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Bathsheba Demuth

What is a Whale? Cetacean Value at the Bering Strait, 1848–1900

The seas around the Bering Strait, where western Alaska and eastern Siberia nearly meet, seem barren—ice-choked, desperately cold, sunless for much of the year. However, the North Pacific is the terminus for the world's deep ocean circulation, its depths containing waters that originated in the North Atlantic and have gathered a rich burden of nutrients over centuries of global churn through the deep. At the Strait, the undersea topography creates turbulence, mixing waters old and new, warm and cold. These currents make the waters of the Bering Strait some of the most productive and biologically diverse on the planet. Over two hundred species of phytoplankton and three hundred different species of minute, fatty, swarming zooplankton form the primary form of productive life in the Bering Sea. The bowhead whale, *Balaena mysticetus*, concentrates this krill into their hundred-ton bodies.

Massive as they are, bowhead whales are also prey. As calves, they are at risk of orca attack. Once adults, their primary predators have long been the people living along the Bering Sea: the Yupik, Chukchi, and Iñupiat. Bowhead evolution made them particularly desirable: they are energy condensed, an adult's body weighing up to a hundred tons, forty percent of it pure lipid—more calories per pound of flesh than any other arctic species on land or sea. Those calories were also the lure that drew the industrial revolution—a revolution based on turning energy to human use—into the Bering Strait. Commercial whalers from New England were the unlikely vanguard of this revolution, men laboring to make a wage by transforming whale bodies into commodities. Their rituals of slaughter and profit are a study in the expectations of a growing market. They sailed into a place where whales were not for sale but were instead understood as souls by the Iñupiat, Yupik, and Chukchi who hunted them with expectations of a world constantly reincarnating and never easy to survive. Two kinds of whalers, with two very different kinds of answers to the questions: what is a person, what is a whale, and what is its value? Those divergent answers would shape very different futures for whales, and for humans, in the Bering Strait.

Whales and Worldviews

In 1852, representatives from these two kinds of whale-killers met on the northern coast of far eastern Siberia, a region called Chukotka. In late September, a group of Indigenous hunters found thirty-three worn, unshaven people limping their way southeast across the tundra. They were refugees from the wreck of the *Citizen*, a ship from New Bedford come to join in the fifth season of industrial whaling. From the remnants of their vessel, they had salvaged a few supplies: biscuits, rum, molasses, flour, the cooked remains of their pet pig, and a makeshift tent. Winter was already bearing down from the mountains, and with little food, no furs, and armed only with a few knives, a broken whale lance, and a shovel, they would not last its first weeks. The Native Chukotkans—Yupik, or Chukchi, the record is not clear—led the group back to their settlement, showing, in the words of the ship’s captain Thomas Norton, “a degree of sympathy for us in our destitute and dependent condition wholly unlooked for.”¹

Norton spent the next nine months among people with whom he shared nearly nothing: not language, clothing or attitudes toward cooking, bathing, sexual propriety, religion or ownership. They did not even share an appreciation of whales. Norton and his crew saw that bowheads were “the staff of life,” to the Chukotkans, but found the raw, slippery, chewy fat nearly inedible. Moreover, simply eating whale, with no thoughts of accumulating wealth or property, Norton concluded, was a signal that his hosts were “listless and unprofitable,” restricted to “simply the endurance of life.”²

What Norton could not see, crouched in his tent and waiting for rescue, was how the killing of bowhead whales constituted an entire social world. Across the Bering Strait, whales were part of a universe without a dividing line between object and subject; all things had voices, in Chukchi cosmology and among the Yupik, the animate universe responded to the thoughts of others, making intention and thoughtful action critical to not injuring the minds of other beings. As a result, hunting the moral, sentient whales began long before the migratory arrival of the animals themselves. Hunters and their families had to have the right mental attitude and perform the correct ceremonies. Among the Ifiupiat, women were responsible for welcoming bowheads by clearing away the past year’s meat and or-

1 Lewis Holmes, *The Arctic Whalers or Winter in the Arctic Ocean* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1861), 84.

2 Holmes, *Arctic Whalers*, 182, 115.

ganizing the boat crews. The Yupik brought in a new season by feeding the whales that fed them, bringing offerings to the sea in an act of blessing for the coming year. In any village, the *umiaks*—the walrus-hide boats captained by a particularly able hunter and a crew of other men—were cleaned, the kits of harpoons, ropes, floats, and spears readied. Without the right preparations, the whales would say to each other, in the stories of some Alaskan Iñupiat, how the humans were not ready to hunt, and the whales would stay far away.

When the whales did come, in the spring in Western Alaska and the spring and autumn along the Chukotka coast, hunting from an *umiak* was not solitary work. Sometimes flanked by kayaks, multiple crews took to the open leads in the sea ice when the spout or rounded back of a whale came into view. Whales have sharp hearing, so hunters moved on muffled feet and with few words. Some captains would wait for the steamy rush of a whale's exhalation before launching the boats, the breath masking the scrape of the hull against the ice. Although approached in silence, bowheads were believed by the Yupik to speak to their pursuers. And the hunters spoke back; Paul Silook, a Yupik hunter, described how the captains would call "out the name of the ceremonies, asking them [sic] to go ahead of the whale and stop it."³

Each boat's captain coordinated the hunt, watching for the vulnerable moment when the dark body surfaced to breathe. If the whale offered up a flank or back, the boats moved in with harpoons poised. These harpoons, with backward-curving barbs, were designed to twist into the wound, anchoring deep in a whale's flesh. Bound by a cord to a sealskin float, each harpoon pinned tons of struggling body to the surface. Even with multiple boats, it could take up to nine hours and dozens of strikes to kill a whale. Once dead, the whale's fins were pinned to its body, or cut away along with the tail, to reduce drag in the water. During the spring hunt, a ramp was chipped into the shore ice to haul the great body free of the water.

At the site of butchering, as the great body came apart, the order of the community was assembled. Cuts and quantities of the kill were allotted according to rank in the *umiak* and to the hunters' performance on the water. A dead whale meant human lives: nearly all the animal can be eaten, even the skin, which when eaten raw prevents scurvy. In a landscape with few or no trees, bowhead fat was fuel to hold back long, dark winters.

3 Smithsonian Institution, Henry Bascom Collins Collection, Unprocessed Box 3, File: Collins 1930.00A, 4–5.

The baleen, which becomes malleable when heated, transformed into sleds and straps. In Chukotka and parts of Alaska, people inhabited the heads of whales, the arches of bowhead jawbones forming the struts of half-subterranean houses. Known through the labor of their deaths, cetaceans were valued as the generative origin of the human world.

Whales were also a part of human politics. By the seventeenth century, the broad cultural commonalities of the Yupik, Chukchi, and Iñupiat were subdivided into small nations with defined territorial spaces, names, particular economic strategies, and, sometimes, political ambitions. *Umiak* captains were often also powerful shamans, or leaders able to command war parties. Others used blubber to cultivate trade relationships, and sometimes to protect, expand or seize control of lucrative trade routes. The capacity to attain and control the flow of biological energy by killing whales created political power. A whole human history, containing centuries of victory and defeat, expansion and retraction, trade and hardship, with all the meanings of alliances and recriminations, linked back to the natural history of cetaceans.

For the people living that history, the value of a whale was part spiritual abstraction and part concrete necessity. The Iñupiat, Yupik, and Chukchi lived in a world that could be counted upon for its continued unpredictability: routine in that summer would follow winter but alive with nonhuman beings and very human politics that could alter the course of any moment. In this world, whale flesh could become all manner of things; whale minds could speak of the future, and in dying, whales made men and women powerful. Bowheads were valuable because in a sentient and stochastic world they responded to the thoughts of humans. They were also, in the experience of their hunters, fairly predictable and infinite in time. Ten to fifteen bowheads were killed every year in Chukotka and between forty-five and sixty in Northwest Alaska. Killing more bowheads was, practically speaking, not thinkable. *Umiaks* were small and tied to the land. Morally, the social relationship between people and whales also put a boundary on destruction: to kill out of greed was understood as offensive to whales—behavior that would keep them from returning. And it was enough. The energy retrieved from the shared bodies of whales animated an entire universe.

Commodifying Whales

Whales animated a different kind of vision for Captain Norton. He was not in the Bering Strait to kill whales for food. Bowheads were hunted to become money. Norton, like most of the whalers in the Bering Strait, came from the Atlantic seaboard of the young United States, where New Bedford, Massachusetts, had become the center of the industry, putting to sea several hundred ships a year. Those ships killed whales to lubricate a mechanizing country: first greasing sewing machines and clocks, then the cotton gin and power looms. Bowhead baleen was used in umbrella spines and corset stays, and above all, the energy stored in whales became light. In the early sunsets and long winters of eastern cities, whale oil lamps lit homes, factory floors, streets, and lighthouses. Energy gathered from distant oceans was an intimate part of domestic and civic life for people who had never seen, smelled, or tasted a whale.

It was those distant demands that sent Norton to sea. He was, by rank, responsible for a successful cruise, but he did not own the *Citizen*. Instead, land-bound investors generally funded the capital-intensive, perilous whaling voyages of the mid-nineteenth century. Captains were hired for their skill at sea, and managing crews recruited with the promise of “strange lands and climes, romance, and fresh experiences” and “a pile of money.”⁴ That money, however, was not a wage or a salary. From the captain down through the specialized layers of mates, blacksmiths, and stewards to the greenest deckhand, payment was a percentage of the cargo’s value, or a “lay,” paid upon the ship’s return to its origin. Captains received up to one-eighth of the net profit, while artisans and boat-steerers received from an eighth to a hundredth, and inexperienced seamen as little as a two-hundredth share. The system gave everyone on a whaling ship “urgent, personal considerations to secure both for themselves and employers the greatest quantity of oil.”⁵

The pressure to make a commodity drove whalers to harvest as many whales as possible, killing their way from the north Atlantic southwards, round Cape Horn into the Pacific, where they hunted north until they reached the Bering Strait in 1848. That this might doom “the poor whale . . . to utter extermination” one captain wrote, was possible; at the very least, “too few will remain to tempt the cupidity of man.”⁶ However, despite writing

4 Walter Nobel Burns, *A Year with a Whaler* (New York: Outing Publishing, 1913), 12, 13.

5 Holmes, *Arctic Whalers*, 271–72.

6 M.E. Bowles, “Some Account of the Whale-Fishery of the N. West Coast and Kamschatka,” *Polynesian*, October 4, 1845.

in their newspapers and logs about extinction, Yankee whalers had little space to conceptualize a future for whales. Although the nouns assigned to whales—bulls, cows, and calves—were probably familiar to most sailors as referents to livestock, cetacean marine lives were a challenge to prevailing theories of private property. Wildness rendered cetaceans salable, alienable commodities only in death. It is in this form that whales most often entered the records of their hunters, becoming tallies of barrels and pounds of baleen. More barrels equaled less time on ship; when the *Francis*' log noted, "we are 9 months out have got nearly 800 bbls," and another hundred cooking, it meant that safe harbor was that much closer.⁷ More barrels meant, simply, more money. A whaler's labor was the link between distant human desires, mediated through a market they fed but did not control, and the oceans they sailed. For a sailor or captain, a whale could only transform into a thing of tangible value—a corset stay in a New York shop, a lamp burning away the dark, a dollar in the pocket—once dead. Oil and baleen transmuted into currency, and the agency that currency represented on shore: every whale flensed, rendered, and rolled barrel-by-barrel into the hold brought the whalers thirty-one and one-half gallons closer to going home with the freedom of money.

The Legacies of Commercial Whaling

Thus, Yankee whalers were in the Arctic because they participated in the exchange of commodities and labor for value. Many of them also believed that this sort of exchange—wages for labor, money for commodities—was the proper order of social life and a progressive force. The many things whalers like Thomas Norton found the Yupik, Iñupiat, and Chukchi to lack, from industriousness to cleanliness to a proper diet, could be solved with exposure to the market. For commerce, as many whalers experienced on the rapidly industrializing eastern US seaboard, made civilized people, who ate well in warm houses, wearing fashionable clothes. Spreading commerce spread civilization, which made the world better by allowing more people more access to commerce.

The market, in short, gave a very different answer to the question of *what is a whale*. It was not a kind of person, but a kind of commodity, with no reason to exist alive. To imagine human life was separable from whale life was a revolutionary concept in the Bering Strait,

7 New Bedford Whaling Museum, Logbook of the *Frances*, ODHS 994, 43

where people and cetaceans had long been understood as reciprocally linked. And revolutions are known to eat their children. In the case of the industrial appetite for whales, the devouring was nearly complete. In 1848, there were probably more than 23,000 bowheads in the Bering Sea. When the industry sputtered to an end sixty years later, perhaps 3,000 remained. How this happened was partly technological, but distinctly ideological. Commercial whalers had to learn how to kill whales so efficiently it rendered their reproductive capacity insufficient, and they needed not to care: human needs had to be so independent of cetacean existence that the latter could perish and the former persist.

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