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The Work of Wildness: Diversity and Difference in a Southwest Alaskan Salmon Fishery

What is the relationship of diversity to difference? That is, how do the elements that constitute conditions of diversity in its multiple manifestations relate to the social and material forms that stand as expressions of alterity, the kind of difference that might oppose, evade, or simply exceed dominant or normative frames? I approach this question through an examination of a wild salmon fishery in southwest Alaska and the industry dynamics through which salmon are reconfigured into changing commodities. Drawing on recent scholarship from the ecological sciences, this paper considers the link between biological population diversity and associated patterns of both variability and stability, whose interplay has been critical in the composition of the social forms of salmon fishing in the Bristol Bay region. The paper confirms the significance of these patterns for the highly heterogeneous relations and modes of work that are enmeshed in commercial fishing operations. However, it also questions easy equations among diversities and differences, pointing out that the diverse cultural traditions that are brought to bear in salmon production are not mere functions of biodiversity, even if they may flourish because of it. Further, the paper suggests that a narrow focus on diversity and its trappings may deflect attention from conditions and processes that may be of even greater consequence for the collective pursuit of uncommon livelihoods and lifeways.

Unlike many other stretches of the North Pacific, Bristol Bay is home to some of the strongest wild salmon populations in the world. The tens of millions of sockeye salmon that return to Bay waters each summer form the basis of one of Alaska's most important commercial fisheries, whose participants have long been drawn from far-flung locales: maritime hubs elsewhere in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest; sites of seasonal food processing across the United States; and zones in Asia and Latin America that have supplied migrant laborers to Alaskan shores for well over a century. The salmon runs also form the backbone of subsistence lifeways in the Alaska Native villages that are scattered across the rural area, as well as in more ethnically mixed regional centers. Across this varied geographical and social terrain, multifarious forms of provisioning are joined to salmon industry work, often in unexpected ways. From seasonal family

salmon camps where fish are “put up” according to particular household recipes, to the makeshift kitchens in cannery raingear storage lockers that sizzle with Filipino favorites not on offer at the mess hall, to the decks of commercial fishing boats where crew pluck particularly attractive salmon from the catch to bring home for fish head soup, industry participants bring an array of activities and sensibilities to the labor of commercial production. What they share is their common responsiveness to and animation by the massive salmon runs that converge upon Bristol Bay each summer.

Ecological research suggests that the strength and relative dependability of Bristol Bay’s heavily exploited salmon returns can be attributed to the biological diversity of its sockeye, a single species composed of hundreds of distinct populations, each adapted to a particular river, stream, or tributary, and to different climactic conditions (Schindler et al. 2010). A recent study by a team of scientists from the University of Washington actually attempts to quantify the effects of this population and life history diversity, calculating that the fishery experiences 2.2 times less interannual variability in the volume of total returns than it would if “the system consisted of a single homogenous population” (609). So, the variance among the Bay’s several hundred discrete salmon populations, the study suggests, leads to a “variance dampening” in the form of more “temporally stable ecosystem services,” a phenomenon that has been dubbed the “portfolio effect,” because it is imagined as “analogous to the effects of asset diversity on the stability of financial portfolios” (609). Leaving aside for now the assumptions underlying this conceptual and terminological appropriation, the study indicates that fine-grained salmonid differentiation is at least in part responsible for the ongoing robustness of what is, in fact, a somewhat unusual fishery in comparison to other wild salmon fisheries in Alaska: Bristol Bay is set apart by both its large volumes and an extremely compressed season. The majority of its fish return in a single surge that lasts only about two weeks. For this reason, it is what biologists refer to as a “pulse” fishery—and this period is marked by unpredictable spikes of salmon and a distinctive pattern of frenzied, round-the-clock production for which the Bay is renowned.

While the intricate social forms that are enlisted in commercial production are by no means the necessary consequence of salmon rhythms or materialities, Bristol Bay producers’ somewhat unconventional relationships to work, time, accumulation, environment, and belonging are nevertheless shaped in intimate connection with the capture of wild fish. These relationships, which range widely but express a common condition

of alterity, depend on a certain kind of wildness. This is not the wildness of untouched nature, even if that image is often harnessed for marketing purposes: the fish that become ensnared in Bristol Bay have been molded by harvest for millennia, as nets exert significant selective pressures on salmon populations. Rather, this wildness lies in the degree to which wild salmon pulse with properties that remain largely outside human control, especially when compared to the salmon reared in industrial fish farms.

In competitive global seafood markets awash with cheaper farmed salmon, Bristol Bay producers have struggled to maintain industry profitability even as the fishery itself remains biologically strong and resilient. They increasingly showcase wildness in their efforts to promote their salmon as sustainable to more lucrative markets. But these same promotional campaigns also call for the adoption of salmon quality standards that are emerging as new industry norms with the growth of the farmed salmon sector—even though these standards are much more difficult to achieve in wild fisheries precisely because of their relative unruliness and variability. As this suggests, the forms of difference valorized by new market paradigms are not necessarily the ones that matter most for producers in Bristol Bay. Still, the reliance of contemporary capitalism on elements of nature and culture whose energies it can never quite contain (cf. Tsing 2009; Gidwani 2008) leaves open the question of what a wild pulse at the heart of production might mean for the forms of diversity and difference it has enjoined in its service.

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