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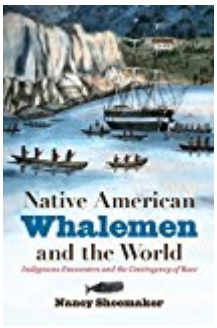

Nancy Shoemaker. *Native American Whalemen and the World: The Contingency of Race.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. Maps, tables. 320 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-2257-6.

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Commissioned by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer (Northern Illinois University)

Nancy Shoemaker's latest monograph explores Native American participation in the whaling industry, which, at its height in the nineteenth century, employed the majority of Native American men living in southern New England. The scope of the book extends far beyond the confines of the northeastern United States, however, as Shoemaker deftly maneuvers between local, regional, and global contexts to tell a larger story about the contingencies of race. A focus on race may at first seem a strange decision, since, as Shoemaker points out early on, race "does not come up much" in the logbooks and whaling journals of the day (p. 4). Yet whalemen's reluctance to discuss race is actually part of what makes it such an interesting category of analysis for Shoemaker. Despite the strength and significance of racial discourses in the nineteenth-century United States, the particularities of the whaling industry, she argues, made race a far less potent marker of difference among whalers. While this does not mean that whalemen did not "see" race, it does mean that notions of race took on differing degrees of significance depending on the context. So while Native Americans in New England faced racial ideologies that treated Indians as "a degraded people incompetent to handle their own affairs," nineteenth-century native whalemen were commonly promoted to officer positions, which—in a shipboard hierarchy that emphasized rank rather that race—often placed natives in a higher social position than the majority of white Americans aboard (p. 181). For Shoemaker, this disjuncture highlights the fleeting and situational nature of racial constructions, which she explores by analyzing how native whalemen encountered race in four different social settings, analyzed in four parts of the book: "The Ship," "The Beach," "Islands," and "The Reservation." Individual whalemen moved through these different spheres frequently, but, she argues, "it was the situation, not the person, that established how race would function in that setting" (p. 198). Although the contingent nature of racial constructions is of course not something that scholars have failed to recognize, Shoemaker's focus on the flexibility of race in the

global context of the American whaling industry sharpens in important ways our understanding of nineteenth-century racial topographies by drawing our attention to how racial expectations not only shifted as a result of long-run historical processes but could also shift for native whalemen even over the course of a single day.

Shoemaker begins on "the ship," exploring the social relations aboard whaling vessels and the selective use of racial stereotypes applied to Native Americans. As the whaling industry expanded during the first half of the nineteenth century and demand for labor increased, merchant investors and captains sought to hire "any man who could do the job," as long as the crew's social composition did not threaten orderly collaboration (p. 40). Hiring practices thus came to emphasize experience and skill over race, and men of color were increasingly able to work their way into positions of authority. Analyzing crew lists from more than two thousand voyages, Shoemaker shows that Native American whalemen were able to occupy high-ranking positions with relative frequency and that the pay native whalemen received was, on average, equal to or even slightly higher than that of their white counterparts at corresponding levels of rank. To mitigate the potential for racial tensions on ships with high-ranking men of color, the primary social mechanism for organizing shipboard relations came to focus on rank rather than race, a situation that "achieved a clear chain of command but also promised equality to those at the same level of rank" (p. 59).

Although rank gained primacy over race, Shoemaker is careful to make the point that those involved in the whaling industry were by no means "color blind." Few Native Americans were ever able to become captains or investors, she points out, and racial stereotypes about Indians persisted, although they were always applied selectively and situationally. For example, the stereotype of the "drunken Indian" so common in nineteenth-century depictions of Indians as a "degraded" people was nearly absent in the whaling industry, while the one most commonly applied to native whalemen was that Indians possessed superior "natural" abilities that made them good hunters (p. 73). This racial typecasting of Indians as naturally skilled hunters, on the one hand, hid from view Indians' intellectual acumen and their management and accounting capabilities—the skills necessary for advancing into captaincy positions. Yet, on the other hand, the stereotype also "helped native men by positioning them in line to become officers," and once in such a position, social codes emphasizing the primacy of rank meant that native officers would be treated with respect, something often denied them back home in New England (p. 75).

After establishing the place of native whalemen aboard the ship, Shoemaker moves on to discuss "the beach," the metaphorical meeting place of whaling crews and indigenous inhabitants in the places where whale ships made landfall. In these zones of interaction, Shoemaker argues, the category of "native," and who belonged to it, became extremely murky and difficult to parse. Although the dominant narrative of these "cultural encounters" imagined the situation in terms of racial distinctions between whites and Indians or between civilized and savage, such a framework was insufficient to account for situations in which "Indians" were on both the ship and the shore. The polarity between civilized whites and savage natives left no clear conceptual place for native whalemen, meaning that individuals who might have been identified as "Indian" in documents produced in New England might, at the same time, be classified as "white" in situations where whaling crews came into contact with indigenous islanders. The contradictions inherent in this conceptualization of nativeness were never fully resolved, and, as a result, Shoemaker writes, Indians could expect to encounter shifts in racial ex-

pectations "not only over a lifetime but even in the course of a single day" (p. 5).

The contingencies of racial expectations and the murkiness of the category of "native" are developed even more forcefully in part 3, "Islands," where Shoemaker delves into a pair of highly interesting case studies of Native American "beachcombers"—whalemen who, rather than return home after their whaling expeditions, continued living in the Pacific Islands. Of particular interest to readers of H-Florida is the case of John Sparr, a Seminole Indian from Florida who got involved in the whaling industry in New England and eventually became a planter in Fiji during the first wave of American expansion into the Pacific. Although Sparr's identity as a Native American would have set him apart from white Americans in the United States—especially at a time when Seminoles and the United States were at war—the local context in Fiji allowed Sparr be counted among the 250 "white" Americans living there in 1851, despite the fact that his status as an Indian at home meant that he could not be an American citizen according to US law. Because he was fully on the side of American interests in the Pacific, other beachcombers in Fiji went out of their way to claim him as a fellow American in legal disputes and property claims in which citizenship was required. The story of Sparr and other native beachcombers highlights the dependence of racial categories on local context as well as the unique position from which native whalemen experienced colonialism. While Sparr and other native beachcombers were at the vanguard of colonial expansion in the Pacific, Shoemaker points out, they had also been the victims of colonial expansion back home.

And it is back to North America we head in the book's final part, "The Reservation." This is the shortest of Shoemaker's four parts and operates more as an epilogue, but it serves an important function by contrasting the sense of respect native whalemen often earned at sea with the deeply entrenched belief in the United States that Indians were "a degraded people." The dominant set of beliefs faced by native New Englanders living on so-called Indian Lands or reservations—that they were "a degenerate people incompetent to handle their own affairs" (p. 181)—was contradicted by the responsibilities and respected status native men earned on whaling vessels, especially as officers. But the stereotype of Indian degradation was so appealing in New England, often functioning as a justification of state oversight, that it continued to persist despite native whalemen's insistence that they had demonstrated "Indian competency through years of dedicated service to the whaling industry" (p. 182). Still, native participation in the global whaling industry "gave them opportunities to earn respect that was otherwise denied them in the racial climate of nineteenth-century New England" (p. 194).

Perhaps one of Shoemaker's greatest accomplishments was to bring to light the extent of Native American participation in the nineteenth-century whaling industry. Because US Customs crew lists did not have a category for race and because Native Americans often used Anglicized names within the whaling industry, it is difficult to figure out who did and did not identify as Native American. By analyzing crew lists in conjunction with lists of New England native populations, Shoemaker was able to create a database of over two thousand voyages taken by more than six hundred native whalemen, which make the appendices at the end of the book a valuable resource for scholars interested in pursuing the topic further. With this source base as the bedrock of the book, Shoemaker convincingly demonstrates throughout that the racial ideas confronted by Native Americans operated in confusing and contradictory ways that always depended on the particularities of the situation. Although *Native American Whalemen and the World* does many things very well, the book lacks much in the way of diachronic analysis. Her focus is squarely on the ways in which race operated differently in differ-

ent situations—on the ship, the beach, islands, and the reservation—which, although she highlights the situational contingencies of race, Shoemaker is not always clear about how racial ideas within the whaling industry or with respect to Native Americans did or did not differ over time. This is especially strange in a book that covers some eighty-odd years in the nineteenth century during which natives participated in whaling. Nevertheless, Shoemaker has made a valuable contribution to our understanding of the situational nature of racial constructions, and provides us with a useful framework for writing history that is both micro and local but also definitively global. For these and other reasons, her book deserves a wide readership among scholars of Native Americans, race theory, and the growing field of global history.