



WHALE SNOW: Iñupiat, Climate Change, and Multispecies Resilience in Arctic Alaska.

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BOOK REVIEW

WHALE SNOW: Iñupiat, Climate Change, and Multispecies Resilience in Arctic Alaska. By CHIE SAKAKIBARA. xxix and 268 pp.; maps, ill., bibliog., index. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2020. \$35.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780816529612; \$35.00 (eBook), ISBN 9780816542147.

With increasing public environmental consciousness evinced by the rise of sustainability-based educational curricula and the mainstreaming of the so-called environmental movement, it can sometimes be easy to forget that the United States remains a whaling nation, one of only four in the world given quotas for aboriginal subsistence whaling by the International Whaling Commission. American whaling is often construed as an element of the real and literary past, statically captured in such maritime classics as *Moby-Dick* and *In the Heart of the Sea*. Geographer Chie Sakakibara's *Whale Snow*—which would hold its own on a bookshelf alongside Melville's (1851) and Philbrick's (2000) volumes—introduces, or for some, reintroduces, a contemporary American community for whom whaling remains central to its cultural, spiritual, and physical subsistence: the Iñupiat of Alaska, centered in the Arctic communities of Point Hope and Utqiagvik (formerly called Barrow). The product of multigenerational and multispecies relationships more than 15 years building, this book is the new academic standard on Alaskan whaling in a time of rapid environmental and societal change.

The word Iñupiat, like many of the world's indigenous demonyms, means “real people.” Sakakibara shows how the connections they forge with whales, whaling, and whaler ancestors help the Iñupiat “remain resilient and real when the ocean rises” (xiv). This is done, in part, by reinforcing old traditions: cultural, like the *ag̃gi* or drum dance (Chapter 5); temporal, like “the whaling cycle”—a calendar that prescribes whaling-related activities throughout the year in preparation for the main spring hunting season and the secondary autumn hunt (Chapter 1); or sociological, like the system of human organization based upon whaling crews and their families. Resilience and realness are also reinforced through adaptation: geographical, as illustrated by the wholesale movement of an entire community from its original site, now lost to rising seas (Chapter 4); spiritual, as with the simultaneous “Indigenization of Christianity and Christianization of Indigeneity” (146); and political, as memorably illustrated in a chapter titled “The New Harpoon” (Chapter 3). The literal new harpoon—a Norwegian introduction with an exploding head—plays only a minor role here; the new harpoon in the chapter's title is a metaphorical one: the Alaska Native Claims Settlement, a political tool (others writing about whaling have referred to harpoons as “weapons”) focused on “subsistence rights, land claims, and

economic and political capital” (83). These adaptations, combined with a deep—that is, often not superficially apparent—historical continuity, contribute to “the political complexity of Indigenous modernity” (80). The insights provided by *Whale Snow* into the Iñupiat culture of today, to adapt the words of geographer Stephen Royle, remind us “it is the 21st Century in Utqiagvik too” (2001, 68).

I can envision a broad and diverse audience for *Whale Snow*. First, the scholarly community focused on theories that intersect at nodes we call “animal geographies” and “human dimensions of environmental change” have gained a valuable book. Anthropologies of Arctic cultures are legion, but few have the geographical perspective informed by a scientific understanding of Arctic environments, which Sakakibara contributes here. Climatology communicates clearly—often direly—the likely repercussions of the accepted models for future climatic change on the physical environment; economics and political science can predict impacts on society and livelihoods, but few of those studies share Sakakibara’s understanding of what this means for people’s emotional and spiritual relationships with other species and the landscapes of their shared homes. *Whale Snow*, or chapters thereof, would fit well within reading lists for advanced undergraduate or graduate-level specialized courses on the human dimensions of wildlife or climate change, as well as broader courses on environmental anthropology or human geography. I plan to use excerpts in an introductory oceanography course, taught from a whale-centric perspective—what Sakakibara (2020) calls “cetaceousness” (12). The book is academic, yet accessible enough to appeal to any educated, general reader with an interest in the subject or the region. Rigorously researched, *Whale Snow* presents reliable, empirically supported findings in a readable style that resembles as much a scholarly monograph as it does the Iñupiat tradition of telling “stories while sitting around a seal oil lamp” (124). Sakakibara justifiably refers to herself as having been “culturally adopted” into the Iñupiat communities about which she writes.

Methodologically, *Whale Snow* will serve as many readers’ first introduction to what the author calls a “multispecies ethnography” (3). Those familiar with the subdiscipline of animal geographies will recognize the value in “bringing the animals back in” to conversations that develop social and spatial theory through the acknowledgment and incorporation of agency held by nonhuman actors in systems of spatial and environmental organization (Wolch and Emel 1995, 632). While Sakakibara does an admirable job of drawing out Iñupiat conceptions of nonhuman animals—particularly the eponymous bowhead whale (*Balaena mysticetus*)—I was left wanting more of the whale’s own perspective. This might have been achieved through the incorporation of more literature from the field of marine biology, though, admittedly, that would still have been mediated by human perceptions. In *Whale Snow*, we read that “the whale has strong agency” when it comes to its participation in whaling, specifically that “the whale gives itself to hunters who are worthy of the gift” (11). But do we know—*can* we know—what the whale actually thinks of this transaction? If anyone is in a position to

tell us, other than the whale itself, it may be the Iñupiat, whom Sakakibara has referred to in a previous volume of this journal as the “People of the Whales” (2017, 159). I may be asking for something that no human author can write and no whale has yet clearly communicated. The book’s introduction asks, “what would an ethnography which is not solely about the human but simultaneously focuses on ‘other-than-human’ ways of life look like?” (19). With its foundation of rigorous field-based scholarship, deep theoretical insights, and openness to both human and other-than-human perspectives, I think such an ethnography would look a lot like Chie Sakakibara’s *Whale Snow*.—RUSSELL FIELDING, *Coastal Carolina University*

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