

A SOCIALITY OF BEING SNAGGED: CARE AND AWAKENING AMONG SALMON IN SOUTHWEST ALASKA

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ABSTRACT

In the Yupiaq village of Akiak, in Southwest Alaska, relations among human and piscine beings are central to understandings and practices of care. Anthropological theories of care concerned with human health have tended to focus on practices of care that are directed to and are for others. Figuring care in the image of “being snagged,” I flesh out a nonhierarchical mode of care in which the division between the cared-for and caregiver is ambiguous or absent. The mode of care I call “being snagged” is reminiscent of the experience of getting one’s fishing net stuck: knotted, tedious, ordinary, and a cause for struggling along with others. Central to understanding the affects and effects of being snagged is the Yup’ik concept of awakening (*ellange-*), which in this article operates as an organizing principle that demonstrates how moments of shared concern for salmon constitute the mutual recognition of life and loss through which care is conveyed. By focusing on practices that are concerned less with treating than with sustaining social relations that promote well-being, anthropologists can more carefully attend to why people make choices about care. Paying attention to nonhierarchical forms of care also stands as a necessary corrective to dominant conceptions of care that delegitimize or overlook life-giving relations.

INTRODUCTION

It may very well be the case that we approach an understanding of care when it is most precarious. Along the Kuskokwim River of Southwest Alaska, state and federal agencies restrict Indigenous access to land and water, including the ability to fish for salmon. In the Yupiaq village of Akiak, the weight of fishing regulations on daily life reveals how constraints on people’s relations with salmon are a problem that concerns care.¹ People draw a parallel between the tribe’s relationship with the state and federal fish and wildlife agencies and the regional health-care system. This article frames the frustration that people feel at being marginalized as subjects of biomedical care and at being simultaneously criminalized for practicing care on their own terms by fishing.²

Despite the expansion of regional healthcare infrastructure in the past two decades, the health services are often at odds with tribal needs.³ Accessibility issues make navigating systems of care particularly challenging. Accessibility is a matter not only of geography but also of self-determination and tribal sovereignty. Although federally recognized tribes in the Lower 48 can contract directly for health services with the federal government, Native communities in Alaska have limited autonomy over local healthcare services. Alaska Native communities in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region, for instance, fall under the auspices of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC). While Native health corporations such as the YKHC provide tribes with comprehensive health services, the federal government overwhelmingly shapes the

health priorities and programs of Native health corporations that rely on funding from the Indian Health Services (Hales 2016:132). As a further matter, while proponents of regional Native health corporations tout their relative cost-effectiveness (compared with the administrative costs of individual tribal contracts), detractors point out that only tribal control will improve accessibility to health services and strengthen tribal self-determination (Government Accountability Office 1998).

Medical anthropologists have emphatically shown that there is much to critique about biomedical care. Perhaps paramount among biomedicine's shortcomings is the paradigmatic tendency to isolate objects of medical concern from the rest of the body, and the sick patient from the structural and interpersonal contexts of illness experience. The adverse effects of biomedical foci are often magnified among people who are already socially and culturally marginalized. In this article, I do not intend to condemn biomedicine tout court. People in Akiak regularly seek out biomedical care. It is the inaccessibility and lack of autonomy over biomedical care, and over care itself, that people regularly point to as troublesome. People experience the twofold lack of autonomy over medical services and fishing practices as painfully paradoxical: people are hamstrung by the regulation of fishing practices that are vital to individual and community health, while they are also often neglected by a medical system meant to prevent harm.⁴ I examine this twofold blow to well-being through an analytic of care.

Existing theories of care tend to conceptualize care both as dyadic and ends-oriented, with the specific intent of alleviating human suffering. This kind of care looks like a surgeon suturing a wound or a grandparent preparing soup for a sick child. These practices of care are directed to and are for others. We may think of these forms of care as serving clear ends and as having ends in themselves: a wound may heal and a sick child may become well again. When people are fishing and processing and preserving salmon, however, care is without a clear end, and a hierarchical division between the cared-for and caregiver is ambiguous or absent. By conceiving of care in unconventional ways (such as in ways that have not been typically addressed in medical anthropology), we might gain a more expansive understanding of how fishing-related practices and relations are essential to Yup'ik well-being.

Grounding care ethnographically, I figure care as "being snagged," expressed by the Yup'ik word base *naginga-*, as an active mode of social entanglement. While a snag

evokes the image of a fishing net tangled on a submerged tree stump or on an abandoned snowmachine, I theorize *being snagged* as describing a temporally extensive and ethically grounded practice. I figure this mode of care as "being snagged" for the ways it is reminiscent of the experience of getting one's fishing net stuck: knotted, tedious, ordinary, and a cause for struggling along with others.⁵ Being snagged involves what Berlant (2011) calls "optimistic attachments": the investments one makes in the continuity of social worlds. In Akiak, social worlds are also invested with fish. When Yup'iat go fishing for and process and preserve salmon, they must also pay attention to each other (Hales 2016). In these instances, care is neither explicitly for others nor for oneself, but it is rather felt and made possible along with other human and fishy beings. We can think, in other words, of this triangulated care as "the work of being related" (Bodenhorn 2000:143).

But as I will show, "being snagged" describes more than an existential Ingoldian "meshwork" of relations (Ingold 2007, 2008). In other words, our being snagged describes the mode of our attachments, not the mere existence of them. Moreover, being snagged suggests the potential unpleasantness of care. I do not mean the ways that modes of treatment (such as chemotherapy) that are aimed at healing may also have harmful side effects, but rather the ways that care takes a toll on both caregiver and recipient. Thinking about care in this way is important for two reasons: first, this framework provides an alternative to ends-oriented models of care that equate health with the absence of hardship. This is important to acknowledge because it allows us to avoid the trap to which the Tanana Athabascan scholar Million (2013) draws our attention: the conceptual trap that conflates healing with resolution and overlooks ongoing forms of settler-colonial violence. Second, on a metaphysical level, considering care as "being snagged" allows us not only to situate care work within the wider social world beyond the confines of the clinic but also to consider the very contingency of this world. In short, this perspective on human experience bears out what Al-Mohammad (2013) captures nicely as the simultaneity of our "ravelling and unravelling" with others. Al-Mohammad (2013:224) focuses on the coincidence of raveling and unraveling so that we may "begin to situate finitude, disease, sickness, anomie, loneliness, despair, rage, and existential trepidation within the same life movements that might be considered to be their opposites." Thus, we can say, neither do all forms of care mean we feel cared for nor do all forms of loss, grief, and trauma mean we are not.

In Akiak, people are intimately aware of the grievous deaths that place Southwest Alaska nationally among regions with the highest rates of suicide and alcohol-induced mortality (Alaska Department of Health and Social Services 2019; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2016). Among Alaska Natives, and Alaska Natives in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region specifically, suicide occurs at staggeringly high rates, over 10 times that of the U.S. general population (Rasmus et al. 2019:48). While statistical renderings of morbidity and mortality reveal a public health crisis, they say little about human suffering, and less about care. Historical trauma literature, in contrast, can address the deep and transgenerational impression of settler-colonial violence on Indigenous people in ways that statistics do not. Yet while historical trauma frameworks reveal the potential for past violence to be felt in the future tense, they may overlook forms of structural violence that are ongoing. In other words, the trouble with common representations of historical trauma is not only that they relegate trauma to the past, but also that they treat healing “as the culmination or satisfactory resolution of illness or, for the Indigenous, a promised safety and revitalization from prior colonial violence” (Million 2013:8). When settler violence is reduced to a historical “moment” rather than being viewed as a dogged structure, healing is equated with resolution rather than with a residual process that may coincide with unremitting harms. Moreover, a historical trauma lens may focus all too narrowly on simply repairing psychic and social wounds rather than on “how people might find meaningful livelihoods within increasingly difficult constraints and imagine a viable future” (Kirmayer et al. 2014:311). If life as Indigenous Peoples experience it is framed solely as a historical effect, and strictly as a settler-colonial one, we risk obscuring other times and ways in which uncertainty, failure, anger, and sadness, as well as joy, hope, love, and exhilaration are felt, shared, and reflected upon. The subject of anthropology may become the wound itself. Ethnography might become elegy.

While this article does not dwell on the trying circumstances of life along the Kuskokwim River, it also refuses to ignore them. Thus, I write to reveal the facts of life and facets of living that are opaque within population-level representations of health (and death and dying) among Indigenous Peoples in Alaska. A series of brief ethnographic vignettes will give texture to this tension. After these vignettes, I examine the centrality of salmon to care work through an analytic of what people in Akiak call

“awakening.” I begin, however, by providing some context for my discussion of subsistence fishing and human well-being in Akiak.

CONVOLUTIONS OF CARE

How fishing and care correspond is convoluted. A growing body of literature in anthropology and the social sciences strives to make clearer the relationship between fishing and Indigenous flourishing in Alaska, which is often overlooked in state and federal management contexts. Well-being is a nebulous concept. Recent scholarship on salmon fisheries in Alaska seeks to make well-being palpable by conceptualizing it through the development of community-based indicators (such as local and nonlocal rates of salmon harvest and the diversity of salmon users included in fisheries management) that get lost in aggregate data or are disregarded (Donkersloot et al. 2020). Well-being indicators can crystallize how human and salmon lives intertwine. Nevertheless, indicators are not substitutes for sustained ethnographic engagement. Ethnography can attend to the messier aspects of daily life and human health that are not captured by orderly measures and metrics. Situating care ethnographically replaces a telescopic view of health and the human body with a kaleidoscopic one.

In Alaska, anthropologists have persistently demonstrated the necessity of taking multifaceted approaches to health. Among Indigenous Peoples in Alaska, expansive approaches to health often prescribe returning to fish camp or hunting. On the Kuskokwim River (in a town anonymized as Tundra Flats), Hales (2016:140) lamented the fragmentation of clinical behavioral health services compared with the “therapeutic value of subsistence fishing as an integrative process.” As among Yupiaq youth in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region, access to hunting and fishing is integral also to personhood and to the social and cultural development of Inupiaq youth in Northwest Alaska, and it is potentially protective against social disconnectedness and depression (Trout et al. 2018; Wexler et al. 2014). Anthropologists have identified comparable sources of resilience among youth in Indigenous communities across the Circumpolar North, including among Canadian Inuit, Norwegian Sami, and Siberian Eveny (Ulturgasheva et al. 2014). In turn, anthropologists in the Arctic and subarctic have placed greater focus on Indigenous-initiated and Indigenous-driven health programs that account for the interconnected nature of well-being.

Essential to understanding the interwovenness of well-being among Yupiat, and in Akiak, is the *qasgiq* model of intervention (Rasmus et al. 2014; Rasmus et al. 2019). The *qasgiq* model takes its name from the dome-shaped, semi-subterranean structure that was the spatial and spiritual locus of the village before colonial contact and missionization, which in Akiak occurred with intensity between 1885 and 1925 (Oswalt 1963). The *qasgiq* housed men and boys during the winter months and was also the site of community ceremonies and celebrations. Women lived separately from men in smaller sod-insulated matrifocal “family houses” with girls and young boys, but women played important roles in ceremonies and other gatherings that took place in the *qasgiq* (Frink 2016:44–45, 47). Such was the importance of the *qasgiq* to social and spiritual reproduction that people regularly sought to purify the house and treated it as a “respected person” (Fienup-Riordan 1994:253). Though in its common usage, the term *qasgiq* refers to a place; the term can operate both as a noun and a verb. As Rasmus and colleagues note, “the term *qasgiq* comes from *qasgiqirayaq* (phonetic: kuz gee raar neq), which has as one of its possible meanings ‘to encircle’” (Rasmus et al. 2019:48). In short, as a verb, *qasgiq* means to practice a mode of collectivity and copresence that promotes wellness.

An Elder (let us call him Jack) lamented the paucity of this copresence in Akiak today. When Jack moved to Akiak in the 1940s as a young boy, the last *qasgiq* in the village had fallen into disuse. “It was already broken into,” he told me. Jack correlated the decline of the *qasgiq* with religious missions and government schooling. When I asked him what he knew about life in Akiak before colonial contact, he replied:

You know, people was working together. Especially fishing season is very important. See how people was, you know, respect each other. Why the ancestors were really talking to them. They had a *qasgiq*. That was their community. Like this building [the tribal community building]. That’s why they’re supposed to have, you know, weekly gatherings, or two times a week. To talk to the boys. They are not doing this today. The building is just for playing bingo and offices. So, they’ve got a place. But that thing don’t go [happen] anymore.

Elsewhere I have written about the concerted steps the Akiak Native Community has taken to address the concerns Jack voiced by creating a fish camp in the village for young people (Voinot-Baron 2020). Like the en-

circling structure of the *qasgiq*, the fish camp furnishes cohesiveness and strengthens a salmon sociality through which people are anchored in the world. Proper relations with salmon mediate what Briggs (1995:24), writing of Inuit youth in Canada, calls the “psychodynamics of attachment”: feelings of worth, belonging, and possibility. Moving from feelings of despair toward the work of repair, the vignettes that follow, though not all explicitly about salmon, articulate what this anchoring in the world looks like, as well as its absence.

THREE VIGNETTES

WALTER

This first vignette involves a gregarious, affectionate, and deep-thinking boy whom I call Walter. When I knew Walter, he had deeply troubled feelings that he carried behind his infectious smile. Walter’s inner turbulence often boiled over in angry outbursts. Walter once described his life to me as a barbed road. He explained that he knew he was not alone in life, but he struggled to ask people for help, and he did not know what to do with his anger. He spoke at length with me about his struggle with “something evil” and about his previous thoughts of self-harm. Walter’s friend Mary was also present for and participated in our conversation.

Walter’s voice shook, and he said, “Something evil comes to me and digs into me. Something comes around and puts their claws in my back. They tell me shit I don’t wanna hear. I try to tell so much people. I want to tell people and show people, but something is always telling me to hide. Don’t show anyone. Just hide. Stay right there. Something is fucking with me.”

He began to sob. Through his tears, Walter recalled a dream in which he was frozen in his body, and he said, “I opened my eyes and I saw my body, and I tried to move my hand, and my hand wasn’t moving. I tried to move it again, it wasn’t moving.”

He went on, “This thing is starting to tell me no one is caring about me. I’m starting to believe it. This thing is giving me hell, man, telling me that people ain’t giving. . . . It’s like it’s telling me what to do, giving me thoughts that are messed up.”

There was a long pause. Dogs could be heard barking in the distance. “You know sometimes I feel like when I see people. . . . seems like they’re going the way they want to go, and I’m. . . . seems like I’m just going the wrong way.”

Mary chimed in, “If you see yourself going in the wrong way, what’s stopping you from changing your direction to go the right way?”

Walter replied, “What I’m seeing every day is [stopping me]. I believe that pain changes a person . . . but seriously, seems like something’s always wrong, telling me to hide. It’s all different now. People who I love, people who love me, I’m starting to see it different. Seems like I don’t even know how to be me sometimes. Personally, I don’t know how I got this far.”

Walter reiterated the conflicting feeling of wanting to share his thoughts and feelings and wanting to hide (from) them. He shared that when he talks to people, “It’s like nobody has the time.” I asked Walter about the people in his life who are important to him, and he said, “I don’t know who . . . I . . . it’s hard to think of someone. The only person that really was there growing up is gone now. . . . Like, most of the people I connected with, most of the people I felt comfortable around always had to go. One of the people I talked to is my gram. If she was alive, she’d be here.”

Walter began crying again, and I turned off the digital voice recorder. After a minute of silence, he continued: “Something is probably telling me not to get too close because I don’t want to lose anybody.”

Mary offered her thoughts, “You know, we’re not guaranteed one hour from now. We’re not guaranteed tomorrow. I think if you close yourself off and don’t develop relationships with other people then you’re going to be missing out on a whole lot. I know it’s scary to open yourself up, especially when you think you’re gonna get hurt in the end.”

Walter agreed: “That’s what I’m afraid of. I’m afraid of losing people I love. Seems like something is telling me, ‘Don’t get too close.’ Seems like that just tears me down.”

FRANK AND EMMA

The second vignette recalls a morning visit with a jovial older couple. The window shades were still drawn when I showed up at Frank and Emma’s house unannounced on a rainy day in August, and I wondered if I had arrived too early even though it was midmorning. An old dog barked at me from his chain in the yard. I figured the barking would alert Frank and Emma to my presence, so I did not knock on their door. When Frank opened the door, he opened his arms wide with characteristic exuberance, and we shook hands. He invited me inside where it was warm. Two plates of eggs rested on a table. As I strug-

gled awkwardly with my rubber boots, Emma brought me coffee. A fiddle graced the wall beside framed family photographs, and a stack of cassette tapes collected dust nearby. When I sat with Emma at the wooden table in the main room, Frank asked me how I like my eggs. “Just like you,” I said. Frank scrambled three more eggs, and Emma toasted a piece of bread for me. Soon, Frank joined me and Emma at the table where his breakfast was now cold.

Talk turned to childhood memories. Emma recalled being sent to Wrangell, Alaska, for boarding school when she was five years old. She remembered crying as her father put her on the airplane. She recalled her school instructors hitting her if she spoke Yup’ik. Emma’s anger abides. But, she explained, her older sister advised her to let out her anger “little by little” as opposed to talking about it all at once “like we are talking right now.” Frank told me that trauma like this does not go away. He told me about family members who, like him, grew up around alcohol: “I deal with this every day, and so do they.” Frank was now resting on a raised mattress against the wall. Emma called his name, but his mind was somewhere else, and he did not hear her. Frank asked me, “Do you understand the impact of boarding schools?” He wanted to be certain that I did understand. I nodded. Emma cut in: “Neither of you were taken away. If you did not have that experience, you cannot understand.” Her eyes filled with tears, and she looked down at her lap. She described her trauma as waves that return. Tidal trauma. I thought of the river barges whose wakes make the ground feel unsteady and the riverbank fall away.

MASON

The third vignette centers on an interaction I had with a headstrong and warmhearted man I call Mason. As the Chinook salmon began running one spring, I noticed that the fish camp Mason shared with his extended family was divided into two adjoining lots. A female family member, whose struggles with alcohol use were often visible, was now cutting fish alone nearby, separate from the other fish cutters, and her adult sons were fishing for her. I speculated initially that Mason had divided the fish camp due to fishing regulations. Other people had shared with me that they were unable to fish for extended family members because they were catching fewer fish. Mason, however, was adamant that fishing regulations had nothing to do with the new fish camp arrangement. When I pressed Mason on the matter, he replied straightforwardly, “It is better

for them, and it is better for us. They have a responsibility now. You have noticed the difference.” In fact, I had noticed: the kin whose presence at fish camp had been sporadic in previous years had returned to the fold.

Cumulatively, these vignettes tell us about a kind of care (and its absence) that I am tempted to conceptualize as being snagged. Walter reveals with heartbreaking transparency the precarious quality of the social world. He gestures to a mode of social entanglement that he simultaneously longs for but also fears because of the pain and trauma of becoming untangled, with which he is intimately familiar. In many respects, Walter reminds us of how entangling is never certain. He illustrates, in other words, “the contingent and fragile purchase his life-line had on the lines of others” (Al-Mohammad 2013:225). Then there is Frank, who suggests the lastingness of trauma, and Emma, from whom we learn that trauma must be treated little by little, not by talking about it all at once. And when Mason spreads out the labor of fishing and processing and preserving fish among his extended family, we witness a reorientation of care from a hierarchical mode to a nonhierarchical one. We witness a social shift that encourages a mother and her sons to participate more actively in a mesh of relations with fish and kin. Fishing does not make everything fine. Nevertheless, Mason’s justification for spreading out the responsibility of fishing among family suggests the capacity for a shared attachment to salmon to embody care. Understanding how a shared concern for salmon amounts to human well-being requires placing people’s piscine relations within a larger social and cultural context of awakening.

AWAKENING IN A WORLD OF SALMON

On Nelson Island, Fienup-Riordan (1986) noted among Yupiat a metaphor for personhood in the opposition between waking and sleeping. “When a [human] person was possessed of a powerful mind,” she writes, “he was said to be awake to his surroundings. Conversely, a [human] person who paid no attention to the rules and led a thoughtless life was considered to be asleep” (Fienup-Riordan 1986:266). In Akiak, I observed a similar moral discourse around awakening.

In Akiak, people speak of awakening in multiple ways.⁶ The concept of waking up describes, for instance, moments when young children become attuned to their surroundings. Through moments of attunement, children develop a sense of self in relation to others. Socializing

children to become aware thus involves fostering relationships not only with humans but also with beings that are more than human. When I asked a woman, who wished to be called Iraluq (meaning moon in Yup’ik), how she was raising her children to “become aware,” she reflected on her own childhood. Her mother and father showed her as a young girl how to identify the smelt’s arrival in May by watching the buds of willow trees. When the herring-like fish arrived, her father would take her dip-netting, and, afterward, her mother would teach her how to thread the verdigris-colored bodies of the smelts together with young willow branches. Iraluq has taught her children to watch for the same signs and to understand the synchrony of trees and fish.

When a child is “becoming aware,” she is also said to be making memories for the first time (Fienup-Riordan 1986, 1994). I once sat beside a small child in the sand as her family fished from the riverbank. The child furrowed her brow as she stared intently at the river. I remember the breeze tousling her thin black hair and her baby-blue fleece jacket that guarded against the wind. Making note of the little girl’s expression, the child’s mother observed that her daughter had been “spacing out” lately. She wondered, “Maybe she is *ellangeq*-ing.” Later, this mother of many children would also equate waking up with “being Native,” when she said, “You start remembering about where your home is, knowing who you are, and where you come from.”

Beyond associating pivotal moments in childhood with waking up, people in Akiak also describe transformative moments in adulthood in terms of awakening. A young woman explained to me that people often invoke the image of waking up when “they have been using drugs or alcohol and finally *ellangeq* and decide to quit.” Indeed, as the Yupiaq scholar John (2009:60–61) notes, a person who is trying to make positive changes in her life might announce to her family, *ellangaartua* (“I am trying to become aware”). Awakening thus describes not merely the mental capacity to make memories, but rather the making of socially and culturally salient memories. Awakening describes the ability to recognize some relations as important and others as relatively insignificant and to be aware of how one is accountable to these relations. This includes relations with salmon. Memory-making as such is critical to psychological and social development and full-fledged personhood (John 2009).

Surely there are times when memories remain private or unspoken, but the ways that relations with fish criss-

cross and coincide with acts of collective memory are striking. I observed that when people are hauling nets and meticulously cutting salmon, there is what Stewart (2011) described as the particular “sentience of a situation”: the sensations to which one is attuned, that affect us, and with which people construct meaningful worlds. There are the frenetic jerks of salmon ensnared in nets; the wild repartee of swallows that flit playfully beside fishing boats; the soft *psbhhh* sound of a knife blade as it moves with ease along the backbone of a salmon; the slime and grit that coats skin, hair, and clothes after handling fish; the mix of sweat and salmon that lingers stubbornly in the cracks of hands; the voices of fishers that echo across the water; the incessant buzzing of flies on a windless day; the lively chatter of family at fish camp; the shouts of young children splashing in the river as mothers, aunties, and grandmothers cut fish; and the sweet smell of smoking salmon that cloaks the village, redolent of shared histories.

As an ethnographer, the sounds and smells of fish at first evoked relatively little in me, and it took me some time to notice them. Perhaps the experience of fishing in Akiak, if unfamiliar, was not strange enough to jolt the awareness of my senses, having grown up fishing with my father. Or perhaps I tended toward the ocular because of my situatedness within a society that privileges sight (Stoller 1989). In any case, it was not until I paid attention to what and who people talked about in the presence of salmon that I realized that something special was going on, and I peered beyond what I could sense with my eyes to see how fish are what Naguib (2013:95), writing of water, calls “a highly charged sensory resource.”

Many times, stories of loss would bubble up, brought on perhaps by the social and olfactory atmosphere of drying fish. There were times when people would break the silence at fish camp with a story of loss that was cast in some indissoluble mix of sadness and hope. I remember, for instance, a man raising concerns, while he and I were fishing, about family members who were in the hospital and drinking again. I recall a family gathering at fish camp to eat cake in memory of a little girl and a father reflecting upon the tragic loss of a daughter. My mind wanders as well to a woman and her daughters and granddaughters cutting fish beside the river, sharing stories of absent kin and looking forward to summer’s salmonberries. I think back also on a man who, recalling a painful memory from his childhood, paused from tending to fish to point to where his father had drowned. We can think of the sights, sounds, and scents of salmon as stirring in people memo-

ries of relations and as sustaining relations themselves, and to how among the black spruce, willows, and waterways of the Kuskokwim River, traces of past lives come to the surface (Taylor 2005).

However painful the memories brought on by fishing, these moments of remembering are rarely weighted with pathos. Despite people’s orientations to loss and death, the general feeling while fishing and processing and preserving fish is seldom one of overt sadness. When Livingston (2012:148) writes about the social nature of pain in an African oncology ward, she suggests the ways that laughter (sometimes irreverent, sometimes nervous) furnishes both “socialization and intimacy” in the face of cancer. She writes of laughter’s potential “to strengthen and animate benign social connectivity, which is healing and care” for patients (Livingston 2012:149). Fishing operates a bit like contagious laughter. Fishing relations similarly palpate a grief that is deep-rooted or fresh. While an atmosphere of salmon stirs in people memories of relations (painful, tender, and laughter-inducing), it is in the presence of fishing partners and family that these relations are nurtured and given new life. It is in this sense that the work of awakening is care work.

Care, in other words, is revealed in what Jackson (2012:170) calls the “art of copresence.” I understand copresence as the mutual recognition of suffering and flourishing through which lives are made possible (see also Parish 2014 on “moral presence”). These artful moments, I suggest, contrast with “‘marked’ forms of empathy, such as those we find in patient-doctor relationships and in healing and religious rituals of various kinds” (Hollan and Throop 2011:7). As copresence, care might not always be a means to an end or something finalizable, but rather to beginnings, extensions, and worlds that are unfolding and healing, as Emma advised, little by little. Cubellis’s (2020:21) notion of “sympathetic care” best, and rather beautifully, captures what I conceptualize as being snagged: a kind of care that is “less about intervening to repair and more about tolerating the discomfort that forms part of not knowing how a crisis will resolve.” Thus, the process and practice of being snagged occurs not during a single afternoon at fish camp, but rather over time, and along with human and piscine others.

CONCLUSION

A form of care takes place along the Kuskokwim River, which is quite different from the care that one typically

seeks out and receives in a clinical setting. This nonhierarchical kind of care that I call “being snagged” occurs predominantly when people are fishing for and processing and preserving salmon. Contrary to biomedical practice, in these piscine contexts, a focus on pain is secondary to the matter at hand: the matter of fish. But, as is often the case, people’s pain (as well as their joys and hopes) also become matters of attention and concern. Among fish and family, care is triangulated. When people watch salmon, they also watch after each other. People become embedded in and aware of social worlds as relations with salmon sustain the timelines and lifelines in which human lives are ensnared with others. Like a tangled fishing net, care expressed in the image of being snagged may coincide with experiences of discontinuity, abeyance, or loss. But out of and through these ruptures, relations of care are formed and reinforced.

By recognizing how care is not necessarily directed to another and is not for another, or symptom-oriented, and is instead often oblique and open-ended, we (anthropologists and others concerned with human health) may better comprehend the choices people make as regards social and psychic well-being, however nonsensical or strange people’s actions may at first appear. People’s insistence on practices that confound dominant logics of care, including for both human and salmon others, may no longer confound us. We may, moreover, gain insight into what metrics, though useful in certain contexts, cannot tell us in others. By attending to how care occurs nonhierarchically, we could more intentionally orient human health to focus on means as well as ends, methods as well as outcomes, becoming along with being, and care as well as cure.

WHAT OF BEING SNAGGED?

While this article’s intent is not to make specific policy recommendations, a few points are in order concerning the potential broader applications of what is written here. In Alaska, Indigenous Peoples and state and federal governments have in numerous cases sought to resolve hunting and fishing conflicts through the establishment of resource-management partnerships. These arrangements, often cast in terms of “co-management,” have been applied to an array of natural resources in Alaska, including caribou and brown bear (Spaeder 2005), as well as migratory waterfowl (Zavaleta 1999) and bowhead whale. Several tribes along the Kuskokwim River, as part of the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, are like-

wise party to a co-management agreement with the federal government to manage Chinook salmon.

Proponents of co-management arrangements tout the ability of Indigenous Peoples to apply to fish and wildlife management decisions what is commonly, if controversially, referred to as traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). While state and federal managers are often bedazzled by the idea of TEK, their practical recognition of this knowledge and of knowledge holders is haphazard. Many other anthropologists have leveled similar critiques against co-management arrangements, including in Alaska (e.g., Hensel and Morrow 1998; Langdon 1989; Morrow and Hensel 1992; Raymond-Yakoubian et al. 2017) as well as in Arctic and subarctic regions elsewhere. By my reckoning, to talk of “co-management” belies the still unequal power of Indigenous Nations in Alaska relative to settler governments and agencies involved in resource management. While the formalization of co-management partnerships is noteworthy, and often the result of decades-long efforts of Indigenous Peoples and allies, it is not radical. Indeed, the same patterns and problems that anthropologists observed of co-management over two decades ago continue to plague the process. I often wonder what more there is to say. Along the Kuskokwim River, as elsewhere in Alaska and the Circumpolar North, Indigenous Peoples have seats at the proverbial table in ways that are, historically speaking, groundbreaking. Yet management practices that treat fish as flesh (as mere biological matter rather than social matters as well) and subsistence fishing largely as symbolic, as fishing regulations tend to do, disregard the expansiveness of Yupiat orientations to salmon (Griffin 2020). Subsistence practices must be recognized as more than one-off practices and instead as enduring processes of care. In the end, however, what is needed more than epistemological shifts are territorial ones.

Short of Indigenous Peoples getting their land back, fish and wildlife managers could, to put it simply, be better ethnographers. This would entail more than community outreach. More working groups and meetings are also unlikely to impart to fisheries managers what is at stake for Yupiat when they are unable to fish in ways meaningful to them. If, alternatively, fisheries managers were to spend time fishing with people (if they were invited to do so) or share meals and church benches with them, something akin to, if short of, a sociality of being snagged—of which state and federal boardrooms are devoid—could be fostered. Irving (2005) describes the

capacity of walking beside another to reveal ruptures that illness creates in ordinary life: in daily routines of walking, talking, eating, and breathing. Irving calls this “walking fieldwork.” We might imagine a type of “fishing fieldwork” that similarly brings to the surface, for fisheries managers, stories, sensations, and relations of and with salmon that are otherwise unclear.

Anthropologists, for our part, might consider in different contexts how care resembles the sociality of being snagged that I observed in Akiak. I expect this to be the case particularly in rural communities where economic opportunities are scarce and access to healthcare is meager. Elsewhere in Alaska, for instance, the health of rural towns and villages that rely on commercial fishing has been hard hit in recent decades as participation in local fisheries has declined. As Donkersloot and Carothers (2016) write, this phenomenon is the outcome of several related factors, including the commodification of commercial fishing rights, a dearth of alternative employment opportunities to supplement seasonal fishing work, and a lack of fishing knowledge among young people. Social ills stemming from and including hard drug and alcohol use are also correlated with the dwindling of local fishing fleets (Donkersloot and Carothers 2016). Although subsistence fishers in Akiak and local commercial fishers in Bristol Bay, for instance, are differently invested in salmon fisheries (socially, culturally, and economically), they struggle in overlapping ways to reproduce relations with fish and family that are essential to human well-being.

Finally, beyond attending to the social entanglements of the people with whom we live, work, and play as we conduct research, anthropologists can continue to recognize how we, ourselves, are also being snagged. Acknowledging personal tangles as ethnographic ones (and ethnographic ones as personal) entails, I argue, practicing what Yates-Doerr (2020:240) calls “antihero care.” This kind of care is cognizant of how, contrary to the myth of the “lone fieldworker,” we are never alone in the field. Because we are never alone, and because people go on with their lives in our absence, we are not the authors of terminal narratives. Rather, not unlike awakening, the stories we tell and of which we are a part are partial and unfolding.

AFTERWORD: *PUKUGTAARTUT*

In this article I have drawn upon words and images that I encountered in Akiak to describe care, specifically, awakening (*ellange-*) and being snagged (*naginga-*). The

Unangan and Sugpiaq poet and writer Abigail Chabitnoy uses an Alutiiq word that also resonates with the kind of care I have described: *pukugtaartut*. Chabitnoy (2019:93) uses the word to refer to the act of salvaging: “*allrani suu’ut caqainek pukugtaartut*,” which she translates as “sometimes people salvage some stuff.” But the word base *pukug-* also exists in the closely related Central Yup’ik language and can mean “to eat bits of meat clinging to a bone after most of the meat has been removed from the bone” or “to pick berries carefully from scattered sites.”⁷

Among many Indigenous Peoples in Alaska, including the Yupiat in Akiak, treating an animal with respect means salvaging meat from its bones. To do otherwise is wasteful and an act of desecration that threatens the sustainability of human and animal relations. With the bones of larger animals, people will also, on occasion, suck out the marrow. Being snagged, as a mode of care, entails a similar salvaging. Social worlds might be fragmented, but a salmon sociality affords ways of gathering these fragments like so many pieces of flesh. In the presence of salmon, people get at the marrow of their relations. People plumb the all-too-human parts of themselves below life’s harder surfaces.

ENDNOTES

1. I lived and conducted dissertation research in Akiak for 14 months between 2016 and 2018 and conducted follow-up research in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic has prevented me from returning. The project on which this article draws was approved by the Social and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board at University of Wisconsin–Madison as well as the Akiak IRA Council. I received written or oral consent to write about and publish the stories included in this article. All human names are pseudonyms.
2. I use the term “Yupiaq,” or Yupiat (plural), to refer to the people commonly referred to in ethnohistorical and ethnographic texts by the anglicized “Yup’ik.” I only use Yup’ik when referring to the language spoken by Yupiat in Akiak, General Central Yup’ik (henceforth referred to as Yup’ik). Yupiaq is a singular noun that derives from the root *yug-*, meaning person, and the postbase *-piaq*, meaning real, or authentic (Jacobson 1995:51). Because Yupiaq means real person, it does not require a qualifier of person. To refer to a “Yupiaq person” would translate awkwardly as a “real person person.” Additional style particularities include capitalization. “Indigenous” is spelled

with a capital *I* and is distinct from the lowercase *i* in indigenous. Indigenous, broadly speaking, refers to distinct peoples whose connections to specific territories predate settler societies. The term Indigenous encompasses, but is not limited to, American Indians, Alaska Natives, First Nations, and Aboriginal peoples. Capitalizing “Indigenous” distinguishes it from the lowercase “indigenous,” which can refer to any person, and typically to one who is born and raised in a specific place. A parallel distinction can be drawn between “Native” and “native,” as a person who is “native” to Alaska is not necessarily an “Alaska Native.” I also capitalize Elder. While the lowercase “elder” refers to age, the capital *E* designates a social status attributed to a person who carries knowledge about cultural norms and values. Finally, I use “Peoples” with a capital *P* when referring to the existence of distinct societies (e.g., Indigenous Peoples). I use the plural noun “people” when referring to multiple Indigenous persons in contexts where specific ethnic and political identities are not pertinent (Younging 2018:65). These editorial decisions are in line with *SAPIENS*, the magazine of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (Weeber 2020), as well as *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and About Indigenous Peoples* (Younging 2018).

3. A several-bed clinic in Akiak is part of a growing network of village and subregional clinics in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta of Southwest Alaska.
4. This point is reminiscent of the overpolicing–underserving paradox experienced by other racialized minority groups in the U.S. (e.g., Alexander 2010; Bridges 2011).
5. While in Alaska “snagging” is often colloquially used for fishing with a rod and treble hook, the term was not used in this way in Akiak. It is also worth noting that the word “snag” has a much different life in American Indian English slang than my use of it here. Some readers are likely aware of this fact. Specifically, the term “snag” might refer to a person with whom one has sex or wishes to engage with sexually, typically for a one-night stand (Cramblit 2018). A person who is a “snag,” moreover, might be referred to as “snaggable,” and, likewise, to have “snagged” someone might refer to the act of having had sex. Given the multivocality of the term “snag,” it must be mentioned that the carnal “snag” common to an American Indian English

lexicon refers to a much different form of care than the form I am concerned with here.

6. While in Alaska Native literature, “becoming aware” is not necessarily the same as “awakening,” nor necessarily the same as “waking up,” in Akiak, people did in fact use these terms interchangeably.
7. This translation comes from the Yup’ik language website, Yugtun (yugtun.com). As of December 2021, contributors to the website include Christopher Egalaaq Liu, Laura Domine, and Lonny Alaskuk Strunk.

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Chinook salmon dry in the boreal light of Akiak. Photo by author.