global dis :connect

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Käte Hamburger Research Centre global dis:connect

Karen Oslund

Sailing out of time: how did Inuit and Western sailors re-imagine their understandings of space and time in order to work together in Arctic whaling communities?

The problem

How did people using different cultural senses of time and space work together in the Arctic to supply the world with whale oil, which was a major energy source in the long 19th century? How did these different cultural senses affect the production and use of this energy source in the rest of the world?

Core interest

My work is on Inuit-Western whaling communities in Greenland and the Canadian Arctic during the long 19th century. Ships overwintering in the Arctic or shipwrecked there became small hybrid communities centred around survival, adaption and overcoming the environmental and cultural challenges of the Arctic landscapes in winter. I explore these emotional communities from the perspective of both Inuit and Western whalers, concentrating on the dislocations of time and space experienced in different Arctic locations and the voyages there and back.

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Inuit and whalers from New England and Scotland had different understandings of time: one seasonal and centred on changes in the landscape of the ice and the movement of animals, the other a 19th-century clock-regulated time.
When members of these communities came together to work in the Arctic, their temporal senses clashed and dis:connected their work and emotional community. My research aims to understand how they managed the dis:connection without permanent rupture and how both sides adjusted to maintain the community.

Preliminary results

Living in the Arctic forced individual Western whalers to adapt to Inuit senses of time and space. In individual encounters, the Inuit often set the terms of engagement. Over the entire period, however, the picture is mixed, as a growing money economy meant that the ships set the geographic boundaries of the settlement and the hunting area. This altered sense of space persisted after the end of the whaling period, with some whalers retaining their sense of Arctic time after their return, and Inuit communities resettled in locations where the ships had been.