

“JUST BECAUSE I’M A FISHERMAN, DON’T ASSUME YOU KNOW WHO I  
AM”: FISHERPOETRY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Folklore Program  
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts

June 2018

## THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: “Just Because I’m a Fisherman, Don’t Assume You Know Who I Am”:  
Fisherpoetry and the Construction of Masculinity

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Degree awarded June 2018

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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June 2018

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This thesis examines the ways in which masculinity is constructed and performed by commercial fisherman poets. Focusing on the writings of cisgender male poets, this thesis examines the ways in which competence and credibility are developed as the highest standards of masculinity, how discussions of the environment contribute to the development of masculinities, and how the relationships depicted in fisherpoetry mirror real-world relationships and develop standards of multiple masculinities.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express sincere appreciation to my advisors Professor Lisa Gilman and Dr. Rachelle Saltzman for their assistance in the preparation of this manuscript and sticking through me without this project. I would also like to thank Joel Brady-Power, Toby Sullivan, Tom Hilton, Jay Speakman and Dave Densmore for allowing me to interview them and help me to get my head around the topic. I would also like to thank Harlan Bailey, Rob Seitz, Tele Aadsen, and all the other FisherPoets I talked with informally while working on this project. I also need to thank Jennie Flinspach, Sarah Wyer, Alina Mansfield, Jacob Ochs, Makaela Kroin, and all the other folklore students who helped to keep me going during this project, as well as John Guzman for keeping me sane and putting dishes away when I was too stressed to.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Literature Review .....	6
Methodology & Definitions .....	12
Layout.....	15
II. “HANDS OF STEEL/HEARTS OF GOLD”: WHAT MAKES A GOOD FISHERMAN?.....	17
Becoming a Fisherman.....	21
Competency, Women Fisherman, & Female Masculinity .....	25
Conclusion.....	29
III. “THE BEAUTY IS THERE FOR ALL TO SEE,/THE PAIN I TRY TO HIDE”: ENVIRONMENTAL THEMES IN FISHERPOETRY & THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY .....	32
Danger & Beauty in the Natural World .....	33
Animals .....	40
Conclusion.....	43
IV. “SON AND FATHER, FATHER AND SON”: DEPICTIONS OF RELATIONSHIPS IN FISHEPOETRY & THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY .....	45
Relationships with Non-Fishermen.....	45
Children.....	54
Conclusion.....	63
V. CONCLUSION .....	64
REFERENCES CITED.....	68

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

It's nighttime and drizzling, as it is wont to do on the Oregon coast, particularly in February. People fill the streets then crowd into bars, restaurants, galleries, and theaters to hear commercial fishermen perform poetry, prose, and song about their occupation, relationships, tragedies, and experiences that range from the comic to the mundane. This scene plays out each year in Astoria, Oregon on the last weekend of February for the FisherPoets Gathering. The FisherPoets Gathering is an annual weekend-long festival celebrating the commercial fishing industry. Over the event's twenty-one years of existence, it has grown from a small gathering of friends into a full-blown multi-venue cultural event, attracting performers and audience members from Europe.

Fishermen from the Pacific Northwest have long written and shared their poetry, in fishing camps, over the airwaves, or in publications like the *Alaska Fisherman's Journal*. The FisherPoets Gathering was a way for this occupational group to share its creative work; over the years, it has become a more publicly accessible way to expose non-fisherman to this poetic tradition. Despite its public face, fisherpoetry remains a form of occupational lore, created by fishermen for other fishermen to share their thoughts on issues that impact the occupation, from weather, fish, and government regulation to more personal reflections on family, gender, and interpersonal relationships.

Fishermen are not the only occupational group with a poetic tradition. Both cowboys and loggers, isolated occupational groups, also create and recite verses about their daily work. The National Cowboy Poetry Gathering is particularly notable as the inspiration for the FisherPoets Gathering. Organized by the Western Folklife Center since



1985, the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering occurs annually in Elko, Nevada during the last week of January. Like the FisherPoets Gathering, it takes over the town for its duration, and offers a variety of performances of poetry and song as well as workshops about aspects of the cowboy lifestyle. Folklorist David Stanley describes cowboy poetry as

Elusive of definition and in constant flux. Although some poems originate in local circumstances and are centered on identifiable individuals and events within a community, many of the most lasting ones lack the sense of specific locality or perhaps lose their local references over time and through repeated recitation. The genre is writing- and print-dependent yet remains intensely oral in performance. Nor did cowboy poetry originate in some preliterate, primitive culture, but instead has borrowed since its beginnings from the forms, metrics, and images of folk song, the Bible, classic literature, and contemporary verse. Cowboy poetry has over the years expanded rapidly in its use of available poetic forms, subject matter, and technique, moving outward from its ballad center to other fixed forms and, increasingly, to free verse. (Stanley 2000, 6)

Fisherpoetry shares many of the same markers of cowboy poetry discussed by Stanley. Like cowboy poetry, fisherpoetry draws on other poetic traditions, and while there are many poets who stick to strict meters, many of the younger poets write and perform free verse and prose. Additionally, while most fisherpoets compose written works, the focus remains on the oral performance of the poetry. Several poets even focus entirely on these oral performances, performing solely from memory and not presenting any written form of their compositions. The one deviation from Stanley's definition of cowboy poetry demonstrated by fisherpoetry is the loss of local references. The poems presented by fisherpoets tend to remain hyperlocal, focusing on the specific locations that events occurred.

The loggers of the Pacific Northwest also have their own poetic tradition, although they do not have a national festival. While their historic poetic tradition tended

to occur during breaks in the work day or evenings in bunk houses and around campfires—much like those of cowboys—contemporary logger poetry and performance tends to take place as part of in-group events related to forestry school logging competitions and gatherings (Saltzman et al 1989) associated with it to bring in an outside audience. Folklorist Jens Lund, in his paper “‘I Done What I Could and I Did What I Can’: Occupational Folk Poetry in the Pacific Northwest” (2015), says that one thing that differentiates logger poetry from cowboy and fisherpoetry is the issue of recitation. He states “It seems likely that many of the logging poems that appeared in industry publications in the last two decades of the twentieth century were never recited. The last logging camps in the Lower 48 had closed by then and radio, television, and recorded music had already taken the place of homemade entertainment by then anyway, and venues for public presentation were few and far between” (2015). Regardless of the performative aspect, each of these poetic traditions are intimately concerned in the lifeways and traditions of the poets, reflecting the highs and lows of each occupation and its history.

One important facet of the history of each of these occupations is that each has historically been male-dominated with a specific form of masculinity perceived as dominant. This dominant masculinity can be characterized by several attributes, some paradoxical. It is, above all else, associated with strength, both physical and mental. Physical strength often gets correlated with physical size, whether height, weight, muscles, or other physical features, such as beards or the penis. This physical strength is also associated with dexterity and being good at whatever physical task is at hand, whether catching a fish or inflicting harm on someone else. Any kind of physically

strenuous activity also gets associated with the masculine. As a result, the side effects of those activities also become associated as masculine, meaning that things like sweat, body odor, messy environments, and the outdoors become coded as masculine traits. Mental strength is frequently depicted as stoicism and non-expression of strong emotions, but also manifests itself in pride both in oneself and one's possessions. These traits of non-expression and pride frequently combine into a mentality that values the self over others, promoting self-sufficiency over communal bonds. What is important to note about these traits is that they have both positive and negative manifestations. Pride, for example, can take the form of quiet self-confidence or loud, aggressive boasting. Physical strength can be used to both protect others and to harm them. It is in these tensions of how these traits are performed by individuals that produce different articulations of masculinity.

Lund coined the term "macho poetry" to describe poems that embrace and draw upon this type of masculinity. For Lund, the content of these poetic traditions, "expresses experiences, values, and narrative style traditionally associated with masculinity" (2015). While Lund does not provide a description of what he means by masculinity, he provides examples of poems from each tradition that demonstrate the attributes mentioned above. While this masculine ethos certainly runs through fisherpoetry, not all fisherpoets promote it in their poems. Instead, this dominant masculinity is contested by a multiplicity of other masculinities, complicating common ideas of what it means to be a man in this occupational context.

This thesis will examine the ways in which fisherpoets' poems and performances provide a way for various masculinities to interact and be placed into conversation with

one another, allowing for the construction of a new dominant masculinity, specific to the fisherpoets. There is no one form of masculinity. As mentioned above, the various traits most commonly associated with masculinity can manifest themselves in any number of different manners, and even then the traits discussed above are by no means a comprehensive list of what gets equated with masculinity. Every individual has their own definition of what masculinity is, shaped and altered by their own life experiences. The traits and details of what makes a “real man” are going to vary from individual to individual. There are as many masculinities expressed at the FisherPoets Gathering as there are individuals, resulting in a multiplicity of masculinities coming into conversation with each other. This multiplicity of masculinities is at the core of my thesis. Focusing on the masculinities of FisherPoets who identify as men, I analyze their performances at the FisherPoets Gathering, their poetry, and their own reflections about what it means to be men in order to examine the dominant masculinity of the FisherPoets Gathering. This dominant masculinity is not one that is practiced by any one individual. Rather it is a composite of the various masculinities present, made up of the traits and attributes that come to be viewed as the mark of a “real man.” While masculinity is rarely discussed as such in their poetry, various themes and topics enable discussions of how diverse masculinities are embodied, performed, and come into conversation with each other. The masculinities expressed through these performances frequently do not match stereotypical ideas of what it means to be a fisherman, the ideas of masculinity invoked by Lund’s phrase “macho poetry.” While the idea of fishermen as rugged, individualistic, unkept men of the sea certainly has a place at the FisherPoets Gathering, each individual deviates in various ways.

## Literature Review

Sociologist R.W. Connell posited the idea of hegemonic masculinity as “a configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of the patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 2005, 77).

Rather than try to define masculinity, a term which he states, “has never been wonderfully clear” (67). Connell states:

All societies have cultural accounts of gender, but not all have the concept ‘masculinity’. In its modern usage the term assumes that one’s behavior results from the type of person one is. That is to say, an unmasculine person would behave differently: being peaceable rather than violent, conciliatory rather than dominating, hardly able to kick a football, uninterested in sexual conquest, and so forth. (67)

Connell then discusses various methods through which other scholars have attempted to define masculinity and the weaknesses of these methods. First are essentialist definitions, which “usually pick a feature that defines the core of the masculine, and hang an account of men’s lives on that” (68), and fail because the selection of what is essential to masculinity is an entirely arbitrary decision. Next are positivist descriptions, which provides a description of “what men actually are” (69) through tests and ethnographic observation. However, this method ultimately depends upon having a pre-existing idea and identification of masculine and feminine and leads to the terms becoming synonyms for male and female. Normative descriptions are based on the idea that “masculinity is what men ought to be” (70). These descriptions have to deal with the fact that few men actually meet this standard and that it leaves no room for personality. The final definition is semiotic, which, based on symbolic difference, defines masculinity “as not-femininity” (70). It is this method that Connell proceeds with, viewing masculinity as a stand in for

authority. For Connell, gender comes down to the relationship between power, production, and emotional/sexual attraction, in which masculinity is that which has power, produces more value, and is attracted to femininity (73-74). However, ideas of masculinity are equally impacted by other societal structures such as class, race, or nationality. This is where the idea of multiple masculinities comes into Connell's work. It is through a focus on the relations between different structures and individuals that discussions of masculinity gain dynamism and realism. Ultimately, the hegemonic masculinity is the one that can claim the most authority over other forms of masculinity and feminity, regardless of if the people in power actually fit under that form of masculinity (77).

Tony Coles argues that Connell's conception of hegemonic masculinity does not take into account the "complexities of various dominant masculinities that exist" (2009, 32). Focusing on hegemonic masculinity hides the impact of other masculinities that may be dominant within a particular social group or context. He provides the example of a young, fit, businessman entering a working-class bar. While his expensive clothes, fitness, and cleanliness may be markers of the dominant masculinity in the office in which he works, in the environment of the bar, different attributes, such as an unkempt beard or a beer belly, are perceived as the attributes of the dominant masculinity (32-33). From this, Coles concludes that

Hegemonic masculinity may be that which is culturally exalted at any given time, but dominant masculinities need to be drawn from this and contextualized within a given field (or subfield), as well as located culturally and historically. It is possible to be subordinated by hegemonic masculinity yet still draw on dominant masculinities and assume a dominant position in relation to other men. (2009, 33).

A variety of dominant masculinities exist throughout society, each drawing upon aspects of the culturally hegemonic masculinity. Those with power in society chooses, whether consciously or unconsciously, those aspects of the hegemonic masculinity that are relevant to their culture, history, and context and defines their dominant model of masculinity based on that, then impose that structure upon the others in the society. These dominant masculinities very well may include attributes associated with non-hegemonic masculinities, but within the context of the group are placed in a dominant position. Thus, within the context of a group, what may be considered a subordinated masculinity in comparison to hegemonic masculinity will in fact be dominant over other masculinities that may be more aligned to hegemonic masculinity, whatever traits are associated with it.

However, just because a form of masculinity is viewed as dominant within a group does not mean that it is unchallenged. Any given social group will have alternate masculinities that are performed within it, and any masculinity that does not conform to the dominant one will be subordinated. Those who perform subordinated masculinities work to challenge the dominant masculinity, while those who benefit from the dominant norm seek to prevent change. This leads to not only contestation over dominant masculinities between groups, but also within groups. When applied to the context of the FisherPoets Gathering, there would be a dominant masculinity amongst the fisherpoets, with the various individual masculinities performed by individual being seen as potential alternatives for that dominant norm. This dominant masculinity would not necessarily be the same as the one that is dominant amongst fishermen as a whole however. In fact, within the context of the commercial fishing industry, the dominant masculinity of the

fisherpoets becomes just another subordinated masculinity. While there are features these masculinities may have in common, such as a focus on competence at fishing, there are also areas where they may diverge wildly, such as an openness towards expressing emotion. The FisherPoets Gathering serves as a place where a community can come together to define its own form of masculinity, and then through example to the wider fishing community, attempt to positively impact the dominant masculinity promoted in that area.

It is important to note that masculinity, as a type of gender performance, is a thing done and is not limited to people sexed male. The idea of gender as a thing done is taken from the work of sociologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman. They argue that “doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (1987, 126). Moving beyond sociologist Erving Goffman’s ideas of gender display, they argue that doing gender is “an ongoing activity embedded in everyday interaction” (130) which is ultimately based upon the construction of differences between male and female (137). Certain frames are established for the doing of gender that reinforce that construction, ranging from having different bathrooms for different genders, despite the biological sameness of the activity or organized sports being an “institutionalized framework for the expression of manliness” (137). Gender is constructed through the actions conducted inside these frames. Also relevant is Judith Butler’s idea of performativity. For Butler, the construction of gender is a “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler 1993, 2). In other words, gender produces itself through the performances of individuals.



Everyone is creating gender through their assumption of and rebellion against gender norms, rather than gender being some fixed immutable standard.

To examine how the creation and performance of folk poetry helps to accumulate capital for fisherpoets, I combine Coles's framework of multiple dominant masculinities with Pauline Greenhill's work in her book *True Poetry: Traditional and Popular Verse in Ontario* (1989) in my analysis of how FisherPoets perform and negotiate masculinity in their poetry and performances. Basing her analysis on folklorist Roger deVeer Renwick's structural analysis of English folk poetry (1980), Greenhill theorizes that folk poetry serves as a way for communities to express what matters to them and what differentiates them from other communities. Renwick asserted that working-class poetry "intended to inform, to persuade, to manipulate, or to affirm the relationship of *communitas* with and among Significant Others in one's primary social and cultural networks" (1980, 3-4), arguing that the deep contextual connection of these poems to their communities of origin made them folkloric. Greenhill expands on Renwick's analysis, examining the way poems can work to persuade others to the poet's point of view. This persuasion is a way for a poet to accumulate cultural capital for the masculinities that they portray in a positive light, while simultaneously reducing the social capital available to other masculinities. Thus, even when the poetry is not commenting on masculinity directly, it likely contains material related to the poet's conception of masculinity and how the masculinity performed by the FisherPoets compares with other masculinities. This presents us not only with the hegemonic ideal as they perceive themselves to be striving against, but also how they envision their own masculinity.

It is also useful to consider analyses of fisherpoets and other dangerous occupations that precede this one. Jens Lund's talk "'I Done What I Could and I Did What I Can': Occupational Folk Poetry in the Pacific Northwest" (2015) has been discussed above and provides a brief history of the three major occupational poetic traditions associated with male occupational groups in the Pacific Northwest. Also relevant is folklorist Julianne Meyer's graduate thesis "Words Carried in with the Tide: Boundaries of Gender in FisherPoetry" (2016). Meyer's thesis provides an overview of the fishing industry as seen from Nushagak Bay, where Meyers conducted fieldwork, and of the FisherPoets Gathering. She then focuses on the experiences of women fishermen and fisherpoets, exploring "how FisherPoets' expressive performances engage and expose gender dynamics present in the occupation" (6). One important thing to note from Meyer's thesis is that "the participants, male and female, of the FisherPoets Gathering are not representative of the population of commercial fishermen. FisherPoets arrive at the FisherPoets Gathering prepared to tear down the walls they build in the occupation. Fishermen at the gathering build walls between themselves and other fishermen, infrequently sharing genuine expressions of emotion" (22-23). The fisherpoets are a distinct group within the commercial fishing world, with their own norms and their own dominant masculinity.

One occupational tradition which has similar masculine associations as commercial fishing is the military. In a chapter titled "Music, Gender, and the Paradox of Masculinity" from her book *My Music, My War: The Listening Habits of U.S. Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan* (2016) folklorist Lisa Gilman examines how the music listening habits of soldiers intersects and interacts with their performances of gender (2016, 80-

112). This concept of how artistic practices and preferences inform the construction and performance of masculinity is a central concern to how fisherpoets express their masculinities. One aspect of masculinity that emerged in Gilman's research in particular was that while soldiers "were supposed to be studly warriors tearing down the enemy and strutting their masculinity in front of one another, they were often simultaneously caretakers, nurturers, and responsible community members" (107). These latter, more stereotypically feminine roles are just as much part of the dominant masculinity of the military as the strength and bravado. After all, looking after one's unit is vital in a combat situation. Soldiers have to know that the others have their back, yet these more nurturing aspects of masculinity often get ignored in common conceptions of masculinity. This idea of caring for others around them is also a central feature of the dominant masculinity of fisherpoets, as will be explored in a later chapter.

### **Methodology & Definitions**

My research and analysis are based on ethnographic fieldwork at the FisherPoets Gathering, interviews I have conducted with several FisherPoets both for this project as well as for the Oregon Folklife Network, and published poems by fisherpoets that I have analyzed. I have attended the past three FisherPoets Gatherings (2016, 2017, 2018), going to the nightly readings and other events such as the poetry contest and various workshops that are held over the course of the weekend. The FisherPoets Gathering has featured over 100 fisherpoets a year for the past two years, with a list of participants that changes annually and an audience of over 1500 people. In general, the poets are commercial fishermen or retired commercial fishermen, many of whom have worked or work in the waters of Alaska or on the Columbia River, and cover all types of fishing from seine

netting to trawling to crabbing. The poets range in age from people in their twenties to their eighties. Roughly sixty percent are men, and forty percent women. Most are white, although there are a few individuals who are mixed race or Native American or Hawaiian. While the event remains focused on the fisherpoets and other commercial fishermen who attend, there are a large number of non-fisherman who participate as audience members, and attendance at the event has grown year after year. This audience is also mostly white, and ranges in age from children to senior citizens.

For this project I interviewed five poets during or shortly after the 2016 FisherPoets Gathering. These five poets were selected in part due to availability and in part because of the topics they write about for their poetry. Each of them have poems that related to gendered issues, even if indirectly, and my conversations with them helped me to develop my own ideas on the topics of masculinity and how it is constructed and performed at the FisherPoets Gathering. Joel Brady-Power is in his thirties and grew up in a fishing family. He is now a trawler in Alaska, where he fishes along with his wife and fellow fisherpoet, Tele Aadsen. Dave Densmore is also a life-long fisherman. Now in his eighties, he is a regular fixture at the FisherPoets Gathering, where he has been performing since the beginning. Densmore also fishes in Alaska. Tom Hilton is in his fifties, and is a native of Astoria, Oregon. He grew up fishing in the Columbia River, although he has also fished in Alaska, and now operates a crab market in Astoria in the old cannery building. Jay Speakman, a man in his fifties and one of the main organizers of the FisherPoets Gathering, no longer fishes but was a fisherman and a sailor for much of his youth; he lives in Seaside, Oregon where he and his wife run an interior decorating business and shop. Toby Sullivan, also in his fifties, did not grow up fishing but joined

the industry in his early twenties. He has fished in Alaska for many years. Toby has both a bachelor's and a master's degree in creative writing. While a college education is not rare for fisherpoets it does distinguish him from the other men I interviewed. For the Oregon Folklife Network, the state of Oregon's folk and traditional arts program which is conducting a multi-year project to document the FisherPoets Gathering, I conducted my first interview with Tom Hilton at the 2015 FisherPoets Gathering. I also supervised interviews done by University of Oregon students and volunteers working for the Oregon Folklife Network with Rich Bard, Rob Seitz, and Harlan Bailey at the 2018 FisherPoets Gathering. I limited my interviews to male fisherpoets to limit the scope of the project, focusing on how cisgender men experience and construct masculinity.

I have also read the poetry that has been published and is available. While many poets have published their own collections, I focused on the FisherPoets anthology *Anchored in Deep Water*, a seven-volume collection published in 2014. This anthology contains a curated selection of fisherpoetry from poets well regarded by the general group of fisherpoets, organized by various themes, as well as interviews with several different fisherpoets. Additionally, I reviewed Internet sources, such as Dave Densmore's own postings of his work on Facebook.

On masculinities and the attributes associated with them, my definitions and classifications are informed by my conversations with the fisherpoets I interviewed, the scholars cited above, discussions in and out of classes, and my own lived experiences as a man. As such, it is useful to briefly define various terms associated with masculinity. Masculinity in general is the bundle of attributes and actions associated with maleness. It is important to note that masculinity is not limited to men, as I will discuss later in

relation to gender theorist Jack Halberstam's conception of female masculinity (1998). Rather, masculinity is those things the individuals associate with maleness, regardless of the sex or gender of the individual performing them.

Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant masculinity within the field of masculinity. It is predominantly associated with physical strength and fitness, aggression (particularly in defense of things perceived to belong to man), emotional repression (the idea that "real men do not cry" is one I myself and several of the men interviewed have regularly encountered in our lives), the consumption of women's bodies, boorishness, uncleanliness, displays of strength as a marker of superiority, self-reliance, a sense of entitlement based on their gender, and a variety of other traits that are constantly influx.

Dominant masculinities all involve various aspects of this hegemonic masculinity, adapted to the particular subfield in which they exist. For fishermen, the dominant masculinity certainly includes physical strength and endurance, stoicism, as well as skill at fishing. This skill at fishing includes not only dedication, but a willingness to do what needs to be done and the perception that a man will keep his word. This focus on skill can also lead to a hyperfocus on the catch and judging a man's worth by how many fish he catches. Another aspect of fishing skill is a willingness to work together, and a recognition that cooperative action is more effective than being a lone wolf.

## **Layout**

I organized the study that follows into three separate chapters. The first chapter focuses on competence and credibility as the key traits necessary to be both a good fisherman, exploring how the two traits are promoted both within the poetry as well as at the FisherPoets Gathering itself. The second chapter explores how poetic discussions of

the natural world contribute to discussions of masculinity, examining the relationship fisherpoets have to both the environment in which they work and the animals that surround them. The third chapter examines the way fisherpoets write about their interactions with non-fishermen, and how their masculinities are contrasted; I pay special attention to intergenerational bonds such as those between father and son. I end with a brief conclusion that summarizes the discussions of the previous chapters while also presenting avenues for future research.

## CHAPTER II

### “HANDS OF STEEL/HEARTS OF GOLD”: WHAT MAKES A GOOD FISHERMAN?

In her book *Legacy and Testament: The Story of Columbia River Gillnetters* (1994), historian Irene Martin states, “fishing is not a lifestyle. It is a traditional way of life, handed down from one generation to the next. It chooses you” (8). While not every fisherman is born into the occupation, fishing is an occupation that requires certain skills in order to survive, let alone excel. A common theme in fisherpoetry is what it takes to make it as a fisherman, what qualities make a good fisherman, and what is needed to try to pass along those qualities. This chapter will examine what FisherPoets have said about the traits that make good fishermen. While these traits do not link to masculinity explicitly, the implications are clear. A good fisherman is judged as someone who is successfully performing a specific articulation of gender typically associated with masculinity.

Two of the traits that occur again and again in fisherpoetry are competence and credibility. Competence in the context of the fishing industry is the ability to perform well, succeeding as a fisherman by doing one’s job and surviving the stresses that accompany it. Credibility in fishermen speak could also be called trustworthiness; one’s credibility resides in other people’s belief that fishermen will live up to their promises and accomplish the things they are expected to do, no matter their difficulty. These traits came up in my personal conversations on fishermen and masculinity with my interviewees as well as in the poetry. The standards for competence and credibility emerge out in the fishing grounds. Characters in poems demonstrate their competence



and credibility, providing models for behavior and demonstrating the value of those skills out on the boat. In her book, Martin relates an Astoria legend that epitomizes competence. The legend concerns a fisherman who had to spend some time in jail due to an alcohol related incident. While in jail he mended his net and dedicated his time barred from fishing to activities that are essential to fishing. As the story has been passed from one generation of Astoria fishermen to the next, the moral has become “He may have been a drunk but he was a damn good net man” (Martin 1994, 51). The message in this story, and in many others, is that a man may have faults, but if he puts his all into fishing, those faults can be overlooked because of his skill out on the water and his dedication.

Credibility is a slightly more complex trait. In an email, Dave Densmore wrote, “though one word can sum [masculinity] up for me....credibility, sticking by your word no matter at what cost once it's given. lol” (Densmore, personal communication, February 15, 2017). For Densmore and others, credibility overlaps with integrity; both mean honoring your promises regardless of unpleasantness. For example, even if someone proves incompetent at fishing, they can retain a modicum of their credibility if they stick with fishing for the period they said that they would. Densmore explicitly linked this trait to his definition of masculinity in his quote above, using it not only as the mark of a good fisherman, but a good man.

### **Constructing performance through the past: “Uniontown Supreme Court”**

Successful fishermen embody competence and credibility; one way fisherpoets indicate value of those traits is to attribute them to previous generations of fishermen. Poets paint the picture of an Edenic past where the fishing was better and the men more masculine. A masterful example of such a poem is Tom Hilton’s “Uniontown Supreme

Court” (2014). Hilton eulogizes Astoria’s retired fishermen, calling upon them as a way to condemn the politicians who have caused damage to the Columbia’s present-day fishing runs. The river was once “full of salmon, sturgeon/Seiners, trollers, gillnetters” (47), a fisherman’s paradise whose days have long since passed. Similarly, the fishermen of the past were greater than today’s. According to Hilton, “A man was valued/By his word/Firm handshake/His deeds” (44). Competency and credibility come across clearly as the true measure of a man. By specifically identifying these traits as the ones that made the men of the past men, Hilton links them to successful performances of masculinity in the present.

Unfortunately, those men are gone, and as Hilton says in the poem, this past is now “Romanticized/Plagiarized/ Eulogized/By people like me” (46). This poem suggests that the heroic fishermen of yore are gone, though they still live on as ideal role models for other men who can still aspire to be honest and trustworthy good fishermen. Hilton contrasts the good fisherman with its opposite, the politician. For Hilton, politicians are incompetent and dishonest men. It was the politicians who destroyed the river’s glory days: “Those days are gone forever/With the stroke of a pen” (47).

This conflict between fishermen and politicians is not limited to this poem. Martin discusses some of the issues between the groups in the last two chapters of her book (1994, 101-130), noting how politicians rarely consult commercial fishermen in the planning for water use rights. Additionally, the fishermen are at the mercy of several different industrial interests favored by politicians – such as logging, mining, and agriculture – in terms of protecting the fish’s habitat. For many fishermen and their communities, politicians are untrustworthy; they do not live up to their promises to

protect fisheries. Politicians thus have become an easy trope for poets to employ as the opposite of the competent and credible fishermen.

In his poem, Hilton constructs a situation in which the masculinities of the two occupations are opposed. To return to Coles's conceptualization, two very different forms of dominant masculinity are associated with each occupation. Action and upright behavior characterize the dominant masculinity of the fishermen, while inaction and deceit characterize the dominant masculinity of the politician depicted by Hilton. While the competent fisherman may be dominant within the field of fishermen's masculinity, he is still subordinated to the politician's masculinity on the societal level, due to the differences in economic and social capital (Coles 2009). Hilton is able to use this poem to vent and complain about onerous governmental regulations, something that most fishermen can commiserate about. This act of voicing the community's displeasure towards the actions of the politicians, by judging their standard of masculinity as lesser than the fisherman's own reframes politicians as subordinate. This airing of grievances provides opportunities for subordinated masculinities to challenge dominant masculinities by providing a chance for individuals who are subordinated to demonstrate the negative qualities of those who support the dominant ideology.

The poem is a way for Hilton to express his displeasure with the lying politicians, criticizing them for failing to take care of the commercial fishing industry, while also valorizing appropriate models of behavior for fishermen through eulogizing fishermen of the past. This valorization depicts the fisherman's model of masculinity as morally superior to the politician's. This contest also helps to accomplish one of the functions of folk poetry (Renwick 1980; Greenhill 1989), to promote community values in contrast to

those held by outside groups. Hilton directly contrasts the honor of the fishermen with the dishonor of the politicians; the result is to promote the former's credibility and worthiness. Hilton's poem takes the historical performance of a specific credible and competent model of masculinity, contrasts it with the disreputable and deceitful masculinity of the politicians, and describes how the latter works to keep the former subordinate through deceitful legislation. The poem then works to both remind fishermen reading the poem or listening to a live performance about their industry's history as well as to inform outsiders of that same history. Hilton's goal is to persuade both that the fishermen of the past were real men, worthy of emulation.

### **Becoming a Fisherman**

It is from the fishermen of the past that those currently fishing learned what they know. To reiterate Martin's assertion, fishing "is a traditional way of life, handed down from one generation to the next" (1994, 8). Fishing is not something one can learn from a book; it comes from doing and listening to those who have come before. As Martin explains, "due to the need to have a large 'data bank' of knowledge about grounds, tides, weather conditions, and fish migration patterns, fishermen frequently learned the fishery from a relative. Families passed on knowledge from one generation to the next, and fishermen as a group integrated potential fishermen into the group from childhood" (61). While many fishermen do come from fishing families, there are others who do not come from fishing backgrounds. These newcomers are called greenhorns, and poems about the mistakes they make while learning the trade demonstrate how FisherPoets comment upon novices, men who are not yet men.

Dave Densmore's poem "Across the Deck" (2017a) takes the form of an explanation of the titular phrase that "speaks of boys to men, of quiet pride" (2017a). This transformation take place as these young men listen to their elders and learn to be competent; in doing so, they establish their credibility. Densmore writes,

Across the deck the best skippers come  
The learning done the traditional way.  
Remembering his own oft times frustrating trek,  
As he shows some new youngster the way.

He didn't just buy in, he earned his boat  
with his own blood, sweat, and tears  
The accomplishment is his own, to stand tall  
On equal with his peers. (2017a)

This passage emphasizes competency at fishing as the core of being a fisherman. The best skippers are those who have worked hard to get where they are; as masters of their trade, they are eager and willing to share their knowledge with those coming up through the ranks. The skipper's status derives from a competent performance—as a successful fisherman and teacher. Densmore describes the good newcomers as those who are willing to listen and learn from the stories and examples of successful fishermen. The transition from boys to men can happens only if the newcomers can demonstrate that they are learning and developing competency at the required skills to be a fisherman. Similarly, greenhorns must demonstrate credibility, keeping to their word and not shirking their duties. By learning and keeping their word, they successfully perform their masculinity, earning the right to call themselves fisherman. In the poem, Densmore states that, "the wise hear what the old ones say," implicitly suggesting that those who do not listen are foolish (2017a). By not listening, they fail to develop the skills necessary to be a

fisherman. Despite any other signals of masculinity they might possess, they are not considered good men in that context, let alone fishermen.

We can see this idea echoed in Densmore's poem "Weakling," which is about overconfident greenhorns who quit fishing because of the difficulty of the work:

Well they come strutting around  
With stars in their eyes  
Wanting a bit of my life  
Though disillusioning, I really try.

I always say it's way far different  
Then what your imagination shows to you.  
It takes a special sort of toughness  
To stick and stay like we must do.

They're sure they've got what it takes,  
Cause they've proven tough in the bar,  
And they're used to hard work,  
Though home and comfort's never been too far.

I tell of the grind and demanding work  
They'll be gone for several months  
And counted on to stick it out  
No matter if the road has some bumps.

It's all about the fish, boat and gear,  
The life you left behind should be on hold,  
Moping round bringing everyone down  
Sure quickly gets very old.

Never could understand  
Why you even bother come asking me  
To bring you along someplace  
You don't seem to even want to be.

And when you bail on a whim,  
You've just screwed the rest of the crew.  
So we're all stuck waiting at the dock  
Waiting to replace irresponsible you.

You go tripping up the dock  
Without a backward glance.  
Leaving me to wonder what I saw

To even bother giving you a chance.

Seems to me a quitter will always be,  
Taking the easiest way that's good for them,  
How do you hold up your head  
When walking through the world of men.

Weakling is not a title comfortably worn  
Just shows a lack of personal pride,  
How do you even look into the mirror  
Or confront the man inside.

And it's funny how sometimes  
The youngest, slightest, member of the crew  
Proves out to be the toughest  
Simply hanging in to do whatever he must do.

Well I guess I'm glad you're gone  
Though I'm disappointed once again.  
But you've proven you don't deserve  
A place here in this world of very tough men. (2016c)

To be a failed fisherman is to be a failed man. Despite the greenhorn's macho belief that he could triumph due to his innate toughness, he has been bested by someone perceived as less traditionally masculine than him, due to the latter's credibility, "prov[ing] to be the toughest/simply hanging in to do whatever he must do" (Densmore 2016c). While the greenhorn may be able to perform a different dominant masculinity on land, he is not able to perform the competence and credibility essential to what is required for fisherman' to be successful, and thus fails to prove that he is man enough for the job. This returns us to Coles's idea of multiple dominant masculinities. While empty displays of strength may be sufficient to claim a dominant position in other subfields of masculinity, they do not work within the fisherman's subfield of masculinity, where competence and credibility are valued over simple strength. Within the subfield of fisherman's masculinity, this masculinity that prides macho posturing over actual strength of character is placed in a

subordinated position compared to the “very tough men” (2016c) that are fishermen. True toughness comes not from brute strength or misogynistic ideals, but rather from being good at what you do and that others perceive you to be a man of your word.

In my interview with him, Joel Brady-Power also noted this tendency of “macho” men to do less well at fishing than they expected. Brady-Power contrasted the “big, strong guys” who come up “to go do this thing that they’re perceiving as very masculine, as very macho,” with the guys who arrive with “the Kerouac twinkle” (Brady-Power, interview with author, 2017). Brady-Power noted that “some of those guys might make it further than the macho guys.” Such macho men with their physical strength, toughness, and big egos, seem to think that those traits will be sufficient out on the water, but it takes much more than an external display to be a successful fisherman. Rather, it takes mental fortitude. According to Brady-Power, “fishing is much more about mental toughness, it’s about endurance” (Brady-Power, interview with author, 2017). And as Brady-Power went on to say, “women are almost, in some ways, better suited...And I think a lot of times that women have more [mental toughness] than we [men] do.” (Brady-Power, interview with author, 2017).

### **Competency, Women Fisherman, & Female Masculinity**

In the previous two sections fisherman and man were treated roughly as synonyms. Yet “fisherman” has come to be a gender-neutral term, with many female fishers’ preferring it over terms such as fisherperson or fisherwoman. Densmore’s “Fisherman” (2017b) demonstrates the transformation of this gendered term: “Now ‘fishermen’ speaks not of gender/But of a state of heart,/A state of grace attained by one,/Who always does their part” (2017b). This stanza once again points back to



competence and credibility, as the most significant traits required for becoming and being a successful fisherman. In the FisherPoets Anthology, an interview with Erin Fristad, a fisherman who frequently participates in the gathering, includes Fristad's comment, "I would prefer we keep fisherman and make it gender neutral by stepping in and doing the work, by inhabiting the complex world of commercial fishing...Being a fisherman is in your blood regardless of gender" (Chelsea 2014b, 15). Densmore, Fristad, and many others in the occupation note that fisherman is a term that someone of any gender can claim—provided they can demonstrate their competence and credibility. Densmore's phrase "doing your part" means that others regard you as someone who will accomplish the assigned tasks. It is a performative descriptor, one that depends upon a constant demonstration of competence and credibility and is open to either gender.

But the openness of the term does not imply that there are not gendered expectations that are challenging for women fishermen. Commercial fishing remains a male-dominated industry. While there may be plenty of feminist male fisherman, women fishermen, and female-only boats, the industry has not achieved gender equality. On the Columbia River, there are reports of female crews as early as 1895. Female crew members started to become more common in the 1940s and 50s (Martin 1994, 53-54). This trend has continued, particularly with women from fishing families serving in all roles in the fleet. However, for those without pre-existing relationships to fishermen, it can be difficult to get into the industry. Meyer states that "women without relationship ties to family or men often struggle to find work, and remaining outside of a relationship can make it difficult to remain in the industry" (2016, 57). Women are often expected to take on nurturing roles in the fleet, and "women fishermen who have children are often forced

to give up fishing because they are expected to take care of children, while their husbands are allowed to continue working. Even women who are not mothers are expected to care for any children present” (Meyer 2016, 56-57). Meyer documents several women fisherpoets, such as Mary Jacobs and Tele Aadsen, who have written about the tension between the expectation to watch the children and desire to continue fishing.

In “Fisherman” (2017b) Densmore uses his privilege as a well-regarded male fisherman to demonstrate that the core qualities one needs to be a fisherman are not gendered, and that anyone can hold the title of fisherman. Yet, he also addresses that it is considered by many to be a male occupation, in part because of the idea that competency and credibility are male traits. Densmore addresses this gender tension in his poem “In Honor Of” (2017c). He writes that “Some guys won’t let a woman on their boat” (2017c) because they view women as bad luck or unskilled. He continues,

Hell, I’ve seen women fishermen,  
That worked circles around a man.

Worked twice as hard, yet kept things clean,  
The boats usually neat as a pin.  
(Something I’ve had occasion to notice,  
Often doesn’t happen that way with men.)

No, I’m usually saying, “pick that up.”  
“Clean it up.” or, “don’t just leave that laying there!”  
And babysitting greenhorn boys  
Is enough to make you pull your hair.

Haven’t seen many women that would quit,  
Before the season was completely through.  
But sticking and staying through the skinny times  
The new boys don’t seem able to do. (2017c)

Densmore again emphasizes the performative nature of someone “always doing their part.” These women are more competent and credible than the greenhorns; they work

harder, stick to the work, do better jobs, and keep their word. In the poem, those men who do not see these women as fishermen are themselves flawed. Densmore calls them out for their refusal to recognize the competence, even superiority, of women fishermen.

Densmore writes and performs his poetry as a not so subtle way to criticize the misogynists in the fishing fleet; for him, a person's worth has nothing to do with gender and everything to do with competent performance of one's job.

Despite their more enlightened views, Densmore and other fishermen still ascribe differences to the genders. In the poem, Densmore states that women keep things clean, while the men do not, and the greenhorns must be forced to do their part to keep the ship orderly. This coincides with the societal idea that women more orderly than men and reflects the fact that chores such as keeping spaces clean are frequently associated with female labor, being an aspect of the nurturing role they are often put in, as described by Meyer (57-59). Similarly, while the poem asserts that women can be fishermen, Densmore genders the greenhorns as male. While women can be fishermen, they never seem to be greenhorns, or fishermen-in-training. They are expected to be perfect from the start, having much higher initial standards than a man first coming onto a boat is expected to have, Meyer writes that "the use of occupational language is more important in women's poetry. Women fishermen are constantly under the pressure to prove their competence in the occupation, and they are able to do this through performing the same physical tasks with equal skill as the men" (30). By demonstrating that they know the jargon associated with fishing, women fisherpoets are able to prove their competence, something male fisherpoets are not forced to do to be considered competent.

I would argue that women fishermen are emblematic of female masculinity. Gender theorist Jack Halberstam coined this term as a recognition that masculinity and maleness are not the same thing, and that masculinity “becomes legible as masculinity when it where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body” (1998, 2). By claiming a space in a still predominately masculine field, women fishermen are forced to perform in masculine ways in order to succeed in the eyes of the other fisherman. They have to operate under a double standard of being “capable of exhibiting hypermasculine tendencies, while also maintaining stereotypical feminine traits” (Meyer 2016, 32). The men who believe women should not be fishermen do not see the essential qualities of fishermen as something women can successfully perform. This genders competency as a fisherman and credibility as male traits. The result? When women perform competently and others regard them as credible, those women gender themselves as men in the world of fishermen. While the work of female FisherPoets such as Moe Bowstern, Tele Aadsen, and Erin Fristad deal at length with these gender issues, as discussed by Meyer (30-37), it is rare to see a male FisherPoet such as Densmore do the same. Densmore is promoting a more inclusive conceptualization of masculinity, one that accepts women to perform in the male dominated occupation of fishermen. This masculinity is dominant amongst the FisherPoets and is a way in which their dominant masculinity contrasts with the more misogynistic masculinity still dominant amongst fishermen as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

While the FisherPoets Gathering enables the FisherPoets to share their work with a much wider audience, the focus of the event remains on sharing with each other. However, this does not mean that fisherpoets have not written poems directly addressed

to the non-fishing audiences. An example of this is Densmore's "On Bravery" (2016a), a poem that describes the various dangers that fishermen face. He describes those who have "been over the edge,/And looked down into their own grave,/Yet keep doing whatever they must,/These are the truly brave" (2016a). Their bravery is another aspect of the competence that the FisherPoets regard as at the core of being a fisherman. Such didactic tales serve as a form of training that educate fishermen and non-fishermen alike about the dangers at sea and how fishermen responded to those challenges.

For Densmore, his competence and credibility come from a life spent on the water as a fisherman and as a poet. He is a legend that has yet to disappear and represents the type of men that Hilton describes as "Boats of wood/Hands of steel/Hearts of gold" (Hilton 2014, 44). Densmore has strode "Across the Deck," teaching other fishermen and FisherPoets how to be competent and credible. His virtuosic performance cultural capital that he can use to shift ideas around masculinity. While Densmore physically embodies many ideas about masculine presentation, through his poetry he can work to destabilize norms around who gets to be considered a fisherman, and through that who gets to be masculine. While Densmore is not the arbiter of women's acceptance as fishermen, he and men like him do help to open the doors by enlarging the space for what it means to be a fisherman. Furthermore, his very masculine presentation combined with the emotional intensity of several of his poems enables the audience to reinvision models of masculinity that discourage "masculine" men from sharing their emotions.

. Fisherpoets can construct a past to shape the present as well as offer criticisms of existing power structures. Their poems make explicit their ideas about community norms—for what it means to be a man, a good fisherman, and a virtuosic poet. This buy-

in is predicated on the same things as a fisherman needs to be successful – competency and credibility.

## CHAPTER III

### **“THE BEAUTY IS THERE FOR ALL TO SEE,/THE PAIN I TRY TO HIDE”: ENVIRONMENTAL THEMES IN FISHERPOETRY & THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY**

The environment a common topic in the of commercial fishermen poetry and prose. Fishermen spend much of their time interpreting the behavior of the sea to ensure their own safety and to secure their livelihood. A strong environmentalism is evident in the works of many different fisherpoets; they extoll the beauty of their working environment and write movingly about their relationship with the various animals they encounter. At the same time, they also recognize the dangers that the environment can pose and use their poetry as a way to discuss the threats they face out on the ocean.

This chapter will look at several different subthemes and topics within environmental poetry and how they contribute to the construction of masculinity as performed by the fisherpoets. Perhaps the most common subtheme is danger. The sea is a dangerous place, and the way that the fisherpoets discuss those dangers in their poetry constructs both a perceived dominant masculinity that ignores the dangers of the natural world and alternative masculinities that pay attention to things like weather conditions and make plans to fish safely. I call the former “perceived dominant” because it plays into dominant societal ideas that men are supposed to face danger head-on, never backing down; a man demonstrates his toughness by surviving the unsurvivable. This dominant masculinity is entirely catch focused, prioritizing the amount of fish caught over safety concerns. In contrast, men who pass up good fishing because of potential weather

problems are viewed as less masculine, because they are not fulfilling the biggest marker of competence – catching fish. As they have noted in their poetry and in their interviews, fisherpoets repeatedly urge for caution and respect towards the natural world, as even the most skilled fisherman cannot outdo Mother Nature.

Despite the myriad dangers of the ocean, fisherpoets still appreciate the beauty of nature, and this appreciation is the second subtheme for this chapter. Those poems allow poets to embrace a more emotionally demonstrative tone, something that contrasts with dominant masculinities that emphasize the denial of men's emotions. Joel Brady-Power is particularly known for the ways in which he uses his poetry to confront the stereotype of the fisherman's stoicism and impassivity. Many of those at the FisherPoets Gathering write about how much they owe their prosperity to the natural world and thus have a responsibility to protect it. This reverence for nature extends to the animals that fishermen interact with on a regular basis. These poems allow fisherpoets to explore both alternate points of view on what they do as well as reflect on the violence that is an inherent part of their profession.

### **Danger & Beauty in the Natural World**

Jay Speakman's "Big Trouble on the Dance Hall Tow" (2014) tells a tale of how an overconfident fishing crew lost their net by not paying attention to the weather. Speakman emphasizes the danger: "No survival suits, no inflatable raft,/Not a soul out there who could save our ass./If it all went wrong, no-one would ever know/How we met our fate on The Dance Hall Tow" (48). Embracing danger is an essential part of fishing, and fishermen risk their lives whenever they go out. The ability to face this danger and to even enjoy it requires confidence in one's own skills. And this confidence is something



that grows out of an awareness of one's own competence, an essential trait by which fishermen define their masculinity. But even the most skilled fisherman needs to respect and acknowledge the ocean's force and unpredictability and thus their own vulnerability.

That respect is something that often must be learned firsthand. Speakman's poem "Big Trouble on the Dance Hall Tow" (2014) describes a situation where the fishermen's first haul is so successful that they decide to continue shrimping and ignore changing weather conditions. As a result, the ship nearly sinks, which the fishermen prevent only by releasing their net—and their catch. Speakman concludes, "Testosterone and blind ambition,/They'll take you far when it's time to go fishin',/But you've gotta' know when to pull back the reins" (50). Speakman explicitly links reckless behavior with male identity, and then condemns it as something that needs to be pulled back on.

Testosterone, the primary male sex hormone, increases muscle development and strength as well as risk taking, traits that enable fishermen to both embrace dangers and envision their own survival. Yet blind faith in one's own abilities can lead to disaster, as it did in the scenario described in this poem. The most successful fishermen should be able to balance their manly urge to keep fishing with caution and a respect for the environment.

Another notable example of a poem about fishermen's struggle with the environment is Dave Densmore's "The Ride" (2017d). Densmore describes an incident he and his crew fled his sinking ship in a small life raft. Shortly before reaching shore, a storm rose up and trapped them at sea for four days. After four days, a large Japanese fishing vessel hit their life raft. After a brief period of terror in which they were thrown into the sea, the Japanese crew rescued the crew. While the story has a happier ending than many, it captures the terror and uncertainty that results from being at the ocean's

mercy. In the poem, nature is always the biggest threat. While the ship hitting the life raft and the initial explosion are not natural events, they are only threatening because of the natural world, with the men's struggle always being against nature. Being able to accept the risks of nature and still be willing to go out fishing in the open ocean requires not just faith in one's own competence but also the abilities of one's crewmembers. In moments of crisis like those described in "The Ride," a fisherman needs to know that their crewmates have their back. By being capable of dealing with whatever may happen, they demonstrate both their credibility and competence, as discussed in the last chapter.

The relationship between a fisherman's reaction to the environmental dangers they face on the job and their masculinity is most explicit in Dave Densmore's "Showdown at Izembek Bay" (2017f). The poem opens: "At thirteen years of age,/He was already a seasoned hand./He'd been told, years before,/'You WILL act like a man!'" (2017f). This exhortation, along with his own youthful bravado causes the youth to ignore symptoms of blood poisoning affecting his arm, sparking a race through rough waves to get to land to see a doctor. The storm causes the skiff (a smaller boat used to pull and gather nets) to break loose from the boat, with the youth's father on board the skiff. The skipper, scared of the conditions, continues onto land until the youth holds a rifle to his head and threatens his life. As the poem explains:

He looked back at his dad,  
And knew what must be done!  
His dad would never just stand by,  
And he was his father's son!

Now there's no fancy philosophizing,  
When you're out there over the edge.  
You do whatever you have to do,  
When you've taken the manhood pledge!

He jumped below and grabbed his rifle,  
And scrambled back up on top.  
One way or another,  
Their retreat just had to stop!

“Turn this boat around,  
Or, by God, I’ll shoot you dead!”  
Or something to that affect,  
Were the words that kid said.

Braced in the corner of the flying bridge,  
With his rifle held straight and true,  
There wasn’t a quiver or a doubt,  
He’d do what he had to do. (2017f)

The skipper turns the boat around, the youth rescues his father, and they all make it to shore safely. The poem closes with:

Later Dad said, “I saw that boat turn around,  
And you with your rifle on the bridge.  
You probably shouldn’t have done that...  
But I’m mighty glad you did!”

Well, I know that kid very well,  
And I don’t doubt to this day,  
That he’d have pulled the trigger,  
If he hadn’t gotten his way.

Now this little story I’ve just told,  
Is the plain unvarnished truth.  
And that rifle still hangs on my wall at home,  
If you want to see the proof! (2017f)

Through the opening stanza’s demand, the manhood pledge, and his father’s compliments at the end of the poem, the poem holds up the actions of the young Densmore as the actions of a “man.” A man, to Densmore, is someone who does whatever it takes to protect the people they care about, regardless of the consequences. When I talked to Densmore about this poem, he confirmed that he would indeed have shot the skipper if he’d had to, even though it probably would have killed them all. Densmore also made sure to emphasize that the skipper was “a brave man, a good man,” and that his hesitation

was a momentary lapse. After all, he was willing to go back for Densmore's father. He summed up the experience with "You gotta do what you gotta do. Sometimes you have to take a huge gamble" (Densmore, interview with author, 2017).

Being willing to take those gambles with the weather and for one's crewmates is a big part of what it means to be a fisherman. In my interviews terms like "grit" and "determination" came up repeatedly as key markers of masculinity, and something fishermen display on a regular basis as they interact with the natural world. Tales of survival amid crises such as "Showdown at Izembek Bay," Densmore's "The Ride," or Speakman's "Big Trouble on the Dance Hall Tow" all demonstrate the fisherman's determination, as well as their loyalty to each other. This cooperative action is another trait that frequently runs parallel with determination—in their poems and among fishermen. As Densmore observed, he could not have saved his father without the skipper's aid and skillful piloting, and Densmore would not have survived if his father had not noticed the blood poisoning. At the FisherPoets Gathering, participants share poems that detail potential catastrophes and the ways that determination and cooperation avert disaster. That very act of sharing contributes to the construction of these norms of determination and collaborative action as standards of masculinity. Those traits are part of the goals inherent in the metaphorical "manhood pledge" to which Densmore refers. This returns us to Lisa Gilman's discussion of caring for others as a masculine trait in the context of the military (2016, 107). This idea of looking out for other men creates a sense that men must look out for each other and nurture each other, actions that are more often considered as feminine (107). For Densmore, looking after each other is a major part of what it means to be a man, and is a key part of the "manhood pledge."

Fisherman have a similar need to take care of one another. In Densmore's "Showdown at Izembek Bay," he depicts show various characters work together to survive. The poem foregrounds these bonds, and Densmore's recognition that killing the skipper would not have accomplished emphasizes that fact. Despite common conceptions of masculinity, no man is an island. Rather, men must depend on those around them to succeed and to survive. In contexts like these, lone wolf masculinities, those who do not support those around them or seek out support from others, cannot be successful. By refusing the help of others, they prove themselves to be incompetent fishermen. Those who make this mistake are subordinated, failing to demonstrate their own competency by not recognizing they cannot do everything on their own.

The centrality of mutual support is evident in the nearly annual FisherPoets Gathering memorial poems that recognize the fishermen lost during the past year or years. At the 2017 Gathering, repeated references were made by various fishermen to the crew members lost on a ship that had gone down that year in a storm, a loss made even stronger by the fact that the season before was notable for having had no deaths. People dedicated poems to the crew members, news stories about the event were read and shared, and people reminisced and got emotional. At least one fisherpoet I observed cried while discussing the topic on stage. These public expressions of grief may seem "unmanly" by dominant ideas of masculinity in which men are not supposed to publicly display emotion, but in the context of the FisherPoet Gathering these displays of emotion are welcome and even expected. Fishermen do not only have to take care of each other physically, surviving rough seas and disease through communal support, but also emotionally, just as the military men documented by Gilman (2016, 107). The

FisherPoets Gathering allows for communal grieving and remembrance. Displays of emotion serve as a demonstration of caring. Grieving for lost friends and allowing and enabling others to grieve is another form of care, one that often gets excluded from most discussions of dominant masculinities.

This sense of self-reflection and emotional openness can also tie into appreciations of nature's beauty. In my interview with Joel Brady-Power, he mentioned that part of why he fishes is because he feels drawn to "the natural places of the Earth." For Brady-Power his feeling of insignificance helps to inspire his poetry and enables him to reflect upon the world. But not all fishermen share this need to reflect, according to Brady-Power:

I don't think all fishermen experience it the same way...I have a group of boats I fish with, and I would get on the radio and say "Oh my god, you guys have to see this sunrise!" And they're like "What are you talking about? How many fish have you caught? I don't care about the sunrise." Like, some people don't see it.... It's not like every fisherman out there floating around is experiencing it the same way I am. But that's one of the beauties about fisherpoets. You get a lot of the people that are thinking about it, you know are getting an emotional or spiritual experience from that are going to show up and share that experience. (Brady-Power, interview with author, 2017)

Another example of this kind of reflective poem is Densmore's "Uyak Bay: a love poem" (2016b). The poem commemorates a complicated place for Densmore. Despite his love for the bay's beauty, it is also the place where he lost both his son and his father in a boating accident. While Densmore's grief over this loss is at the center of many of his poems, it fades into the background in this one. Like Brady-Power, Densmore finds that the natural world can inspire reflection and heal emotional trauma: "But the human spirit's resilient/And the beauty's still there to see,/ I find solas [sic] in nature's deeply healing power/And the gifts she holds out to me" (2016b).

## **Animals**

One environmental topic that all fisherman relate to are fish, a common topic for fisherpoetry. Lloyd Montgomery's "Journey" (2014) is written from the point of view of the salmon, providing a fish's reaction to the fishing industry. This poem evokes sympathy for the fish, describing their lives from their point of view and ends with a plea for the audience to respect the needs of the fish. The poem argues that fishermen need to let some fish get through in order for the fisheries to be sustainable, as well as work to maintain the environment in which the fish spawn and live.

Fish are not the only animals with which fisherman interact. Fishermen are in constant competition with the various animals that eat fish, such as sea lions. During our interview, fisherpoet Toby Sullivan explained that it used to be common practice for fishermen to kill sea lions; there was even a bounty on them in the early 1970s (Sullivan, interview with author, 2017). Sullivan is the author of "Killing Sealions" (2014), a prose piece that describes an experience he had killing sea lions shortly after he began fishing, as well as his meditations on violence. In the piece Sullivan explains that he feels that everyone is capable of violence. Some people may not enjoy it, but everyone is capable of it, even towards those viewed as acceptable targets, such as sea lions. Violent behavior is something that many Americans associate with men and masculinity. In the piece, Sullivan describes shooting the sea lions as "fun, there was no getting away from that" (45). For him, the enjoyment in causing harm is rooted in a joy that "had something to do with extending the will out through the hand of the world, an application of power and effect over distance... There was, at first, a deep and terrible satisfaction in making things happen, and then, like all vandalism, an undeniable excitement" (45). The pleasure that

comes from violence is the ability to exert control and mastery over something. In the case of the sea lions, pleasure is amplified by the fact that the natural world is the one thing that fisherman cannot normally control. Nothing they do can affect the weather and guarantee a calm sea, so instead they vandalize the ocean by causing unnecessary bloodshed and inflicting violence on animals. He continues, “For there was a secret black kernel of pleasure in killing these animals, a pleasure that came in the badness of the act itself, an act of conscienceless ego, a recognition, even an exultation, in an act of desecration, in knowing that no civilized person could condone such a thing” (45-46).

This phrasing positions the one person on board who does not condone the crew’s violence as representing civilization. Kathy, the replacement cook, the only woman on board, does not condone the actions of her crewmembers. She is ultimately so upset by the event that she leaves the boat at her next opportunity. The poem acknowledges that some amount of violence is a necessity in commercial fishing. Ultimately, “in a fleet that counted success by how many thousands of crabs could be hoisted from the sea and sold to people who boiled them alive, the analogy of crab counts to body counts was not lost on anyone” (Sullivan, 47). The slaughter of the sea lions, however, is different than the catching of fish. There is no higher meaning in the killing, no purpose other than the pleasure in the violence, in the control exerted over the natural world. This desire to exert control, this desire to dominate is at the core of many dominant masculinities. Some measure of their dominance comes from entitlement, an idea that the world and all that is in it is men’s to despoil. Sullivan recognizes that urge to control the world without acting on it. He performs a masculinity rooted in that realization but with an awareness that the



urge towards violence and control is neither a healthy urge nor does it conform to his current sense of morality.

The piece climaxes with a dream Sullivan had, in which the crew killed Kathy and shoved her body in a crab pot for conjuring “up some kind of ju-ju on us for killing the sealion.” (Sullivan 2014, 48). The dream ends with Kathy’s coming for her revenge, “crawling across [the pots on the stern] toward us on her hands and knees, strands of kelp and slithering things glistening in her hair hanging wet in her white face. Her empty eye sockets crawling with sea lice, limpets and starfish stuck in her neck. Then she was climbing down, crawling across the deck toward us” (48). Kathy becomes the focus for Sullivan’s guilt, the embodiment of what he did wrong. It is by internalizing Kathy’s judgement that Sullivan begins to contemplate what he did, the impact of the dream-Kathy lingering in Sullivan’s conscious. This sets apart Sullivan from his crewmates, who show no signs of regretting for killing the sealions. The poem presents two distinct masculinities – one that revels in the violence, and another that acknowledges it but regrets it. The lone female character represents a rejection of unnecessary violence.

This distaste for the violence of fishing and how it contrasts with the natural beauty and reverence for the animals the fishermen depend upon is not limited to Sullivan. In “Fisherman’s Heaven” (2018a), Densmore describes heaven: somewhere where he can continue to fish but “just catch ‘em and turn ‘em loose” (2018a). Densmore, who does not like to eat the fish he catches, imagines an idyllic ocean, in which the fish and fisherman are equal partners, enjoying the experience of the hunt. This collaboration takes place “on a friendly ocean,/Where no one ever dies or drowns” (2018a). Densmore reimagines the relationship of fishermen not only with the fish they seek but also the very

environment in which fishermen operate. He reimagines the adversarial relationship into one that is mutually enjoyable. His poem envisions a world without killing and without the threat of the ocean. It depends upon the more reflective, emotional masculinity performed by many of the fisherpoets, rather than the more catch-oriented masculinity mentioned by Brady-Power, or one that delights in violence as seen in Sullivan's work.

### **Conclusion**

Poetry about the natural world is based on experience. Some of the poems relate specific events when the poets were confronted with some aspect of nature that was beyond their control. This lack of control then serves to inspire the creation of poetry and prose. The ocean is dangerous because it is uncontrollable. Storms can threaten and kill fishermen at any moment, but part of the beauty and the joy of the ocean is man's inability to control or shape it.

The things the fisherman can impact and interact with are animals. They can treat them respectfully, honoring their deaths. Or they can kill animals as a form of vandalism to exert some control over an unpredictable environment. How a fisherman reacts to this lack of control indicates a lot about who they are as a person. There are men who have total faith in their own competence, like the young Speakman and his companions out on the Dancehall Tow. There are men who know the dangers and face them anyway, recognizing that they can depend upon others in order to survive. There are men who take out their feelings about their lack of control on others, like Sullivan's crewmates, who enjoyed the violence they caused against animals. These masculinities are by no means exclusive, and individuals can and do navigate? among them. Nature provides the proving grounds on which fishermen can demonstrate their competence and their

credibility, a place where different people can prove their masculinity through their relationship with the natural world. Writing poetry about these experiences and sharing it provides a way to gain and expend that capital, presenting experiences to which fishermen in the audience can relate. Though non-fishermen might not be able to fully imagine what it is like to be in a massive storm, they come away with a better appreciation of the fisherman's life with both its crests and troughs.

## CHAPTER IV

# “SON AND FATHER, FATHER AND SON”: DEPICTIONS OF RELATIONSHIPS IN FISHEPOETRY & THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY

Poems discussed earlier like “Uniontown Supreme Court” (Hilton 2014) and “The Showdown at Izembak Bay” (Densmore 2017f) depend upon human relationships in order for their themes to come across, and their emotional core depends upon the relationships between various people. Commercial fishing is an intensely social and community-focused industry. Fishermen learn how to fish from other fisherman and depend on other fishermen to save their lives in dangerous situations. Thus, poetry about how fishermen interact and relate to each other is common. Folk poetic traditions such as fisherpoetry exist in part to allow groups to express themselves to others in their group, discussing their concerns and musings on the events impacting their community (Greenhill 1989). Fisherpoetry also serves as a way for the poets to discuss the future of the industry, often through the lens of their own relationships with their children. The poems I discuss in this chapter all focus on interpersonal interactions. Each presents multiple models of masculinity, both from within the same subfield or from differing subfields.

### **Relationships with Non-Fishermen**

In poems about male fisherpoets’ relationships with non-fishermen we can see how they envision masculinities other than their own. In the poems I will analyze, different individuals interact, various models of masculinity are performed, with the masculinity being performed by the fishermen usually being depicted as superior. These

poems allow for the fisherpoets to articulate their own masculinity as they view it and to compare themselves to others on a “yardstick of masculinity” (Brady-Power, interview with author 2017). By showing interactions with people who are not fishermen, who belong to a different subfield with different dominant masculinities, fisherpoets can compare themselves to others. As Greenhill asserts, folk poetry serves as a way for members of a community to discuss their own views by comparing their thoughts with those of individuals from other communities. These depictions demonstrate the complex web of masculinities that make up society, and how different groups have their own masculinities. These poems show what individual fisherpoets think about other groups, and how the standards of masculinity differ from individual to individual to some extent and from group to group.

One example is Jon Broderick’s “Fishing with my Brother-in-Law” (2014a). The brother-in-law (named Rich) is a banker whose wife encourages him to take a break from his normal life. Rich joins Broderick on the boat and slowly learns how to do the job, until their fishing operation encounters the police. However, due to Rich’s quick thinking, the situation is resolved in Broderick’s favor. Three very different subfields of masculinity are depicted in the poem: fishermen’s, banker’s, and the police’s – each of which have differing relations to each other. One key part of Rich learning to be a fisherman is changing his clothing. While the change in clothes does not immediately transform him, it marks the beginning of his learning process. One verse states:

As the hardware I had him outfitted  
In Xtra-Tuffs, raincoat and bibs  
Which he wore like a rented tuxedo. It’d  
Take more than a couple of trips  
To lose the Abercrombie and Fitch.  
“Try on these old Carhartts,” I said. (34)

Later, Rich helps Broderick pick fish from the net. This is preceded by him putting on the proper clothing, the poem stating, “So he grabs some 620’s that he shoves on/And jumps back where the gurry is thick” (35). Rich being useful is marked by a change in outfit. This serves as a visual marker that he is able to act according to the norms of another form of masculinity. However, operating in that manner becomes a burden when the police come to the boat to check on Broderick’s fishing licenses. Broderick did not get a license to have crew on board the boat, but Rich’s ability to switch between gendered performances helps to save the day:

Before I could muster a lie  
Out from the cabin comes Rich  
Dressed in Dockers, Tommy, REI,  
Nike, Abercrombie and Fitch,  
And a ball cap that read “Merrill-Lynch.”  
“Just him,” I said.

Well the law checked my permit and I.D.,  
Looked at Rich, then looked at the sky.  
And since all of my papers were tidy  
Without smiling he bade us good-bye.  
Rich tried to invite him inside.  
“Got some fresh coffee in the kitchen,” he said (p. 36).

A change in clothing saves the day because clothing is an important part of identity performance, particularly gender performance. This is just as true as for fisherman and bankers as it is for the most obvious example of clothing determining gender performance—drag queens and kings. In discussing drag kings, Halberstam argues that one reason that male impersonators are rarer than female impersonators is because “mainstream definitions of male masculinity [view it] as nonperformative. Indeed, current representations of masculinity in white men unfailingly depend on a relatively stable notion of the realness and the naturalness of both the male body and its signifying

effects” (1989, 234), which can be summarized by stating that “masculinity ‘just is’” (234). Because masculinity is commonly viewed as something inherent, something nonperformative, male identities tend to be perceived as fixed. In this case the clothing makes the man. By changing back into his banker clothes, Rich performs an identity other than what the law expected to find. Because the officer is not expecting a man to perform an identity other than his own, he cannot envision Rich as anything other than a non-fisherman. Rich’s ability to switch between gendered performances through clothing helps to destabilize the barriers between identities, demonstrating the performative nature of masculinities.

Broderick focuses on how ill-fitting the fisherman’s gear is on Rich throughout the poem. This sets up the conclusion of the poem in which Rich comes out in his non-fisherman’s outfit, tricking the law enforcement into thinking he is not acting as a crew member. By switching to a different kind of masculinity – in particular, one associated with money and higher status, he throws off the police. It is Rich’s clothing that saves the day, rather than any display of competence as a fisherman. If Rich had been dressed as a fisherman, it is unlikely that the law enforcement official would have asked to see his skill at a fisherman before fining Broderick. By basing his decision solely upon the clothing Rich wears, the law enforcement is using an essentialist definition of what it means to be a fisherman and a man. For him, the clothing one wears are a defining factor of one’s identity, and people are incapable of performing in ways other than how they immediately present. As such, because Rich is not dressed as a fisherman, there is no way he could ever be a fisherman. However, as discussed by Connell, such essentialist definitions ultimately fail, due to how arbitrary they are (Connell 2005, 68). Identity,

whether as a man or as a member of an occupation, is performative, constantly being recreated through the actions of individuals (Butler 1993, 2). Rich understands this and uses the law enforcement's rigid definitions of what it means to be a fisherman against him. The poem ends with Broderick remarking that Rich "was pretty good crew" (36), an assertion based on his ability to save the day from disaster.

Perhaps no poem better demonstrates different conceptions of masculinity than Joel Brady-Power's "Assumptions," performed for the first time at the 2017 FisherPoets Gathering. It describes an encounter Brady-Power had at a party with a construction worker. This man makes the assumption that Brady-Power is aligned with him culturally and politically due to Brady-Power's occupation. The man's misogynistic and hateful comments prove too much for Brady-Power, and he confronts the man. Brady-Power's repeated performances of this poem received much applause and several affirmative "Fuck yeah, Joel!" from the audience. Brady-Power does not put his poems in writing because he does not believe that his poems are mere texts; they are performances. To honor his perspective, I quote only part of his poem to demonstrate my point. The full performance is available in its entirety on YouTube (Brady-Power 2017). What follows is the poem's opening stanza:

"So you're a fisherman,"  
A booming voice calls across a crowded room  
Sizing me up  
Carefully placing me somewhere on his yardstick of masculinity.

From the start, Brady-Power makes clear that this is a poem about masculinity. The construction worker automatically assumes certain things about Brady-Power based on his stereotype of a fisherman. In our interview, Brady-Power cited the man as an example of toxic masculinity; the poem depicts him as misogynistic, homophobic, racist, anti-



environmentalist, and violent. The man is oblivious to anyone's views but his own. This masculinity is similar to that performed by Sullivan's crewmates in "Killing Sealions" (2014) in that it is characterized by men enjoying exerting control over others. These men are, to use Brady-Power's term, toxic – performing masculinities that only value themselves and their ability to do harm to others. The harm of these masculinities is amplified when they are in a position of dominance. The standards of these toxic masculinities are impossible to comply with, and that inability to meet those lofty standards to consider oneself a "true man" only enhances the toxicity. Some men, desperate to reach these standards, will act out violently in order to prove their ability to conform to these constructed standards no one can meet. Just as the toxic masculinities have been constructed, there are other men consciously constructing masculinities that are more accepting of others or seek to subvert the standards of toxic masculinity.

Every man has certain privileges just by being a man, particularly a white cisgender heterosexual one in the United States. Because of his privilege as a white, straight, cisgender man, Brady-Power regards himself as complicit in the man's toxicity. In his depiction of himself in poem, Brady-Power does not immediately respond. He remains silent, allowing the other man to spew his hate. But Brady-Power finally confronts him:

So yeah, I'm a fisherman,  
And a feminist,  
And an environmentalist,  
And an ally to people of color, immigrants, and the LGBTQ community.  
Yet I am also just another white man  
Living on the inheritance of my privilege  
Just like you. (2017)

Brady-Power seems to claim no difference between his own privilege and that of the other man, yet the declaration of his beliefs belies his words. Brady-Power may not perform the same toxic masculinity as the other man, yet he still gains dividends from the concept of that masculinity is dominant over alternative forms of gender expression. This happens because of others' perception of him. Some people, such as the construction worker, assume certain things about him due to his gender and occupation. Brady-Power looks like what modern American society envisions as a man, therefore he is masculine, therefore he is afforded privileges people who appear differently are not. Even if Brady-Power actively works to give power to people in subordinated position to him, he still benefits from the actions others take to enforce the societal dominance of masculinity in all its forms. Brady-Power makes his point in the last stanza by declaiming:

And I know fishermen who are teachers,  
Who are engineers,  
Who are nurses,  
Mothers,  
Fathers,  
Sons and daughters,  
Fishermen who are straight,  
Fishermen who are queer,  
Fishermen who are patriots,  
Anarchists,  
Rednecks,  
Peaceniks,  
Screamers,  
Dreamers,  
And assholes.

So just because I'm a fisherman,  
Don't assume you know who I am. (2017)

As with any other identity, fisherman is not a single label. Just as there is no one form of masculinity, there is no monolithic identity of "fisherman." The various labels

and identities possessed by an individual do not separately describe a person, rather it is at the intersection of those identities that people exist. This idea of intersectional identities grows out of Kimberlé Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality, which examined the ways in which black women are oppressed along multiple axes of identity and argued that to look at only one of those axes was to occlude aspects of an individual's oppression (1989). Since Crenshaw coined the term, it has shifted to encompass the various axes of identity each individual has, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. Brady-Power's final stanza is in this vein, identify the various other axes of identity that fishermen exist on. Each of those identities have a performative aspect. Those who cannot see this multiplicity of identities lose out in recognizing the variety inherent in humanity.

Masculinity is best defined by the places where it is perceived absent, as noted by Halberstam (1998, 2), and where better to do that than with what many consider its opposite, femininity. Interactions between fishermen both male and female and women who are not fisherman work to construct masculinity just as much as fishermen's interactions with men who are not fishermen. It is Broderick's sister's suggestion that initiates the action in "Fishing with my Brother-in-Law" (2014a) and brings together the poem's main characters. However, not every interaction between men and women is positive. Dominant, toxic masculinities tend to view women as objects to be consumed by men. This can be seen in man described by Brady-Power, who mentions the man's misogyny. This misogyny is very much present in the fishing fleet, with Meyer stating, "women working in the occupation are often at risk of sexual expectations from their crewmembers" (2016, 64). In fisherpoetry by men women are more generally presented as mothers, wives, and daughters. Some of these women also fish, but many do not, and

this affects the relationship between the women who do not fish and the men in their lives who do. This is seen in Rob Seitz's "Family Dynamic" (2014a). Although Seitz begins by describing his role as ship's captain, he notes:

But back on land  
all my authority is lost.  
It's just like my kids say  
"at home mommy is the boss."

Now I've heard all those theories,  
about who should wear the pants.  
But when dealing with matters of town  
my wife has a better grasp.

Like a lot of fisherman's wives  
she's smarter than the guy she's married to.  
So it only makes good sense  
for her to rule the roost.

She runs a real tight ship  
it could pass any inspection.  
The slightest piece of dust or dog hair  
are beyond my detection.

See, I've crossed breaking bars,  
been in the worst storms you've ever seen.  
But, that stuff don't scare me half as much  
as neglecting to keep the bathroom clean.

She's a loving mother  
but will stand for no infraction.  
Homework is as disciplined  
as a military action.

The pace at which she works  
is staggering to see.  
If I ran my crew that hard,  
they'd probably mutiny.

So, I'll be the boss at sea.  
She'll be the boss in town.  
I think the fish are lucky  
it ain't the other way around. (Seitz 2014a, 30-31)

Seitz recognizes that his wife's abilities far exceed his own. While most of the poem emphasizes his wife's competence in the domestic sphere, reinforcing the idea that a woman's place is in the home, the last line of the poem indicates that Seitz does not believe that his wife's competence is limited to that area. His assertion that the fish are lucky that his wife stays at home indicates a belief that his wife could be an even better fisherman than he is, if she wanted to. This recognition of his wife's competence in no way diminishes Seitz's own, but gets back to the idea that a woman fisherman does not need training – she has to be successful from the start.

### **Children**

A key part in the transmission and construction of masculinities is how gender roles get passed on to the next generation. As Irene Martin stated “fishing is not a lifestyle. It is a traditional way of life, handed down from one generation to the next. It chooses you” (1994, p. 8). Due to the number of fishing families, there are many poems about the parent-child relationship. These poems frequently center around the poets' reminiscences about fishing with their parents or examinations of the relationships between their children and fishing. Densmore's “Showdown at Izembek Bay” (2017f) is a good example of the first type. As already explained, the poem focuses on the environmental dangers posed by the sea and how masculinity demands not only braving those dangers but doing “whatever you have to do” in order to help save other fisherman. Yet, the underlying current of the poem is the relationship between son and father. The father saves the son's life by recognizing the infection in his arm. The son in turn saves the father's life by getting the skipper to turn around and throw his father the line. The poem hinges on the fact that the father has brought up his son to be a good man and a

good fisherman and also the loving relationship between the two. While the father-son relationship may not be the focus of the poem, it sits at its heart, demonstrating the cooperation necessary to survive and the importance of love and respect in the father-son bond.

The male poets I analyzed also write about their daughters, yet there are differences between how they write about the two. While sons are largely written about as potential heirs, future fishermen in the making, daughters are more typically depicted as symbolic of life on shore. Rob Seitz writes regretfully in “Isabelle” (2014c):

I wonder, little girl,  
if there's a chance,  
you'll forgive me for missing  
your Valentine's dance.

I'd be there if I could,  
and I'll miss you lots,  
but it's crab season,  
and I need to keep fresh bait in my pots.

I wonder, little girl  
if there's a way,  
we could postpone celebrating  
your upcoming birthday.

It pains me to miss it,  
but I'll tell you the reason,  
you had the misfortune of being born  
during Hake season.

I wonder, little girl  
if you'll understand why  
I won't be there to light fireworks  
on the Fourth of July

See the boat has been  
so long in the yard,  
that I have to go fishing  
though the decision is hard.

You're growing up so smart,  
pretty, and strong,  
most of the credit  
belongs to your mom.

Sometimes I'm there, and  
sometimes I'm not,  
but you are always  
foremost in my thoughts.

In life there's hard choices,  
but I hope you'll see it this way  
every day we're together  
can be our holiday. (32-33)

Seitz's daughter serves as an embodiment of everything that he misses on land while he is out fishing. The option of bringing Isabelle out fishing with him, allowing them to be together on those days, is never brought up. It is only when Seitz is on land that the bonding time when those days can be made up.

Seitz's writing about his daughter can be contrasted with a poem about his son.

Named "Football Food" (2014b), the poem goes:

If it's true,  
What they say.  
And you are what you eat,

My boy, with his  
Lingcod-fueled tenacity & stamina,  
Is going to go through your boy  
Like a hot knife, through partially hydrogenated vegetable oil,  
And leave him lying there  
Like some disease-laden feedlot cow  
Staring stupidly, wondering,  
What just happened?

Now it's not my place  
To tell anyone how to raise their kids  
But I hope someone  
Will build their boy out of lingcod too.  
Because my boy  
Is going to need someone  
To play with. (37)

While Seitz is not positioning his son as a fisherman in this poem, the characterization of his son is very different from that of his daughter in the previous poem. While his daughter is characterized as waiting for the absent father, the son is characterized by action and his relationship with other boys his age. Furthermore, the successes of the children are attributed to their same gender parent. Isabelle's is credited to her mother. Seitz is the one to make his boy into a paragon, through the fishing that provides the lingcod for his son to eat. The son is held up as an ideal figure, with his "lingcod-fuel tenacity & stamina" (37). Seitz positions his son as being superior to the other boys. He is stronger, smarter, and all around more capable than them, and they are unable to compete or even function at a level comparable to his son. He is more competent than the other boys, a quality which for fisherman is one of the main determiners of masculinity, as discussed in the first chapter.

And what makes a child a good fisherman is the subject of Broderick's "How to Tell a Good One" (2014b). Broderick writes proudly about to his son, Henry:

The new kid wears waders that come clear to his chin  
and a life jacket at his mother's wise insistence.  
When, at the end of a long slog across the mud, we reach the skiff  
Pete, his brother, a veteran of a dozen campaigns,  
hauls him aboard by the scuff of his gear.

But the kid coils the line a Pete pulls the anchor.  
Nobody has to tell him.  
And as we set for the first time this season  
he neatly throws clear a loop of leadline from a binboard snag.

He pulls when we pull.  
He picks when we pick,  
making surprising quick work of your basic #1 double-gill-on-the-bagside,  
he hardly touches the fish.

When we take a break at the water's edge  
he's quick to the beach with the dipnet



rounding up stragglers  
and climbs back in the boat three times.  
“Practicing,” he says.

At the bottom of the tide we cut the skiff loose.  
Pete carves a tight turn at the outside buoy.  
The skiff pulls up easy alongside.  
I snag the trip line, tie it astern,  
Pete tows out and up  
until we like what we see and nod both.  
He cuts the throttle and I cast the buoy free.  
The boat drifts a moment in the lazy brown current and the blue two-stroke  
exhaust.

In the bow the new guy is watching.  
He hikes up his bibs,  
hooks his thumbs in his suspenders.  
“What’d we just do?” he wants to know. (37).

Henry enthusiastically does the job. He eagerly asks “What’d we just do?” when he does not know what is going on. Henry enacts the idealized image of a fisherman’s son. While Seitz’s son is involved in football, Henry is learning how to be a fisherman. Henry excels, “making surprising quick work of your basic #1 double-gill-on-the-bagside/he hardly touches the fish.” Henry demonstrates his competence, listening to the more experienced fisherman and inquiring after their experiences. Through this process of active learning, he reveals his capability to be a good fisherman, and thus a good man. Broderick’s title for his poem is purposefully ambiguous. Does it refer to a good fisherman or a good son? Both interpretations work, and in both cases exemplify a positive form of masculinity characterized by a willingness to listen, learn, and work hard.

Not all good sons are good fisherman. However, not being a fisherman does not exclude someone from being a good son or a good man. Patrick Dixon’s prose piece “The Connection” (2014) describes a conflict between Dixon and his son when the latter refuses to go fishing. The son first claims to be ill to avoid fishing, but the real reason

behind the son not wanting to go is that he “just can’t stand all the killing” (49). However, it requires the intervention of Dixon’s wife for the son’s real reason to come to light. This revelation allows for resolution. The son agrees to help clean the boat once Dixon has returned in lieu of going fishing. While Dixon’s son may not be interested in being a fisherman, he can still be a good man, keeping to his word once he is able to disclose his true feelings. This emotional openness is a trait that is not frequently associated with masculinity, and in this poem requires the mediation of a woman. Even though father and son love each other, it is the mother who bridges the gap between them. She does the emotional labor.

As has been discussed, fishing is a dangerous career, and even the most careful fisherman is at risk of losing his life. Densmore, who lost his son and his father in a single boating accident, writes movingly about this tragedy in several poems. His poem “Remembrance” (2014a, 40-43) deals with how fathers pass along the fishing tradition to sons and also approaches his own son’s death. The protagonists, Big and Little Tim, are the ultimate presentation of the father-son fishing bond, both excellent fishermen who fit the ideal image of the profession. They are competent, skilled, and willing to teach those new to fishing: “From father to son was passed,/The lessons that were learned...they were willing to teach the green./They loved to tell the stories/ Of the wondrous sights they’d seen” (40). The main difference between the father and son concerns Little Tim’s future. “Big Tim opted for college/And some kind of fine degree. Though Little Tim just kept insisting,/A fisherman, he meant to be” (40) . It is worthwhile to note that many fishermen, especially those who participate in fisherpoetry, have attended college; the

seasonal nature of fishing makes it possible to do both. Big Tim's hope for his son to attend college does not mean he cannot keep fishing.

The climax of the poem is an accident at sea in which Little Tim perishes. As the boat sinks, Little Tim focuses on sending a distress call instead of getting himself to safety. By sacrificing himself to save his crewmates, he demonstrates the importance of acting to ensure the wellbeing of others. As with many of these disaster poems, there is a clear hero exemplified by the hyper-competent man who sacrifices himself to save others. We see that same figure several times throughout Densmore's work, particularly in "The Showdown at Izembek Bay," (2017f) where the young Densmore fearlessly holds a gun to another man's head. Poems may mention negative emotions such as fear, but they are rarely given prominence. Positive emotions such as pride in one's actions are given much more focus than negative emotions such as fear. This has the effect of valorizing the heroes, promoting them and their traits as models to follow. By valorizing these figures, it provides the masculinities they depict with social capital, reinforcing traits such as not showing fear and being selfless as attributes of the dominant masculinity. The poem then shifts, not only back to Big Tim, but to a first-person perspective. The most telling passage goes as follows, "If I could have back my son,/I'd never allow him near a boat!'/But, yeah, I bought another boat/And I named it after him" (2014a, 43). This shift reveals that the poem is a reflection by Densmore on the death of his own son. While the accident in which Little Tim died does not mirror the situation in which Densmore's son died, the emotions are Densmore's. Despite the danger, Densmore still fishes, even though "I can never get back my Tim" (43).

Densmore's poem "Skeeter's Song" (2014b) focuses on his son's death much more directly. The poem discusses his excitement to become a father, how he taught his son to be a fisherman, and his reaction to his son's death. The poem begins with a reflection on learning from his father. From that experience, Densmore always knew that he yearned to do the same thing, passing his knowledge down to a son. "Son and Father, Father and Son,/What I was and knew would be,/I couldn't wait for the second role/I knew would someday come to me" (30). This focus on fathers teaching their sons runs throughout the poem, and the education is not simply on how to be a fisherman. It is also about how to be a man, as the two topics are inextricably intertwined:

The winter he was seven,  
I pulled him out of school.  
There's more ways than one  
To learn how not to be a fool.

He spent that winter with my crew and me,  
Learning to be a man.  
I've got to say, he learned it quick  
And turned out a right good hand.

He even learned the tows and marks,  
And handled the boat just fine.  
Whenever I'd glance up to the bridge  
His grins towards mine shined.

Nothing could make a fisherman prouder  
Than to watch his young son handle their boat.  
I doubt there was a happier, prouder father  
On land or afloat. (33-34)

This passage is reminiscent of Broderick's "How To Tell a Good One" (2014a). Both are concerned with a son's skill at fishing and the pride that accompanies a skillful son. Both describe young men who are eager learners, demonstrating their competence at fishing. The pride both fathers show at their sons' competence reinforces the idea that competence is one of the central attributes for being a man for fishermen. The clearest

way for someone to prove their masculinity is to demonstrate their competence, to prove they can accomplish what they need to. Part of this competence is being willing and excited to learn, something displayed by both Broderick's and Densmore's sons. Densmore also explicitly links learning to be a fisherman and learning to be a man, making it clear that to be a good fisherman is to be a good man. The assertion that "there's more ways than one/to learn not to be a fool" (2014b, 33) positions fishing on an equal level with formal education; mastery of both sets a man apart.

There is also pride about being the one to have taught a son to fish. Having a son to take over the family fishing business demonstrates that a man fulfilled his duties to his family, ensuring that there will be someone to provide financial support to the family after he is gone. Someone will be prepared to take over the business after the fisherman retires. As Densmore discussed in an interview with Chelsea Stephen, he wanted Skeeter to take over the business when he got older, "Skeeter would have been running the boat, and I would have been on the dock. Boy, I wanted that. I wanted that natural progression. I had dreamed about that my whole life. I'd been teaching Skeeter. He loved fishing and he loved boats just like I did, and I couldn't wait to turn the boat over to him" (Stephen 2014c, 13-14). Accident and chance robbed Densmore of the chance to do that. Grief like that needs outlets, especially in a stoic community like that of fisherman. Poetry thus provides an outlet for emotions, whether they are positive or negative. Poetry gives these men a medium through which to praise their sons for their skills, discuss how they relate to their sons, and to mourn the loss of a son.

## **Conclusion**

Gender is not constructed by itself. People perform gender, interacting with each other and each creating their own form of gender expression. These relationships ultimately define the relationships between and within expressions of gender, and poetry can serve as a way to depict these relationships. Whether discussing how different fishermen interact or how fishermen interact with non-fishermen, these interactions help to illuminate the fisherpoets' dominant masculinity. The traits I've discussed previously – competence, credibility, bonds with other fishermen, tolerance for danger, appreciation of the natural environment – come to the fore in the interactions fisherpoets have with other people. Broderick's brother-in-law demonstrates competence through his quick thinking. Brady-Power speaks directly to a representation of an outside dominant masculinity, using the poem to accumulate the cultural capital to help dispute its dominance. Seitz's, Dixon's, and Densmore's poems all comment on what masculinity they hope will be dominant for future generations.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

At the core of masculinity is what it means to be a man, and for the FisherPoets, what it means to be a man is inextricably intertwined with what it means to be a fisherman. However, being a fisherman is, for these men, not inextricably intertwined with being a man – anyone can be a fisherman, not just men. Thus, traits such as competence and integrity become integral to their construction of masculinity, and it is through the performance of those traits that a good fisherman, and thus a good man, can be known. Fishing provides numerous ways for a man to demonstrate his competence and integrity, as does writing poetry. Poetry for these men can have any number of purposes. It can serve as a way to eulogize the past, a way to provide instruction to greenhorns, a way to discuss bad behavior within the fishing fleet, a way to process trauma, a way to recognize beauty, and a way to share hopes about the future. Above all else, fisherpoetry is a form of communication, a way for individual poets to share and express their experiences with others.

Fisherpoets form their own community, a small subsection of the larger community of commercial fisherman. As such, they have their own standards and norms, including ideas about what makes someone a man. While there are fisherpoets who perform masculinities that lack the features discussed in this thesis, the poets discussed here are creating a masculinity that differs from common ideas of what is or is not masculine according to dominant norms. Their poetry and performances help to construct a dominant masculinity that may not be what an outsider might first expect. The fisherpoetry I have analyzed places a strong emphasis on skill and ability to fish, but also

on being true to your word. While physical strength may be important, mental fortitude is even more so. It is more crucial to success than maybe any other trait. Because of the extreme conditions, reliability and the ability to work with others become crucial skills, and people who are not able to get along with others are not as valued. To be a real man for fisherpoets, one cannot simply look out for number one – it is all about looking after the whole community.

One of the biggest markers of the masculinity in the poetry I examines are the men's openness to expressing emotion. As Joel Brady-Power told me in our interview, "There's all of these expectations on men, that they need to be this certain way, that we're not supposed to experience emotion, that we're supposed to be stoic, or we're definitely not supposed to cry. All these different things. My hope is that some of those people come to fisherpoets and then see people like me, people like Toby [Sullivan], people like Pat Dixon, all these people that are tapping into that visceral emotional experience that we get and then they're going to feel hopefully liberated, that it's okay to feel those sorts of things" (Brady-Power, interview with author, 2017). This hope of Brady-Power's stands in direct opposition to dominant masculinities that discourage men from expressing emotions. As with the soldiers documented by Gilman, men who have been through dangerous situations often turn to each other to process these situations emotionally. She writes that "these manly men relied on other manly men for support and sharing when they needed to express their less than manliness" (2016, 111). The FisherPoets Gathering provides a space for these expressions of emotion, and by normalizing these expressions Brady-Power hopes to create more safe spaces where men can express their emotions honestly.



One other deviation from hegemonic masculinity enacted by these fisherpoets is a willingness to embrace masculinity from people other than men. For fisherpoets masculinity is not limited to men. It poses a model open to everyone regardless of gender identity. Women are just as capable of everything required to be masculine to fisherpoets. They may even be viewed as more capable, going by Brady-Power's comments that women make better fishermen (Brady-Power, interview with author, 2017) or Rob Seitz's assertion that the fish are lucky his wife stays on land (2014a, 37). However, this view that women are more competent is not widespread throughout the fishing fleet. Women must still must operate under a heavier burden than a cisgender male, forced to not only perform hypermasculinity perfectly through their displays of competence, but while also successfully performing femininity to be seen as a woman (Meyer 2016, 32-33). Masculinity is not something restricted to men, but rather a source of strength available to everyone, even if the bar is unfairly higher for some.

This project has focused on how cisgender male fisherpoets construct and envision masculinity, but there is probably as much or more to be gained from documenting what female fisherpoets think of the topic. Quite a few women fisherpoets regularly engage with the topic, and as Jack Halberstam argued, it is when masculinity is removed from a male body that its definition becomes most clear (1998, 2). Additionally, an examination of different themes that occur throughout fisherpoetry would probably elucidate other aspects of the fisherpoets' dominant masculinity and how it differs from that of other groups. Finally, an in-depth examination of the performances at the FisherPoets Gathering and how those performances articulate gender norms and construct various forms of masculinity.

What this project has accomplished is putting forward a more nuanced appreciation for masculinity. The FisherPoets Gathering allows a space for the creation of alternative masculinities, masculinities that are more emotionally open and less misogynistic than found in other spaces. Through the creation of art such as poetry, fisherpoets can explore and construct alternative standards of masculinity, ones based not only on displays of competence and credibility, but free from misogynistic double standards and allowing for freedom for emotional expression. The poets discussed in this thesis are a force for change, constructing more accepting masculinities than are currently dominant in the fishing fleet and American society as a whole. An outsider to the FisherPoets Gathering may not expect to find these nuanced approaches to masculinity being expressed by fisherman, but this surprise only confirms Brady-Power's statement that "just because I'm a fisherman/don't assume you know who I am" (2017).

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