



Research, part of a Special Feature on [Alaska's Salmon and People: Synthesizing Knowledge and Dimensions](#)

## A bitter taste of fish: the temporality of salmon, settler colonialism, and the work of well-being in a Yupiaq fishing village

*William Voinot-Baron*<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** In southwest Alaska, dominant narratives of subsistence and conservation are concerned predominantly with material relations with fish, with the number of fish that are killed. In Akiak, an Alaska Native (Yupiaq) village located along the Kuskokwim River, people's relations with Chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*) extend beyond the material, encompassing also the temporal. In this article, I contend that state and federal fishing regulations enact and extend settler colonial representations of Indigenous disappearance. Framing Yupiaq people's appeals for "a taste of fish" as a temporal matter, I examine how state and federal fishing regulations rupture the temporality in which Yupiaq people's relations with Chinook salmon unfold and threaten people's well-being. By examining the vitality of human-salmon relations through an optic of care, I describe how Yupiaq peoples in Akiak experience the adverse effects of interrupted and postponed relations with Chinook salmon in "confusion" among youth. In turn, I illustrate how people get on with living despite the limits that the present politics of fisheries management place on their ability to take care of each other on their own terms, and in their own time.

**Key Words:** *Alaska; Alaska Native; care; fishing regulations; subarctic, subsistence; well-being; Yupiaq*

### INTRODUCTION

Where the Kuskokwim River stays near to the village of Akiak, people have historically fished for Chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*) gradually, setting and drifting nets over a period of several weeks in late spring and early summer. Given conservation concerns, Chinook salmon fishing has in recent years been severely limited to allow early running salmon to spawn. Rather than occurring in time with the riverine return of Chinook salmon, fishing has been restricted to irregular hours long "openers," or fishing opportunities. Among Yupiaq peoples in Akiak, regulations that fit fishing into temporal allotments make it difficult to renew relations with human and salmon others, and consequently, to be well. In the face of these regulations, people have appealed to State of Alaska and federal managers for the ability to fish for Chinook salmon when they return: people have expressed their desire for "a taste of fish." An elder explained the import of being temporally attuned to Chinook salmon in this way: "The first fish we revere ... Family get together and [each person] eats part of the fish. It is like coming over a mountain. We respect the first fish. A lot of our folks never made it to spring. It is a new beginning."

Whereas, presently, fishing regulations bring time to bear on matters of fish, this article considers what might it mean to think of fish as measures of time. Drawing upon 14 months of ethnographic research conducted between 2016 and 2019, I contend that the narrative of "a taste of fish," despite its symbolic value, fails to fully account for the temporal entanglement of human and salmon lives when applied in fisheries management contexts. Although I have supplemented extensive field notes with interviews, focus groups, and storytelling workshops with youth, my primary orientation to life in Akiak was through countless hours spent helping people with fish: setting and drifting fishing nets, constructing and repairing drying racks, and in summer, such mundane but vital acts as monitoring smokehouse fires and removing fly eggs and maggots from salmon. The centrality of salmon to everyday life surfaced also in conversations and modes of caring that occurred away from the river, often at times that seemed at first entirely unrelated to salmon: while training sled

dogs, watching after children, and attending church services. I also observed and participated in fisheries management meetings in neighboring villages and in the "hub" community of Bethel as well as via teleconference.

All phases of my research were conducted with the generous oversight and input of the Akiak Native Community Akiak IRA Council. The authorization of the tribal council, however, guaranteed neither a swift nor a consistent welcome among people within the community, many of whom are now friends. I use the term "friend" deliberately here and throughout my writing not as an alternative to the term "interlocutor" or other possible referents for ethnographic subjects. The people who populate these pages are more than merely mutual participants in dialogue. As much as my relationships with people grew out of moments of talking, joking, storytelling, and clarification, these relationships also reflect moments when people refused to speak and when there were no words at all. I also use the term "friend" because some people used it for me.

Even as I write of friendship, I am aware of the fraught and unfolding history of "friendship" between settlers and Indigenous peoples that has facilitated the betrayal, dispossession, and erasure of the latter. Referring to my Yupiaq friends in Akiak as "friends" is not intended to obfuscate or minimize my presence as a settler scholar nor the violence of settler politics. Nor is it intended to take these friendships as given. I have often fumbled and failed in the process of making, and maintaining, these relationships, and people have been remarkably forgiving in this regard. These friendships unfolded painstakingly over time, as they still do. It is through their gradual unfolding that these relationships continue to function both as foreground and background for how salmon focus understandings and practices of care in Akiak. These relationships also illuminate the texture of life under settler colonialism as well as the ways people try to move beyond it. The way that life transpires within this tension is brought into sharp relief in the way people in Akiak are temporally oriented to salmon. A consideration of settler colonial effects in light of time thus orients this article.

<sup>1</sup>University of Wisconsin-Madison

## TEMPORAL MATTERS

Scholars in anthropology and Indigenous studies have argued convincingly that time, along with land, is elemental to the dispossession and erasure of Indigenous presence under settler colonialism. Settler colonialism rests upon the imaginary that Indigenous peoples have disappeared or are always about to disappear and are subjects thus of inevitable decline rather than of calculated and continuing erasure (e.g., Bracken 1997, Rifkin 2017, Weiss 2018). Settler fictions of a stoppage of time, of “temporal stasis” (Rifkin 2017), for Indigenous peoples are intended to render Indigenous peoples as subjects of assimilation within settler chronologies. Portraying Indigenous absence as a forgone conclusion, this logic also locates settler colonialism in the past and, in the past tense, as already “settled,” which it is not (Simpson 2014, see also Coulthard 2007).

I contend that State of Alaska and federal management decisions about when Indigenous peoples are allowed to fish enact and extend the settler logic that renders Indigenous people temporally absent (Byrd 2011), displacing and affixing Indigenous peoples within settler modes of timekeeping. As I demonstrate, however, settler representations of Indigenous atemporality not only position Indigenous lifeworlds in the past chronologically but also render static people’s orientations to human and nonhuman beings in the present. Being and becoming well by sustaining particular relations with salmon instantiates among Yupiaq peoples a desire for the recognition of distinct forms of temporal presence. Settler laws and policies continually deny this for them, making precarious temporal relations of care with salmon.

Fishing in Akiak occurs thus in the shared contexts of care and colonial pressure. Although medical care and fisheries management may seem unrelated points of contact with the state, Yupiaq peoples in Akiak experience both as forms of control that bear significantly on their well-being. People identify the regulatory presence of fisheries managers as a painful paradox when measured against the relative inaccessibility of institutional forms of care.

If a small village clinic is fully staffed with trained community health practitioners, residents can be seen for routine sick visits and blood draws, as well as infant and low-risk pregnancy check-ups. Emergent cases can also be seen in the village. The first point of access for secondary and tertiary care, however, is the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Regional Hospital in Bethel, which is located roughly an hour’s boat ride or short plane flight from the village. Inclement weather, however, can keep people village bound for days in late fall and early spring if river ice is impassable by truck, and if a low cloud ceiling prevents planes from flying. In addition to clinical services such as inpatient and emergency care, and obstetrics and pediatrics, the regional hospital also offers services such as behavioral health counseling and alcohol and substance abuse treatment. Residents must travel to Anchorage for specialized forms of care, ranging from cancer treatment to orthopedics, that are not available in Bethel. With advanced medical care marginally accessible at best, people expressed frustration at feeling at once overlooked as subjects of biomedical care and surveilled for fishing, for practicing care on their own terms and in their own time.

Although drastically high rates of morbidity and mortality among Alaska Natives have no apparent bearing on fisheries

management decisions, ways of living and dying signal for Yupiaq peoples the effects of fisheries management on their well-being. My friends in Akiak noted, however, that statistics of life and loss can come to feel more predictive than descriptive, to have the effect of portending suffering, rather than to represent it. Athabaskan feminist scholar Million (2014) has called upon Indigenous peoples to nuance and complicate theories of trauma that represent suffering as total. Yupiaq peoples in Akiak are doing this careful work, giving life to what statistics do not, to the ways Alaska Natives are not merely recipients of care but also agents of it. Central to this article thus are the ways in which Chinook salmon are temporal matters of care.

Understanding temporality along with Lear (2006:40) “as a name for time as it is experienced within a way of life,” I stress how Yupiaq people’s relations with salmon are not only time sensitive but also sensitive to ways of keeping time. Although this article examines the adverse effects of settler colonial interventions on Yupiaq peoples, I focus also on what Vizenor (2008) calls “survivance”: on Indigenous “experiences of duration” that are neither consumed by suffering nor necessarily oriented to the settler state (Rifkin 2017, see also Robbins 2013). In short, my intent is, after Cameron (2015:19), “to hold together what settler colonialism continually denies—its own existence and the deeply violent geographies that sustain it—and to refuse a totalizing account of colonization.” Notwithstanding how colonial forms of domination disrupt temporalities of care, Yupiaq peoples in Akiak continue to anticipate and enliven relations with salmon and human others in ways that ground the possibility of being well.

Although very little was asked of me explicitly while living in Akiak (though an immense amount was given to me), the more time I spent with people the more apparent their hope that my research would, in the words of one elder, “be written in a form that is coming from our hearts.” This elder added his firm belief that only if I “fight our fight with paper” will people who make and enforce laws and policies, perhaps, listen. He also expressed to me his concern that what I write “not help them to become stronger,” but instead “enhance our way of life.” It is in the light of this elder’s words, as well as conversations with other people in Akiak, that I do not use a pseudonym for the village. Although to ensure the privacy of the people who so graciously shared with me their lives, the names of people are not real, but Akiak is a real place. Calling Akiak by a different name would effectively write it out of the historical record, unwittingly undermining the very fight of my Yupiaq friends for recognition that I hope to represent.

On a summer afternoon in between fishing, a Yupiaq elder mused that in representations of Indigenous peoples, too often “the end of the story is always bad.” He clarified: “Yes, we are being killed. But what are we doing to take back our land, our fishing, our children?” In the brief space of this paper, I have tried to provide a partial answer to this vital question.

## WATCHING FISH

With a population of fewer than 400 people, Akiak tends toward the river, cradled by the horseshoe of its western bank. Although Chinook salmon are caught in late spring and summer, and other salmon species are caught throughout the summer months, people fish throughout the year, drifting nets from boats, setting nets in

tributaries, and placing traps in eddies below the ice. Not long after the river ice went out, in the weeks when people were still heading upriver to collect firewood and traveling to the tundra to hunt for bird eggs, I stood with a man beside the river as he looked skyward. He shifted in place to trace the path of two black ducks as they cut above us through the evening light. “The black birds are flying high. The deep swimmers are probably passing.” His observation of the synchrony of ducks and salmon recalled the words of an elder who had previously explained to me that to care properly for fish one must learn to *murilkelluku*, to watch, or be attentive to, fish.

Similar to Indigenous peoples’ relationships with fish and animals across the circumpolar North, Yupiaq peoples in Akiak relate to Chinook salmon not as units of a population but instead as knowing subjects with whom they are reciprocally engaged in relations of exchange (e.g., Tanner 1979, Fienup-Riordan 1983, 1990, 1994, Nelson 1983, Brightman 1993, Hensel 1996, Scott 2006, Nadasdy 2007, Willerslev 2007, Todd 2014, Gadamus and Raymond-Yakoubian 2015). Catching fish is not accidental but rather the result of proper human action toward salmon beings that choose to be caught, or not. If people do not properly attend to salmon by processing, consuming, sharing, and disposing of fish parts according to particular norms and practices, and by speaking properly about salmon, salmon will avoid being caught. As a mother of six children put it, when salmon are caught at the proper time, “they know to keep coming back to you and your net.” Fish are caught therefore only if and when they give themselves to fishers (see, e.g., DiNovelli-Lang and Hébert 2015).

One of Mauss’s (2000) critical interventions in anthropological understandings of gift exchange is that gift giving is rarely asymmetrical and is instead fraught with obligations of acceptance and return. According to Mauss, the social weight of gift giving inheres in the social fact that gift giving also always entails giving a part of oneself. Gifts, Mauss (2000:13) writes, are “invested with life.” Applying Mauss’s logic, Nadasdy (2007) has written of hunting practices among First Nations peoples in the Yukon that accepting animal gifts is a responsibility upon which the sustainability of human-animal sociality rests. Similarly, among Yupiaq peoples in Akiak, failing to catch salmon when they return exposes to uncertainty the continuity of human-salmon relations, including the return of salmon themselves (see also Langdon’s 2007 discussion of “relational sustainability” among Tlingit peoples).

Although State of Alaska and federal fisheries managers also make distinctions among fish that are more granular than population-level analyses, such as when they monitor for age, sex, and length of spawning salmon and when they prohibit subsistence fishing to allow early salmon to spawn, these intra-population distinctions are, nevertheless, concerned with the overall health of the salmon stock. Age, sex, and length distinctions are distinctions merely of kind. The life of one fish is of little concern separate from its enumerative value. Conversely, among Yupiaq peoples in Akiak, the life of each fish bears relational significance. Catching the “first fish” refers not to asymmetrical human action (to the first fish that is caught), but rather to the action of salmon beings in relation to humans (to the first fish that offers itself to fishers).

Watching salmon thus means watching for salmon to return, knowing that when salmon return, they are ready to be caught. Yet attending to salmon entails also watching for signs of salmon elsewhere, such as in the black birds whose vernal flight mirrors the return of salmon to the river. Beyond avian indicators, people see signs of salmon also in each other. Attending to salmon necessitates attending also to human others whose lives and well-being are entangled in networks of interspecies care.

### WATCHING EACH OTHER

The way that watching human and piscine beings entails mutual modes of care was made clear as I crouched beside Hannah on the dirt-packed floor of her smokehouse where she and her sisters had gathered with small children. Rains were already falling in southwest Alaska, but the smokehouse was still filled with slabs and strips of Chinook salmon. Chinook salmon are historically preserved and stored by the time the rainy season arrives in late July and August but fishing regulations in recent years have delayed fish harvests, and salmon have dried slowly, spotting white with mold. Hannah and her relatives now shared the tedious and time-consuming task of removing maggots and fly eggs from salmon that labored to dry in the wet weather. Maggots are a nuisance. Yet the adverse consequences of fishing regulations for Yupiaq peoples are more than matters of mold and maggots. Hannah pointed to a small boy who had been watching me from across the smokehouse. With the hood of her raincoat pulled over her head to prevent maggots from falling onto her silver-streaked hair, Hannah expressed concern that young children are probably confused because they do not know “when things happen.”

That a Yupiaq child might not know when things related to salmon happen is worrisome for Hannah and for others in Akiak because awareness of salmon temporalities is vital to the renewal of relations with salmon beings. If children do not learn when things related to salmon happen, there is a risk that human obligations to salmon will be unfulfilled and that salmon happenings will cease. The disquiet, however, that young people are unaware of when things happen is about sustaining relations not only with salmon but also with humans.

Hannah’s concern for the young boy in the smokehouse is perhaps felt most acutely against a backdrop in which people express unease over what they identify as a lack of discipline among village youth. Similar concerns have been raised about Indigenous youth in communities across the circumpolar North (e.g., Searles 1998, Stern 2003, Wexler 2006, 2009, 2014, Stevenson 2014, Ulturgasheva et al. 2014, Trout et al. 2018). Although people in Akiak pointed to acts of vandalism and theft as anomalous examples of a problem of discipline among village youth, people spoke less of specific delinquent behaviors than of an orientation to the world that they experience as at risk.

An elder called Jack explained the trouble with fishing and hunting regulations in these terms: “Kids out there ... they do things that they want to do. Us parents don’t say a word to them. To work right, to work together ... we have to get back to them.” Identifying the absence of a kind of structure in young people’s lives (“they do things that they want to do”), Jack offered an example from his own childhood of how to “get back to them”: “Before Fish and Game, you know, start controlling around here, [in] fall time, my stepfather taught me one thing, you know, what

I should do. Put [out] lush fish trap. And we do that, you know, set them out.” Although lush fish (known also as burbot, *Lota lota*) are not regulated, Jack correlated the inability of adults to teach youth about what they “should do” in relation to fish and other animals, and also about when these relations should happen, with the problem of discipline among youth.

Jack continued: “Soon as [we were] done [fishing], my father told me, “Now you can go if you want to go.” Then right away, moose in my head. I went up to the hills with dogs [and] looked for cows, cows or calves, because bulls are nothing but skinny, skinny moose. [But] what mess us up, control us.” Whereas when Jack was a boy, elders and parents instructed youth on the proper time to hunt, today the state has assumed this responsibility. (As a further matter, today only bulls can be hunted legally.) Although Jack attributed state and federal control of fish and wildlife to wider concerns about youth, he ultimately centered responsibility for youth with the tribe itself: “When I think, today, we’re just making a very bum mistake, letting things go when they foul up ... When I think [about] how things could calm down or just completely quit, shut it off, we ain’t gonna shut it off like this.” According to Yupiaq scholar John (2009), cultivating and sustaining relations with ancestors and fish, among other beings, is a critical part of childhood psychological and social development. Jack sees it likewise. The inability to fish gradually for salmon when they return is troublesome not merely because it is inconvenient to dry fish in wet weather and to fend off flies and maggots, but also because the very nature of social relations with humans and salmon others changes.

The challenges Yupiaq peoples face when fishing is fitted into abbreviated blocks of time are thus more than practical matters that can be alleviated with technical ingenuity, though this is often what is asked of them (Nadasdy 2017). Tending to smokehouse fires during unpaid breaks from work and experimenting with different methods for drying fish (such as using electric fans) might function as effective tactics in the material sense, but they do so only at the expense of the social. The need to care for a sick relative may compound the temporal demands of fishing, and the strictures of mourning may likewise prevent families from taking full advantage of irregular fishing opportunities. The feeling of needing to fish all at once puts immense physical and psychological strain on people when nobody can be certain of when the next fishing opportunity will be, and when the demands of caring for kin elsewhere call people away from the river into homes, hospitals, and houses of worship. Concerns for youth are rooted thus in the persistent and paralyzing feeling of being subject to settler colonial forms of control that prevent people from effecting discipline on their own terms and in their own time, or, more precisely, in time with Chinook salmon. Social life is depersonalized under settler colonial forms of discipline that measure time bureaucratically against the clock rather than as a set of relations with human and nonhuman others (e.g., Stern 2003, Searles 2010, Stevenson 2014).

Stevenson (2006) has written of how Inuit parents take their children camping as a mode of healing to instill in them longing with the hope that they will one day recreate for themselves the values and relations that inhere in these experiences. Instilling longing in youth creates for them not only relationships to the past but also conceivable futures (see also Lear 2006). Parents and

elders in Akiak hold similar hopes for youth. The desire of my Yupiaq friends in Akiak to “get back” to each other, and to not let things go when they “foul up,” recently motivated the construction of a fish camp for youth as part of a tribal behavioral health program.

On a rainy morning typical of August, I followed an elder and three male youth fishing for silver salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*) as part of the fish camp initiative. A boy whose family did not own a boat and who had not fished for Chinook salmon enthusiastically took charge of casting the net and picking salmon from it, his sleeves rolled up above his forearms. In the afternoon, youth and adults gathered together at the fish camp beside the river. Tall grass was placed on folding plastic tables for the fish until cardboard boxes were found, and two women instructed girls on how to cut and clean the freshly caught salmon. An elder watched. “Up, not down,” he advised one female youth, instructing her on the proper motion of the half-moon shaped *ulu*aq. Other people cut willows for drying racks. After slabs and strips of silver salmon were hung across the willows, fish heads were placed in the ground to ferment. On the following afternoon, two women and a group of female youth gathered in the kitchen of the house I was living in to prepare for a potluck half-dried fish from the salmon caught the previous day. The girls watched the women for pointers on how to make *eggaam*, and the women teased them about someday finding husbands. While the food was baking, the girls took photos of themselves in the bathroom mirror, and music played from cell phones in the background.

Although human relations with silver salmon, and relations among humans that silver salmon mediate, resemble those with Chinook salmon, they do not replicate them. Chinook salmon are without substitute, compelling human action and care in their own time. When I asked a mother about what her family does when the river is closed to Chinook salmon fishing, she replied, “Nothing. Just wait to fish.” She qualified, “Or we’ll try to get the smaller fish, like the white fish, [by fishing along the riverbank]. [But] there wasn’t much white fish this year. I only caught maybe four white fish. That’s all I caught all summer.” She paused. “I don’t know. We try to do something. But waiting to fish and cut fish ... it’s...” Her voice quieted as her brow furrowed, expressing the concern that her words could not.

When one must wait to fish until the river “opens” and then fish frantically before the river “closes” again, at stake are relations and knowledge about the world that salmon mediate gradually over time. When one is unsure of when next she will be allowed to fish, longing can start to feel like mourning. When people are prevented from fulfilling temporally sensitive obligations to salmon, the reproduction of concepts and relations that infuse fishing and life with meaning becomes untenable. Children can become confused. Yet as I have tried to show, although people identify among youth the deleterious effects of postponing relations with salmon, these effects have intergenerational implications.

A Yupiaq man explained the consequences of conservation in these terms: “When we look back 40 or 50 years, there was no such thing as “conservation” [of fish]... [The elders] told us, “Fish until you fall down for a week [and then rest]” ... [The elders] know fish, I know fish ... People are suffering. That’s the bottom line. People don’t talk, but they are suffering. They tell us [this] ... We

need to conserve our elders.” The confusion that people in Akiak observe among youth should thus not be interpreted strictly as a sort of childhood turmoil. Rather, childhood confusion signals for people the fragility of the wider social world.

### A BITTER TASTE

In Ecuador, Kohn (2013) has observed that the ability of Indigenous Runa to attend to multiple kinds of selves enables hunters both to kill prey and to avoid becoming prey. Kohn recalls the advice of his hunting partner to sleep facing skyward to protect against lurking jaguars who are prone to attack. Returning the “gaze” of jaguars affords the possibility that jaguars might treat humans also as selves and therefore leave them alone (Kohn 2013). Runa lives are in this sense physically at stake in recognizing the selfhood of big cats, among other kinds of beings. Yet as Kohn emphasizes, the effects of seeing other selves are also immanently social. It is precisely the ability to recognize other kinds of selves that reinforces what it means to be human: not only by virtue of relating to selves that are other than human, but also by relating to other humans through the physical and social proximity that human and animal relations such as hunting mediate (see also Willerslev 2007). The inability to recognize other kinds of selves, however, is symptomatic of a condition Kohn (2013:117) calls “soul blindness.”

As I have demonstrated, along the Kuskokwim River, fishing regulations precipitate a similar sort of blindness. As among other Indigenous peoples in the circumpolar North, this ocular trauma has grave implications both for relations between humans and fish as well as for relations among humans. Confusion among youth about salmon is alarming not only because if one does not watch fish properly, including when fish give themselves to be caught, there is a risk that fish will disappear, but also because of the ways social life is at stake in attending to salmon temporalities. The ability of youth to watch salmon, to relate to salmon as selves, or in the very least, as more than meat to taste, clarifies what it means to be human and, as people told me, what it means to be well. Fishing in time with Chinook salmon and other salmon beings cultivates a watchfulness for salmon and human relations that guards against social interruptions and ruptures that people in Akiak associate with ongoing histories of loss.

It is thus in the light of concerns for both intra and interspecies well-being that people in Akiak appealed to fisheries managers for “a taste of fish,” for the ability to fish for Chinook salmon when they return. These appeals were met with limited success. Still, “a taste of fish” took on the quality of a mantra within management contexts. Noteworthy is how “a taste of fish” continued to transmit meaning even after fishing regulations prevented people from honoring timely relations with salmon, even after everybody knew that any Chinook salmon caught would not be the first to have offered itself. While “a taste of fish” originally signified a temporal attunement between humans and sentient salmon, on teleconferences and in the boardrooms and tribal offices in which management decisions were discussed, “a taste of fish” metamorphosed into an allotment of a spiritual quota for Yupiaq peoples. Given the perceived scarcity of Chinook salmon, the appeal for (merely) “a taste of fish” also gained currency among State of Alaska and federal managers. Translated over time, the idiom of “a taste of fish” was reoriented to the technical practice of fishing itself, divorced from human

and salmon sociality, as if any fish would symbolically suffice. “Tasting” was recalibrated within a settler temporality in which time is understood as a mechanism for effective management of humans in relation to declining salmon populations.

“A taste of fish” became, thus, a slippery symbol capable of functioning in a new set of social relations, not between Yupiaq peoples and salmon, but between fisheries managers and fishers that makes “a taste of fish” meaningful in a different sense. Paradoxically, the narrative of a “taste” aligned with dominant conceptions of conservation concerned with the quantity of salmon that are caught, or not, with care for salmon at the level of the population. Fishing as such is asymmetrical and asocial. Salmon are acted upon, rather than acknowledged as social actors themselves. Fishing is reduced to an event, bounded and bureaucratic, impersonal and untethered from piscine temporalities of care that for Yupiaq peoples in Akiak are immanently personal. Detached from individual salmon temporalities, the narrative of “a taste of fish” transmits a famished understanding of Yupiaq duration (Rifkin 2017), of how belonging and longing unfold over time in relation to salmon.

As I discussed briefly at the beginning of this essay, the imposition of temporality is elemental to the colonization of Indigenous peoples. Settler colonialism naturalizes the dispossession and “slow death” (Berlant 2007) of Indigenous peoples by portraying Indigenous peoples both as out of time with settler modes of timekeeping and as running out of time. If Indigenous absence is imminent, so, too, is settler presence. Or so goes the settler logic. In the past 50 years, anticolonial movements, including Indigenous land claims, have unsettled the legitimacy of settler governance. If settler colonialism depends on taking from Indigenous peoples both time and land to be governed, in the face of challenges to settler presence, time and land have been also “given back” under premises of liberal governance and recognition of Indigenous existence (Simpson 2016). As Coulthard (2007, 2014) and others have argued, however, settler states have tended to extend to Indigenous peoples forms of “recognition” that, although cloaked in the language of inclusion and multiculturalism, undermine Indigenous autonomy (e.g., Povinelli 2011, Nadasdy 2017, Weiss 2018). Settler states thus attempt through “recognition” to relegate to the past both the project of settler colonialism and the presence of Indigenous peoples as distinct sovereigns (Wolfe 2006). Settler states enact the “deferral” (Weiss 2018) of Indigenous absence by embracing Indigenous peoples and forms of governance only in ways that do not threaten settler sovereignty (Povinelli 2002). For Indigenous peoples, this embrace is of the sort that suffocates.

I contend that the postponement of relations between and among Yupiaq peoples and salmon enacts a similar deferral. Imposed on Yupiaq peoples is a “framework of temporality that serves as the basis for forms of temporal inclusion and recognition” (Rifkin 2017:26). Along the Kuskokwim River, for Yupiaq peoples to be taken seriously as participants in fisheries management requires that they be seen as taking seriously efforts to conserve Chinook salmon. In the light of conservation concerns, the narrative of “a taste of fish” was distilled (Nadasdy 1999) into an acceptable form of indigeneity, employed in the end as a sort of strategic essentialism in which merely “tasting” fish was cast as the greatest

good and as good enough. “A taste of fish” became, in other words, a form of time “given back” under the guise of recognizing Indigenous presence. Although, as I have shown, “a taste of fish” alone is unpalatable, the present politics of fisheries management in which Alaska Natives have little say over when they can fish compels many people to hold their tongues. Thus, when Yupiaq peoples in Akiak appeal for “a taste of fish,” they mean what they say, but they also mean much more. A fishing partner put it simply: “A taste of fish is shit. It is like tasting wine.” The bitter sentiment that a taste of fish is like tasting wine conveys how the desire for fish is never only about fish, how with salmon, communion happens elsewhere and in other times.

## CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have tried to show how among my Yupiaq friends in Akiak expressions of longing in winter and in early spring for “a taste of fish” are more than the desires of the stomach; they express also desires of and for the social. When a mother gingerly guides her daughter’s hands as she teaches her to cut salmon, quietly acknowledging that now she knows how her own mother felt, and when a father takes his sons fishing, they each cultivate among their children relationships with living relations and ancestors, and with humans and salmon, that are paramount to a way of life. One’s longing for fresh fish in winter expresses thus the durable hope to be at fish camp with relatives and to reanimate these relations. Longing as such means that relations with salmon are carried along and unfold well after salmon are preserved and put away for the winter, and that relations with salmon are irreducible to isolated opportunities to get “a taste of fish.” When one attends to how salmon temporalities make possible modes of care, evident are the ways in which “a taste of fish” alone is distasteful.

Contemplating the claim of the Crow chief, Plenty Coups, that without the possibility of hunting bison “nothing happened,” Lear (2006:2, 9) theorizes what it would mean for Plenty Coups to have witnessed an end of happenings, an affective stoppage of time. Lear proposes thinking of the Crow chief’s claim as about more than nostalgia and instead about his waning ability to conceptualize the world and his place in it. Although Lear considers Crow life under the condition of “collapse,” as he puts it, life for Yupiaq peoples in southwest Alaska is opening up. The construction of a community fish camp for youth is a testament to this vitality, an example, among others, of what Weiss (2018) calls “future-making.” To ask, however, after Lear, a similar question concerning salmon, to ask about confusion and belonging under settler colonialism, centers both the vulnerability that is manifest for Yupiaq peoples in attending to salmon and the failure in management contexts of “a taste of fish” to respond to this vulnerability. At stake in attending to fish as measures of time are matters of care that are fundamental to flourishing.

*Responses to this article can be read online at:*  
<http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/issues/responses.php/11408>

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