Yesterday I watched a man slice open a 61 inch sturgeon—still breathing. He wore a flannel shirt, unbuttoned with nothing on underneath. He was covered in tattoos faded to the point of being unrecognizable and wore a large tooth around his neck. He seemed to take a lot of pleasure in ripping through the fish with his dull knife. I watched the sturgeon squirm at first, then calm to a shallow breath. As the knife reached the tip of the fish tail, the sturgeon took one last big breath where its gills expanded and its head lifted, and then gave in and died. Interviewing fishermen, I am forced, on occasion, to remember that these folks are hunters.

The fella who caught it was thrilled and exhausted, wet up to his knees. The hook he used was almost straightened—that fish almost got away. (not the best picture, but this is what a sturgeon looks like.)

Once the fish was open they examined it for eggs. It is illegal to take female sturgeon out of these waters and there is a prevalent poaching scene here. But I have only heard rumors of Russians on the river at night with guns. But what would these fishermen here have done if this sturgeon had been female and filled with caviar (or bait, depending on your angle)? Suture her up from head to tail and throw her back? Undoubtedly, no. This sturgeon, however, was a male.

The veteran fishermen I talked to on the other end of the parking lost may have thought differently of that fish. One of them mentioned something about a dissolvable thread. If you catch a sturgeon, you can make a small cut in the belly and check the sex. If you’ve caught a female, simply sew the fish up and send it back. A 61 inch fish has seen its share of battles, they are no doubt resilient. The treatment of a sturgeon may be a dividing line between these two groups of anglers.

These veteran fishermen were altogether welcoming. They made no assumption (like many do) that I am an authority or the law. The minute I stepped out of my car at the boat launch I was greeted by Tony who immediately invited me over to his camp and gave me his chair. Tony made the occasional pass at me, but I am a pro at deflecting these comments by now, and Tony’s friends helped me out with the remanding responsibility. The four of these men sat around a fire made of a broken table. Tony offered me a can of soup. “Now Aubrey, you look like a chicken noodle soup kinda gal,” he said. He opened a can and placed it over the fire for himself—I declined his offer.

These men knew everything about the river. They could remember the date that the dams were constructed and the water started getting cold. And they remember swimming in these waters when they were still warm. One of the men claimed to be the oldest fisherman on the Sacramento River. With the exception of one man (who has been trying to get a hold of the Wilderness Conservation Authority to procure guides to clamming), none of these men really ate the fish they caught. They believed in throwing them back as there are so few left. The problem, they say, is the dam. They say the water is too cold for the fish to spawn, and none of the dams have fish ladders so fish mobility is truncated. There is apparently a fish hatchery at the base of every dam, but these anglers don’t eat wild-caught fish for preservation sake.

Tony fishes with his homemade fishing pole, works in dry-walling, and speaks of living with roommates. None of them is drinking or smoking. They speak of Nostradamus and his predictions and we chat briefly about the concept of whiteness (one of them refused to take the US Census because his ethnic group—Irish-American—was not represented). They invited me back for a tour of the river and an earful for stories. I am seriously considering it.

The Importance of Reflection

In working with communities, taking the time to reflect is an essential practice. Beyond aiding in understanding conversation and relationships, reflection begs us to consistently reevaluate the intentions of our work. Though it can take place in many forms, my reflection exists in the form of a blog. Self-publication provides me with an expecting audience (even if it is only my friends) and generates dialogue and perspective from my readers. Below is an excerpt. More can be found at http://booksandboondoggling.blogspot.com.