

*WELLNESS & HEALING: INDIGENOUS INNOVATION & ALASKA NATIVE RESEARCH
Proceedings from the Alaska Native Studies Conference (2016)*

Blackfish Lessons on Environmental Sustainability, Food, and Indigenous Culture

Dr. Thomas Michael Swensen

Abstract

This essay, “Blackfish Lessons on Environmental Sustainability, Food, and Indigenous Culture,” examines Yup’ik interventions into understanding the place of human-nonhuman animal relations in regard to ecological sustainability. In lending consideration to Indigenous culture, the first part of the essay explicates the Yup’ik way of living, the *Yuuyaraq*, and its relationship to the environment. Then the essay turns toward two Yup’ik stories about blackfish, John Active’s “Why Subsistence is a Matter of Cultural Survival: A Yup’ik Point of View” (2001) and Emily Johnson’s “Blackfish,” taken from *The Thank-You Bar* recorded performance (Johnson, 2009), that speak to the imbrications of Indigenous culture and the environment.

Introduction

Near the end of the performance of *The Thank-You Bar*, Yup’ik choreographer and dancer Emily Johnson sits at the front of a stage, in a children’s pool filled with small plastic colored balls, advising the audience to listen to the Alaska blackfish because, “It will tell you when to swim, headfirst into danger,” she says, “it will tell you to press your belly down wherever you are, and rest” (all “Blackfish” quotes are from *The Thank-You Bar* recording, 2009). Known as *Can’giiq* to the Yupiit, the dark-spotted tawny-green Alaska Blackfish, or *Dallia Pectoralis*, has long been a subsistence food for the people in central and western Alaska. The hardwearing fish, measuring 7-8 inches long, live in streams, lakes, and rivers and can bury themselves into deep into the bottoms of rivers to keep themselves warm in the winter months. *Can’giiq* marks an enduring connection between Indigenous culture and the local ecology, in that the animal and the Yup’ik live in the same ecology. In juxtaposition to the post-Fordist food produced in decentralized locations, subsistence foods like the blackfish forge a connection between Indigenous people and the environment.

So when, in *The Thank-you Bar*, Emily Johnson directs the audience to pay attention to the blackfish, it is because Yup’ik people, as do all Indigenous people, have a tradition of watching the flora and fauna and relating these observations into their own cultures. This essay, “Blackfish Lessons on Environmental Sustainability, Food, and Indigenous Culture,” examines Yup’ik interventions into understanding the place of human-nonhuman animal relations in regard to ecological sustainability. In lending consideration to Indigenous culture, the first part of the essay explicates the Yup’ik way

of living, the *Yuuyaraq*, and its relationship to the environment. Then the essay turns toward two Yup'ik stories about blackfish that speak to the imbrications of Indigenous culture and the environment. In the short story, "Why Subsistence is a Matter of Cultural Survival: A Yup'ik Point of View" (2001) Yup'ik storyteller John Active explores blackfish and human relations by relaying how the grounded knowledge Native people possess with the local environment is part of Yupiit culture. The blackfish, for Active, provides for proper ways of being in the world, following the *Yuuyaraq*, as an alternative to the destructive nature of human greed and the effects of the industrial fishing complex on the Alaskan environment and culture.

In John Active's tale, sustainably harvested food proves an enduring means of cultural and spiritual connection to ecology. Aligned with Active's tale, Yup'ik performer Emily Johnson's narrative "Blackfish," as part of *The Thank-You Bar* performance, critiques knowing a blackfish through scientific dissection in contrast to the Indigenous knowledge of *Can'giiq*. She presents Indigenous knowledge about blackfish as an alternative option to the forms of knowledge western scientific inquiry may yield about the fish. She discusses that her cousin's futile attempts to dissect a blackfish is to overlook how human and nonhuman culture are connected to the natural environment. Johnson's blackfish narrative suggests that one can learn more from the fish by following Indigenous cultural knowledge rather than by attempting to cut the fish into pieces. In this way, Active's and Johnson's stories critique Western forms of interacting with the environment as they consider the benefits of the imbricated cultures between humans and nonhuman animals. The bond between the blackfish and the Yup'ik illustrates how the treatment of non-human animals works as a sign of how Indigenous culture treats itself: to harm the non-human is also to do damage the humans.

Ways of Being Human and the Environment

Alaska is home to numerous Indigenous cultures which all take part in traditions that involve close relationships with animals who live in specific geographies. The Yupiit and the *Can'giiq* compose part of the many "rich ecosystems," in Alaska that, Tlingit scholar Maria *Shaa Tláa* Williams observes, "support over fifty-six villages and towns in the Yukon/Kuskokwim Delta area and the Bristol Bay area" (p. 8). The Yupiit reliance on blackfish in this ecosystem as part of their subsistence diet proves indicative of how Indigenous cultures exist in relation with nonhuman animals.

These subsistence activities performed in specific natural environments shape the contours of Indigenous culture -- so much so that even the phrase "subsistence practice" simplifies the manner in which Native culture proves shingled with the natural ecologies of Indigenous place. Confirming this environmental and cultural imbrication, Yup'ik leader Mike Williams, Sr., describes how the Western idea of subsistence "is a different term that we use [that] non-Natives understand." Instead of using "subsistence" he says, "I prefer 'customary and traditional use' ... it's not only for our physical needs — it's spiritual and sacred to us." The traditional act of living off the

land not only provides nourishment to the body but also to the spirit. “Subsistence,” he asserts, “has a different meaning than cultural and traditional use.” The Yupiit way of living, as Williams concludes, intervenes in the human-nonhuman world, but also offers cultural sustenance. (Quoted in Walker, 2014)

The environment and Indigenous ways of living work in conjunction to form Indigenous ecological outlooks and priorities. Yup’ik scholar Oscar *Angayuqaq* Kawagley (2009) writes, “Out of this ecological based emphasis on reciprocity, harmony, and balance have evolved some common values and principles that are embedded in the worldviews of most Alaska Native peoples” (p. 227) The ecological knowledge embodies what Harold Napoleon (2009) asserts is “a very old world” that in Yup’ik is referred to as “*Yuuyaraq*” and translated into English as “the way of being human” (p. 124). To this *Yuuyaraq* way of being, Kawagley adds, “Most indigenous peoples’ worldviews seek harmony and integration with all life, including the spiritual, natural, and the human domains.” (p. 227) As a concept, *Yuuyaraq* carries a meaning that in English conjoins the categories of the spiritual, natural and human in an inseparable fashion. In Yup’ik, culture and the environment are linked to specific terrestrial ecosystems in Alaska that in part produce Indigenous culture over time.

The *Yuuyaraq*, as a horizon of Indigenous experience, embraces non-human animals that, like Native peoples, develop cultures in distinct environments. The animals that create their own cultures in the ecology are also part of an Indigenous traditional food culture that exists as a site of intervention between the shared human and nonhuman animal environment. Nonhuman animals, like the blackfish, and humans produce themselves in and share the same environmental resources such as waters from rivers, and therefore Yupiit possess a vested interest in the wellbeing of nonhuman animals. Cup’ik writer Joan *Pirciralria* Hamilton (2009) speaks to this association, asserting how Native people “believe that all things in this world and universe have life, as humans have life,” and respect is given to these lives. The animals and plants that compose the traditional Indigenous diets are recognized as beings with value, fundamental to the *Yuuyaraq* since they provide the material for existence, and, Hamilton adds, “[T]he land serves as a pharmacy, a source of many medicinal plants. The lakes, rivers, shallow creeks, and the sea provide a variety of fish, birds and marine mammals.” Acknowledging the living bonds between humans and the environment displays how Native cultures are geographically oriented in their formation. “The land provides birds, animals,” Hamilton declares, as well as “perennial berries, vegetables, moss for cleaning, sod for making houses and grass for weaving” (p. 253). Flora and fauna are, as living things, offering the ingredients of Indigenous cultural resolve.

The cultural traditions surrounding nonhuman animals also shape the contours of the particular human culture that inhabits the same geography, the link between the environment and subsistence, where *Can’giiq*, the blackfish, demonstrates the significance in helping understand Indigenous human-animal historical contexts in Alaska. Indigenous narratives about *Can’giiq* oblige as an imperative method for

recognizing how Yup'it Indigenous culture, their way of being, can be particularly situated in the Alaskan ecology.

“Our subsistence lifestyle IS our culture”

In the last three centuries the Indigenous people of Alaska have witnessed a multitude of species they relied upon for subsistence transformed into products for economies to sell in marketplaces throughout the world. Salmon, crab, sea otter, are just a few of the marine animals that multinational companies have utilized in the industrialization of a global food system. John Active's piece “Why Subsistence is a Matter of Cultural Survival: A Yup'ik Point of View” contributes to understanding the relationship between Native culture and regional animal populations in regard to the industrialization of regionally situated food. The stories he relates signify how Indigenous cultural customs with the environment through stewardship is part of the *Yuuyaraq*. In the explication of the tradition, the essay contrasts the *Yuuyaraq* with the manner in which greed and the fishing industrial complex labors without acts of reciprocity to the environment. Active makes the case, however, that any disregard for the long-term well being of the ecology contradicts the *Yuuyaraq*.

John Active's essay is composed of three sections, “Blackfish,” “Lessons in Storytelling,” and “Being A ‘Genuine Yup'ik,’” which all speak to the interrelations between the environment and human culture. The first section (pp. 182-84) conveys the story of a blackfish swimming through a river where it pokes his head above the water to witness a family at their fish camp wasting the animals they take from the river and use as food. The blackfish observes that the scraps and bones of fish lying about the ground were crying. Seeing this as a disservice, the blackfish decides to avoid swimming into the family's fish trap and instead travels further through the river. Coming upon a second site, the blackfish sees a second unkempt fish camp with children throwing fish bones at one another, in play. Aghast at the disrespect with which the family act towards the remnants of the fish, the blackfish moves past them, onward up the river. At a third camp the blackfish finds a situation where fish traps are filled with decaying fish, but no one is around to empty and eat them. The blackfish sees dead fish floating in cages, rotting, and the senseless loss of life motivates it to continue on through the river. At a fourth camp the blackfish finds “At last, a family which appreciates their food.” “They don't waste or leave bits of food or bones on the ground,” the blackfish observes, “They bury their inedibles so there is no crying and wailing at this camp.” (pp. 183-84) For the blackfish this final camp presents a responsible form of human interaction with the environment, by respecting the remains of the animals when they bury them into the ground. The act of returning the fish remnants to the earth proves a form of respect for the animals that gave their lives for another's nutrients, in following the *Yuuyaraq*.

Building upon how to care for the remnants of living things that become food, the second section of John Active's essay, entitled “Lessons in Storytelling” (pp. 184-85), recounts a tale told to him by his grandmother Maggie Lind. Her story further develops

concerns for the cultural aspects of the *Yuuyaraq* behaviors done in respect of the environment. The story she tells her grandson John is one that has traveled throughout Yup'ik communities, about a dream denouncing the careless exploitation of animals, traditional food resources. She elucidates a story to him about a man who dreams he is fishing on the Kuskokwim River when he discovers a skeletal salmon in his drift net. The fish, caught in his drift net, tells him, "I am skin and bones...because your people have been so wasteful. There is coming a time when we fish shall be scarce to you," the fish warns, and continues, "The people have begun to use us to become rich (probably referring to the commercial fishing industry)" (p. 184). The fish as skeletal remains reflects the cautionary words it speaks, in that to be wasteful is to push against life itself.

The fish-specter continues speaking to the man, complaining about the form of handling fish are receiving by people who are motivated to hunt them for profit, not subsistence. "We fish were not put on earth to be used this way," the fish says, "We were placed here for you to eat. Look where it has led you. You fish us only to make money and some of you fish us only for our roe and throw the rest of us away" (p. 184). Tying to the sentiments from the first section of the story, about the blackfish witnessing the dying and dead floating in fish traps, this fish explains, "Listen, I hear crying and wailing coming from your fish caches. Many of us from last year hang rotting in them. Why should we make ourselves available to you when you waste us and only use us in this way?" (p. 185) If people will continue to abuse the fish by letting them die and decompose in the river, it asks, why would they present themselves to people anymore?

The fish continues to caution the fisherman with a warning, "The days of want and stealing are coming," it says, "Many hearts will be broken when they find that their subsistence-caught fish have been stolen. Even their set nets will be taken without the asking" (p. 185). In confirmation of the dream, John Active explains that there has been theft at fish camps along the Kuskokwim. The series of burglaries have in turn led to change in the culture along the river, that in response people had begun to lock their fish caches in fear that others might steal from them. After a season with a severe shortage in the chum salmon population, Active writes, fishers throughout the region were wrecked financially. This crash in the chum population leaves questions about whether future commercial fishing seasons will open.

In this story the closing of the fishing seasons reveals the inherent problems with the industrial fishing complex, in that when fish are taken for the sake of making money people will seize as much as possible without focusing on their customary subsistence needs. In contrast to this, the *Yuuyaraq* culture mandates to live in conjunction with the ecology, of which Active writes, "Elders say fish return to the rivers for a purpose: for us to eat." The fishers should be catching fish for their own nutrient needs, that is, "Not to make money off of, but for subsistence purposes" (p. 185).

The following section of the story offers alternative ways of interacting with the ecology that reflect the *Yuuyaraq*.

Feeding the Ancestors

In the third and final section of John Active's story, called "Being A 'Genuine Yup'ik" (pp. 185-87), he further contrasts traditional culture, what Joan *Pirciralria* Hamilton describes as the *Yuuyaraq*, with the industrial fishing economy. The fishing industry, Active writes, is part of a cash economy, which along with stealing is "not part of our culture," where, he asserts, "Subsistence is everything." The traditional culture of being in accord with the ecology through subsistence practices equates to "the Yup'ik way of doing things." "Now, in this cash economy some people fish commercially and others," he writes, "even go so far as to fish to sell them illegally" (p. 185). These ways of treating the environment run in contrast with long-term sustainable culture.

Active remembers the stories and observations told him by his grandmother Maggie Lind that include advice on how to counter the ruination of the ecological system. Reflecting on the lessons of the blackfish and the skeletal fish told early in the story, Active remembers that his grandmother told him, "A cash economy and stealing are not part of our culture," due in part to the way that it decouples the relationship between human and the nonhuman animals. In fact, he writes that she had instructed him, "To be watchful at all times that I do not offend the spirits of the fish and animals that I take for food" (p. 186). Subsistence customs acknowledge and value the spiritual lives of the animals and plants used as food because without the flora and fauna there would be nothing to subsist upon. "First and foremost: subsistence is our life" (p. 186), so much so that, he writes, "Our subsistence lifestyle IS our culture. Without subsistence we will not survive as a people" (p. 186). Thus, to sacrifice the entire surrounding ecology to the industrial fishing complex would be to lose Yupiit culture, the *Yuuyaraq*, altogether.

"People know they're there because people know they're there"

Yup'ik choreographer and dancer Emily Johnson's work brims with discussions of human relationships to ecology. In a three-part series that began with *The Thank-you Bar* (2009), *Niicugni* (2012), and *SHORE* (2014), she progressively used theater and performance to explore *Yuuyaraq* themes in her work. The piece called *The Thank-You Bar*, named after her grandmother's bar along the Kenai Peninsula, was the first in the series, employing Indigenous ecological understandings to explore human relationships with one another and the environment. In the conclusion of *The Thank-You Bar*, Johnson relays the story "Blackfish." For this last part of the show, she has the audience abandon their seats for pillows placed around a child's pool. With a flashlight pointing up toward her from the pool she sits in, she begins a story about blackfish, comparing Indigenous knowledge, the *Yuuyaraq*, to the abilities of Western science to understand the animal.

In the darkness of the theater, with the flashlight's beam shining up on her face,

she says, “There is a fish that lives in very deep, very cold rivers.” Emily Johnson says, “Their taste is strong, pungent, oily,” and when “They are caught in weighted traps that fall and then rest somewhere near the muddy bottom” of rivers. “In winter, when the tops of rivers freeze, blackfish,” she describes, “push their plump bellies down into the mud, as far from the ice as they can get. They wait” for the water to warm back up. Yet even when the weather is warm, the fish “are never seen swimming in their rivers. They never jump up into the air to break their egg sacks like salmon, or to catch bugs like trout.” The blackfish goes concealed, yet, “People know they’re there,” she assures the audience, “because they know they’re there.” This knowledge about the blackfish that she relates to the listeners proves to be a sign of Indigenous ecological understanding, part of what Hamilton describes as the *Yuuyaraq*. The declaration of understanding that blackfish are residing at the bottom of the rivers comes from the enduring presence of both Yup'it and the fish in the region. From thousands of years of coexistence the Yup'ik have come to know the blackfish.

The blackfish, as a cohabitant of the region also serves as a traditional food source. “When they are holed in traps they are motionless,” she describes, then after they are caught, “they are stored in buckets.” In the buckets they do not fidget, instead they nuzzle their bellies into the bottom of buckets, where they can lay “with their bellies still... on a porch for months,” Johnson says, with “No water. No food. No mud. No fish air.” Appearing inert the blackfish, if returned from the buckets to “their rivers, when held in their very deep very cold waters” in “gently primed in the cups of two human hands, the blackfish heaves.” Coming to life the animal will pulse and while its “head moves from side to side. And then it swims away.” When given the chance to return to the river the fish will eagerly locate its way to the dark muddy bottom of its home. This is how she knows the blackfish, as a living thing and as a food source, a being with a life force. After she acknowledges the fish as a living being she continues with a story about a family member who sets out to know the blackfish in another way.

Her cousin once, she explains, tried to study blackfish for a science fair at school. That spring he caught four, placing them in a bucket to study them later in the fall. Her cousin imagined its “blood, and a heart, lungs,” and “he wanted to pin the blackfish open,” to “draw its picture,” and “label parts.” Following the tropes of modern science’s rationality by wishing to dissect it, he sought to “find out how they sit themselves upright in buckets, why they never surface their rivers, how they come to life after months pressed into mud” — or the bottom of buckets. In the beginning of his experiment the cousin took a blackfish in one hand and a knife in the other and cut it “anus to head, up the belly; but he didn’t see lungs, guts, blood.” In fact, after he cut it, the fish dissolved in his hand into a “thick black liquid goo,” she says. “He tried to stop it from slipping between his fingers” but “the whole mess of it” dripped through his grasp, gathering as a puddle at his feet. So he tried it again, with the same results as his first attempt.

“You eat the blackfish raw. You eat them whole, headfirst. It’s as if you eat the blackfish as the blackfish swims to your belly.”

In giving consideration to her cousin’s research, “If you cannot cut open a blackfish to look at its insides, can you study its insides,” Johnson’s cousin asks? Following the failure of the tests, her cousin abandoned the dissection experiment, choosing to eat the remaining two from his bucket and then ate his father’s cache of fish too, five in total. “Nobody eats five blackfish!” Johnson exclaims about her cousin’s actions. Her relative thought that if he ate a lot of blackfish he could find out about the blackfish’s soul, something that he was unable to do when he sliced open the fish. The cousin sought to learn “about what they dream about during the ice over, about their survival through the harshest conditions, lying in buckets in homes away from the cold deep habitat of river,” and lastly, she adds, “about their swim down our throats.” With his turn toward digesting the fish he hoped to learn about its personality and its decisions. “He thought there was something that the blackfish could teach him that he could maybe, in turn, teach his family and friends and teacher at school.”

“But,” she says, “the blackfish made him puke. It came pouring out of his mouth, sliding over his tongue. That same thick black liquid goo,” she says. “It pulled out of him, leaving him feeling cleaner than before, but with a horrible taste in his mouth.” His eating of the blackfish mirrored his previous attempt to cut it open, and both times the black goo collected on the floor.

After he vomited the fish, she says, “He lay down, belly pressed to the floor,” mimicking the blackfish. “He couldn’t move, so he fell asleep.” In summation of his experience, he told Johnson, “The blackfish are unstudyable.” His encounter with the animal led him to believe that “you cannot cut open a blackfish. Please, do not try.... But when the blackfish enters your dreams, you hold still and listen to what it says.” Johnson’s message is that people need to listen to what animals have to say, just like in Active’s story about the man who dreamed of the skin-and-bones fish. “It will tell you how to survive this world,” she tells the audience, “It will tell you its secrets.” By listening to the blackfish one can follow the *Yuuyaraq*.

Conclusion

In the last section of “Why Subsistence is a Matter of Cultural Survival,” John Active discusses traveling on a berry-gathering trip with his grandmother Maggie Lind on the Johnson River. They stop at a spot along the shore where she tells him where his great grandmother is buried. As they return to the boat and prepare for lunch, Lind takes a “pinch” of everything they were going to eat and returns back to the land. There, she then placed the food in the ground, telling him that “this was done for a good journey and for the abundance of the subsistence foods we were going after” (p. 186). This ceremony brings Active and his grandmother into the ecology by recognizing that the berries they were out picking, and the lunch they were eating, shared a connection to the place their relatives rested beneath the earth. Following the *Yuuyaraq*, the

customary forms of living with the environment, Active and Lind acknowledge the ecological fabric that composes Yupiit culture. Active warns that, like the blackfish, if such a culture “should disappear, we are no more” (p. 187). Without the linkages to ecology the Yupiit would cease to exist as a people.

Ray Barnhardt and Oscar Kawagley (2005) write, “Indigenous people throughout the world have sustained their unique world-views and associated knowledge systems for a millennia, even while undergoing major social upheavals as a result of transformative forces beyond their control.” Both Johnson and Active tell stories that show ways in which customary values and ethics about the natural world wrangle with problems of the fishing industry and the taxonomic aspects of Western science. Yet, Barnhardt and Kawagley point out, “Many of the core values, beliefs, and practices associated with those world views have survived and are beginning to be recognized as being just as valid for today’s generations as they were for generations past” (p. 13). John Active and Emily Johnson point to the relevancies of customary practice. For the blackfish provides valid lesson about how ecological sustainability, food, and Yupiit culture are bound together. In this sense, the Yupiit way shuns the anthropocene era of human activities’ holding drastic bearing on ecosystems.

References

- Active, J. (2001). Why subsistence is a matter of cultural survival: A Yup'ik point of view. *Alaska Native Writers, Storytellers & Orators: The Expanded Edition*. Alaska Quarterly Review. Anchorage: University of Alaska Press, 182-87.
- Barnhardt, R. & Kawagley, O. A. (2005). Indigenous knowledge systems and Alaska Native ways of knowing. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 36(1), 8-23.
- Hamilton, J. P. (2009). The Yup'ik and Cup'ik people. In M. S. T. Williams (Ed.) *The Alaska Native Reader: History, Culture* (252-56). Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Johnson, E.. Blackfish. Music from the Thank You Bar. Catalyst Productions, 2009. CD. Available at <<http://www.catalystdance.com/shop/thank-you-bar-cd>>
- Kawagley, O. A. (2009). A Yup'ik worldview: A pathway to ecology and spirit. In M. S. T. Williams (Ed.) *The Alaska Native Reader: History, Culture* (221-29). Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Napoleon, H. (2009) Yuuyaraq: The Way of Being Human Being. In M. S. T. Williams (Ed.) *The Alaska Native Reader: History, Culture* (121-143). Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Walker, R. (2014). 10 Things you should know about Alaska Natives. *Indian Country Today Media Network*. 11/20/14. Available at indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2014/11/20/10-things-you-should-know-about-alaska-natives-157919
- Williams, M. S. T. (2009). Alaska and its people: An introduction. In M. S. T. Williams (Ed.) *The Alaska Native Reader: History, Culture* (1-12). Durham and London: Duke University Press.

About the Author

Dr. Thomas Michael Swensen, assistant professor of ethnic studies at the University of Utah is an original shareholder in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement corporations Koniag, Inc., and Leisnoi, Inc. He is also enrolled in the federally recognized Tangirnaq Native Village, aka the Woody Island Tribe.