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Whale Peoples and Pacific Worlds

Earlier histories of Pacific whaling appeared as romanticized, straightforward narratives. Manly white hunters nobly opened up vast swaths of the Pacific Ocean and the lands and islands washed by these waters to the Western world as they pursued dangerous prey that they transformed into lucrative commodities. Recently, the history of Pacific whaling has undergone a renaissance as scholars have applied new avenues of analysis and brought it into conversation with a broader array of historical fields. Historians critically note the role of whaling in the expansion of European and US empires—and global capital—in the Pacific. Additionally, they examine the consequences that whalers and whaling brought to Pacific lands, waters, peoples, and species. Diseases decimated Indigenous populations across the ocean, drawing survivors into increasingly more exploitative relationships that further pressured local resources. And sea mammal populations, particularly whales, experienced succeeding collapses as one fishery became overhunted and hunters moved on to the next. But in many ways, historical examinations of Pacific whaling have remained one-dimensional. Active European and Euro-American whalers and polities—the usual historical agents—executed their wills on the passive Pacific, whose peoples and species could do little more than play the role of victims.

The articles in this volume explore a different narrative, charting new histories of Pacific whaling. They reveal that a broader array of sources, such as local newspapers, old collections of whale recipes, oral histories, and culturally specific material items can uncover a more inclusive history of who whaled, where, and why. They demonstrate a more diverse set of whaling economies that did far more than simply transform whales into oil and baleen. Instead, they reveal that many nations and peoples beyond the usual historical actors used whaling to claim and control marine and terrestrial spaces, to establish and enforce boundaries, and to exercise power. All the articles push back against the notion of a passive Pacific, specifically when it comes to the peoples of this ocean and its marine environment. Together, these articles illustrate that whaling was much broader than the killing and commodification of whales. Excitingly, they help substantiate the emerging field of Pacific worlds.

In broadening whaling narratives beyond the straightforward but challenging task of transforming whales into commodities, these new whaling histories demonstrate that Pacific peoples “lived with whales,” to adapt a conceptually useful phrase from Nancy Shoemaker.¹ Demuth’s examination of a moment of cross-cultural encounter in the Arctic of 1852 (in this volume) poses two questions that help us consider how hunters “live” with whales: *what is a whale, and what is its value?* Together, these invoke a third, related question: *why whale?*

Answers to these questions are, of course, historically rooted in specific places and times and reflect the worldviews of particular societies. For Indigenous peoples, there were often many reasons to whale. The mid-nineteenth-century Fijian chief Cokanauto whaled in order to get closer to *tabua*, sperm whale teeth that were markers of prestige. This mirrors whalers’ symbolic use and valuing of whale teeth, a different kind of consumption than that of other marine commodities. Ngarrindjeri whalers sought access to cash and goods that would have increased their status in Aboriginal societies, while simultaneously laboring at nearby whaling stations so they could maintain ancestral connections to *Kondoli* (whales) in a changing settler-colonial world of nineteenth-century Australia. Indigenous Arctic peoples invested cetaceans with agency, seeing whales as giving themselves to their communities for subsistence purposes and to make them wealthy and powerful as whale commodities proliferated throughout local, regional, and global exchange networks. These Indigenous peoples recognized that this only occurred when harpooners had practiced the right ritual preparations that demonstrated that they respected the gift of whales. According to Māori authorities and some Coast Salish leaders, the reciprocal respect they gained from whales meant that they could call leviathans ashore. Among their own societies, Indigenous whalers distributed meat, blubber, and bone throughout villages, thereby affirming and augmenting their status as respected authority figures.

Because whaling meant something more than the killing and commodification of whales, Indigenous whaling peoples such as the Iñupiat, Ngarrindjeri, and Kāi Tahu—along with the Makahs of the most northwestern point of the contiguous United States—can be more accurately described as “whale people.”² Seeking to define what

1 Nancy Shoemaker, *Living with Whales: Documents and Oral Histories of Native New England Whaling History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).

2 Information about the Makahs of Washington State is from Joshua L. Reid, *The Sea Is My Country: The Maritime World of the Makahs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

this means, several of the authors here interrogate this classification and together map out three related commonalities of whale peoples. The first commonality is that they are in *relations* with whales. Many Indigenous peoples recognize varying degrees of relations that others define as kin-based or political, definitions which often overlap from an Indigenous perspective. Elsewhere, Athabascan Dian Million engages with Indigenous relationality, explaining that “the meaning of Indigenous as it is defined by all those cultures who identify themselves as such has always been in their relationship to a ‘land,’ that place they were in relationship to without anthropocentric bias, relationships that disciplined action and cohered *Indigenous* persons and societies.”³ For whale peoples, these relations included marine waters and whales themselves and were expressed in various ways, demonstrating that what was relevant for one people was not as critical for others. Paikea, the whale-riding ancestor from Hawaiki, the original Māori homeland, reflects relationality literally through whakapapa (genealogy) that connects the past to the present and the future.

Other whale peoples illustrate that relationality with whales included both men and women. For example, the work of Māori women was central to the success of nineteenth-century shore-whaling stations in New Zealand. Similarly, Iñupiat, Chukchi, and Yupik wives supported effective umiak captains by calling the whale and sending off the crew with their prayers. The Makah wife of a whaler often helped in the ritual preparations of harpooners, and remained solitary and still during a hunt because it was believed that a whale would mimic her actions. In these Indigenous societies, whaling helped to bind together families, as each gender assumed responsibility over various aspects of the hunt, welcoming the whale ashore, and dividing the catch. Nearly all Indigenous whaling societies see whales as another people. This endows leviathans with agency, just like any other people, and explains why many Indigenous whalers speak of whales as giving themselves to harpooners. Even some non-Natives—particularly those observing a gray whale calf in captivity and others gray whales in the lagoons of Baja California in the late twentieth century—also think of whales as individuals endowed with agency.

Because whale peoples are in relations with whales, they have a host of ritual practices, beliefs, and ceremonies related to whaling. These mark a second key character-

3 Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2013), 116.

istic of whale peoples. Often done to honor the whale, these practices reflect values of stewardship and responsibility for these beings in which they are in relation. For instance, before the 1999 hunt, the Makah crew engaged in over 1,000 hours of ritual preparation, which was in addition to a similar amount of time spent on physical preparation. Additionally, ceremonies highlight the importance that this relationship plays in the social life of whale people. In the mid-nineteenth century, Makah harpooners performed mock whale hunts as part of the engagement ceremony when they sought a marriage partner. A ritual like this demonstrated the whaling prowess of the potential groom and his ability to care for his family and people. But it also illustrated just one of the ways that whaling infused many aspects of their lives. Ngarrindjeri and Native Hawaiians, among others, also observed ceremonial practices respecting whales.

The relations that whale peoples have with whales stretch long into the past and remain relevant today and into the future, representing a third characteristic shared by whale peoples. Archaeology often affirms these historical roots. The finds at Ozette, a Makah village just south of Cape Flattery, reveal that this tribal nation has been whaling for more than 2,000 years. This is why whales figure prominently in the creation stories of whale peoples. After a great flood brought people to Cape Flattery, they transformed this into their homeland and became the Q^widiččaʔa-tš (“kwi-dihch-chuh-ah”)—the People of the Cape—by establishing villages where they could harvest whales. Swooping down from his nest high in the mountains and casting lightning snakes to stun whales, Thunderbird taught them how to whale, a practice that defined their identity and made the waters around Cape Flattery into Makah marine space. For Kāi Tahu, whales appear in voyaging traditions and in stories about the creation of Aotearoa’s southern landscape. Similarly, Tikigaq villagers at Point Hope, Alaska, tell about a whale that died and created the headland where their community is located.

Indigenous knowledge pertaining to these sea mammals and whaling reflects the substantial length of time that a community has been a whale people. Makahs studied and learned the behaviors of several types of whales that they regularly hunted. This included whale anatomy—they had to know where and when to strike so that harpoons and lances would work best—and navigation of marine waters so they could safely hunt and return home. The only way Makahs and other whale peoples could accumulate this knowledge was through generations of being in relations with whales. Because this relationship is historical, it has changed over time, as whale peoples embraced new technologies and opportunities to hunt whales or maintain their rela-

tions with whales. For instance, when iron became increasingly available to Makahs in the early nineteenth century, whalers began making harpoon heads and lances from this metal. In 1855, the People of the Cape used the treaty-making process in order to reserve for themselves and their descendants the right to hunt whales. By the 1860s, they tried using firearms to hunt whales, but found that they were not as effective as traditional gear. By 1905, they were regularly hiring steam-powered tugboats to help them tow their catch back to villages. None of these innovations diluted the customary practice of whaling or made the hunters any less Makah—instead, these adaptations helped them maintain their distinct identity as the People of the Cape amid the changing settler-colonial world. Many of the articles in this edition attest to similar historical strategies pursued by Native Hawaiians, Taukei of Fiji, Ngarrindjeri of present-day South Australia, Kai Tahu of Aotearoa, Ainu peoples of Japan, and Arctic communities.

The new whaling histories in this volume also help us better understand the plurality of Pacific worlds, an emerging field in history. These whaling histories underscore that the meaning of a “Pacific world” varied, from the shores of Indigenous Australia, Aotearoa, the South Pacific, the Salish Sea, northern Japan, and the Arctic, to the Europeans and Euro-Americans who sought to exercise some measure of control over the Pacific. Furthermore, they illustrate how a Pacific-worlds analysis uncovers the connections between the local and the global, as this ocean basin is better understood historically as a complex assemblage of different regions. This should come as no surprise when we remember the difference in scale that a Pacific-centered analysis offers. Despite the staggering scale of this ocean, however, this lens of analysis appears useful, particularly when we choose to focus on the threads or networks—such as whaling or whales—that knit together the various Pacific worlds.

These histories also highlight the centrality of the Pacific. Older whaling histories take a traditional (world-systems) approach, framing the Pacific as the periphery to particular centers of capital and power. If we think about whaling from the perspective of the local peoples and powers in the Pacific, many different sites in this ocean resemble central hubs for various networks of peoples, valued items of exchange and commerce, ideas and technologies, and diseases, to name a few. Moreover, these new histories emphasize the importance of and opportunities presented by mobility across and among various Pacific worlds. Whaling gave numerous individuals, including Indigenous peoples, the opportunity to explore the larger world for myriad purposes.

Finally, many of these new histories on Pacific whaling confirm that Pacific worlds were first and foremost Indigenous spaces—and they remain so today in many places. This is evident in the way that Paterson and Wilson (in this volume) approach their examination of Ngarrindjeri whalers through the frame of reconciliation rooted in Indigenous perspectives and epistemologies, not those of the settler colonial nation-state. Similarly, by visiting their ancestor at New York’s American Museum of Natural History, Māori efforts to “heed the call of Paikea” also illustrate this. Makahs articulated the persistence of Indigenous Pacific worlds most dramatically by harpooning a gray whale in 1999.

By taking a broader and more inclusive view, these new histories of whaling in the Pacific illustrate the potential for what some scholars might have once written off as a specialized and antiquated corner of historiography. New methodologies, theoretical approaches, and analytical perspectives instead point to many of the rich possibilities that Pacific whaling histories have to offer.

Further Reading:

Million, Dian. *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2013.

Reid, Joshua L. *The Sea Is My Country: The Maritime World of the Makahs*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

Shoemaker, Nancy. *Living with Whales: Documents and Oral Histories of Native New England Whaling History*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014.