Melillo on Shoemaker, 'Pursuing Respect in the Cannibal Isles: Americans in Nineteenth-Century Fiji'

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On June 25, 2012, I was hunkered down in the reading room of the Nantucket Historical Association's Research Library. I had spent the morning poring over William S. Cary's harrowing account of the 1825 wreck of his whaling vessel, the Oneo, on a remote Fijian coral reef. As I contemplated a much-needed lunch break, an elderly man in a flower-print hula shirt strolled into the archive. I perked up my ears when he and the research librarians began chatting about David Whippy, another nineteenth-century Nantucket castaway, who ended up in Fiji the year before Cary's calamitous landfall. As it turned out, the library's impromptu visitor, Mark Whippy, was a Fijian-born descendent of David Whippy. Almost immediately, Mark and I struck up a conversation, which helped to inspire two articles I soon wrote on the surprising nineteenth-century connections between Nantucket and faraway Fiji.[1] When I began my research, I had never expected to discover that a tiny island off the southeastern shores of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, had experienced such consequential relations with a distant archipelago in the South Pacific.

In Pursuing Respect in the Cannibal Isles: Americans in Nineteenth-Century Fiji, Nancy Shoemaker explains how her own curiosity was piqued by these stories of noteworthy New England-Fiji connections. Shoemaker and I are outliers. For the most part, historians have ignored Fiji's role in the political and economic development of the United States. Shoemaker sets out to rectify this omission, noting that the US treasury received millions of dollars in customs duties from the transpacific trade in Fijian sandalwood and bêche-de-mer (sea cucumbers of the genus Holothuria) during the early 1800s. These commodities—prized by the Chinese for their ceremonial, artistic, medicinal, and culinary applications—were found in great abundance on many of the 332 islands that comprise the Fiji archipelago. In turn, US consumers craved silk, porcelain, tea, jade, and lacquered goods from their Chinese counterparts. Nineteenth-century New England merchants seized on such commercial opportunities and built their fortunes as the intermediaries in these long-distance exchanges.

According to Shoemaker, of greater importance was the proving ground that Fiji offered to nineteenth-century Americans who sought the admiration of their peers. Fiji presented these men and women with "a unique platform to express social superiority" and "a place to make something of oneself" (pp. 9, 218). Nineteenth-century Fiji did not inhabit continental imaginations as it does...
today, a cluster of paradise isles captured in opulent travel advertisements and rainbow-hued labels for designer spring water. Rather, in the 1800s, Americans regarded Fiji as a zone of barbarism, a foil for civilization: “Cannibalism especially became the hallmark of Fijians’ savage natures” (p. 13). These characterizations justified exploitative, and even violent, behaviors that would have seemed distasteful or unscrupulous elsewhere. In Shoemaker’s words, “Such stigmatizations of Fijian culture barred Americans in Fiji from pondering the moral implications of their actions, since the absolute savagery of Fijians legitimated whatever Americans did there” (p. 9).

The author embarks on her journey with the noble ambition of circumventing “big-picture abstractions,” asserting in the opening pages, “this book is not about empire, borderlands, or settler colonialism” (pp. 2-3). Instead, as the title suggests, respect is the analytical fulcrum of Shoemaker’s meticulous study. Her microhistory “test cases” are the biographies of a trio of protagonists who hailed from Massachusetts port towns. Shoemaker devotes two chapters apiece to the Nantucket castaway David Whippy, a sea captain’s wife named Mary D. Wallis, and Salem merchant John B. Williams. These three New Englanders were *papalagi* (foreigners) in Fiji, but they were also “extraterritorial Americans” whose experiences in the South Pacific “allowed Americans at home to imagine themselves as a distinct and superior people” (p. 7).

Whippy found that the harsh realities of life as a common sailor aboard a whaleship were not to his liking. He arrived in Fiji in 1824 aboard the British brig *Calder* and ended up spending the remainder of his life on the islands. The details of his early years in the Fiji archipelago are vague, but Shoemaker does a commendable job of “piecing together anecdotes acquaintances told about him and analogizing from other men in a similar situation” (p. 54). What emerges from this mosaic is the picture of a man who rose from beachcomber to cultural intermediary, eventually acquiring the title *Mata ki Bau*, a mid-level rank of distinction in the Fijian social hierarchy on the island of Bau. Whippy embraced certain local customs, including polygamy, but he made a point of distancing himself from rumors of barbaric practices, like cannibalism and wife strangulation. By the 1830s, Whippy oversaw a small community of foreigners in Levuka, on Ovalu Island. Shoemaker chronicles how his status rose precipitously as he assisted Wesleyan missionaries and served as a guide and advisor during the 1840 visit to Fiji of Lieutenant Charles Wilkes and the US Exploring Expedition. In the decades that followed, Whippy became a wealthy landowner and was able to operate an array of business ventures independently from Fijian chiefs.

Wallis, the subject of Shoemaker’s fourth and fifth chapters, hailed from a working-class family in Beverly, Massachusetts. In 1844, Wallis accompanied her husband, Captain Benjamin Wallis, on two voyages to Fiji aboard the ship *Zotoff* to acquire bêche-de-mer for the China trade. She later published *Life in Feejee: Five Years among the Cannibals, by a Lady* (1851), a travel account based on the journals she kept during their lengthy stays in the archipelago. While her book is an unbridled assertion of white moral superiority, espousing faith in the Christian missionary projects afoot on the islands, it also allowed her to break free of some of the gendered confines that limited access to respectability for nineteenth-century women. Its publication helped secure Wallis a modest reputation as something of an expert on Fiji in her day. However, her more durable impacts on perceptions of the archipelago were posthumous. As Shoemaker astutely notes, “Her greatest influence on Fiji would come later as historians of the islands turned to her texts to understand and document the transformative events and historical figures crucial to the country’s history at midcentury” (p. 130).
The third member of Shoemaker’s trio, Williams, was the least appealing of the bunch. An unvarnished capitalist and brazen political opportunist, “he sought to make money by trading in the islands’ natural resources, speculating in land, and seeking government reimbursement for property losses” (pp. 212-13). Williams, who served as US commercial agent in Fiji, was unrepentant in mobilizing American military and legal power in support of his own commercial interests. Business failures and personal crises left him aggrieved. Williams’s Fiji house accidentally burned to the ground during US Independence Day festivities on July 4, 1849. Some Native men in the service of Williams’s chiefly ally, Cokanauto, rescued the American’s possessions from the conflagration but took many items for themselves. Cokanauto retrieved a portion of the lost goods, but Williams spent the rest of his life demanding payment (and accrued interest) for the remainder of the property, even using the US court system to pursue his grievances. In the long run, the terms of the deal struck to repay these debts to Williams’s family, eleven years after John’s death, were among the factors that undermined the powerful chieftain and self-styled Tui Viti (king) of all Fiji, Seru Epenisa Cakobau of Bau, paving the way for the cession of Fiji to Great Britain in 1874.

Each chapter of Pursuing Respect in the Cannibal Isles evinces Shoemaker’s precise research, eloquent prose, and engrossing subject matter. In fact, the book is so well written that it seems pedantic to critique it. In what follows, I introduce three provocations, more as ideas for future researchers who choose to follow Shoemaker’s capable lead than as major criticisms of the work under review.

First, as is the case with so much scholarship on the US and the Pacific World, China remains an opaque silhouette throughout the book. Yet it was the third node—and arguably the driving force—in a transpacific “triangle trade” that connected North American merchants, Pacific Island peoples and ecosystems, and burgeoning Asian markets for raw materials and luxury goods. As I have found in my own research, among the most fascinating passages in the logbooks of New England traders are the instances where they attempt to comprehend the shifting terrain and unfamiliar dimensions of Chinese consumer demand during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The Pacific Ocean’s island environments harbored a tremendous diversity of species and varieties of sandalwood and sea cucumbers. They could also be processed differently to achieve a range of results. An entrepreneur’s ability to sniff out opportunities in an emerging global capitalist marketplace was a major determinant in the process of achieving respect, yet this goes largely unremarked in Shoemaker’s book. A model of how scholars might add more dimension to the Chinese side of such transpacific histories is Gregory Rosenthal’s Beyond Hawai’i: Native Labor in the Pacific World (2018).

In addition, one of the risks of focusing on the stories of individuals and their personal ambitions is the loss of a broader historical context into which readers can situate these micro-narratives. Approaches developed by environmental historians might provide ways of achieving this contextualization that are less abstract and more accessible than some of the other frameworks that Shoemaker disavows. It is worth remarking that the sandalwood and hêche-de-mer trade between Fiji and China comprised only one facet of a vast, rapacious harvest of marine organisms throughout the nineteenth-century Pacific World. This was a crucial stage of a global environmental process that historian John F. Richards termed “the world hunt” in his book The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World (2003). The hurried commodification of sea otters, seals, whales, sea cucumbers, sandalwood, tortoiseshell (hawksbill turtle back), mother-of-pearl, copra (dried coconut), bird guano from Peru’s Chincha Islands, New Caledonia nickel, and
phosphates from islands like Nauru and Makatea, to mention only a few of the most sought-after resources, wreaked havoc with Indigenous communities and ecosystems in nearly all regions of the Pacific. These rapid-fire extractive practices—many of which relied on the unfree labor of Indigenous peoples, coolies from China, and debt peons from Latin America—also provided vital subsidies of energy and raw materials to industrializing economies on either side of the Atlantic World.

Finally, Shoemaker is to be commended for proposing the concept of “respect” as means of clarifying the motivations of historical actors. Her approach offers an expedient work-around for some of the problems that plague the rigid analytical frameworks of empire, borderlands, and settler colonial theory. However, throughout the book’s chapters, respect often comes across as imprecise and static, an ahistorical and transcultural “personal emotion” or an “intangible human striving” (p. 8). Certainly, the desire for approval from our peers is influenced by biological predispositions, but it is almost a truism to assert that the dimensions of respect vary widely among periods and across cultures.

In many ways, such discussions have been with us for decades. Historians and those in other branches of the humanities and social sciences have long sought to understand class formation in more nuanced and less deterministic ways. This pursuit began, in earnest, with the publication of Pierre Bourdieu’s masterwork, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979). The French sociologist cleverly demonstrated how his countrymates used cultural and social capital to assert status and achieve respect. Diplomatic history and the study of America’s imperial forays throughout the world were also affected by new models for comprehending relations of power. Over the past four decades, one of the most consequential (and controversial) developments in the study of US foreign relations has been the emergence of scholarship that follows “the cultural turn.”[2]

These caveats and quibbles aside, Shoemaker’s book does not disappoint. Its pages are generously illustrated by a trio of maps and twenty-eight black-and-white images. In addition, three detailed appendices list the voyages of sandalwood traders, the comings and goings of bêche-de-mer ships, and the naval expeditions that arrived in Fiji before 1860. *Pursuing Respect in the Cannibal Isles* extends the legacy of eloquent writing, insightful historical research, and probing analysis on display in Shoemaker’s superb book, *Native American Whalemen and the World: Indigenous Encounters and the Contingency of Race* (2015). Scholars and students of US diplomatic history, the Pacific World, the history of the nineteenth-century United States, and the history of Fiji will find an enthralling read in the pages of this first-rate book.

Notes


[2]. For a summary of this trend and its early critics, see Peter Jackson, “Pierre Bourdieu, the ‘Cultural Turn’ and the Practice of International History,” *Review of International Studies* 34 (2008):
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