

# RELOCATING YUQUOT:

## *The Indigenous Pacific and Transpacific Migrations*

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**I**N 1786, A YOUNG MOWACHAHT man boarded a ship in Yuquot (colonial: Friendly Cove or Nootka) and travelled to China via Hawai'i. Comekela, as he was identified by the British, was the younger brother of the Mowachaht chief, Maquinna. He stayed in China for close to a year before returning to Yuquot. Even though he was the first known coastal person to cross the Pacific, to live in China, and to return, his story has been virtually erased from the public record, buried in an avalanche of homilies to British, Spanish, and American explorers who came to the Pacific Northwest. In this article, I relocate Comekela's story and the ancient village of Yuquot as part of the Mowachaht's Pacific heritage. This village site, continuously inhabited for over four thousand years, was a strategic portal on the Pacific and an Indigenous site of arrival not only for Europeans but also for Chinese labourers, Hawaiians, and others. These stories help us rethink British Columbia's early history, foregrounding it as Indigenous territory as well as a site of contact for diverse and mainly Pacific peoples who came together at this strategic depot.

This article began as an attempt to better document the alleged initial arrival of Chinese on the Pacific Northwest coast in 1788–89.<sup>1</sup> I began to study the primary archival sources related to the Meares 1788–89

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<sup>1</sup> This work was part of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded project titled "Asian Canadians on Vancouver Island: Race, Indigeneity, and the Transpacific." The research team originally included Rita Dhmoon, Imogene Lim, Christine O'Bonsawin, John Price (PI), and Tusa Shea. The project aimed to recover and reconceptualize the history of Asian Canadians on Vancouver Island and entered into a partnership with the Land of Maquinna Cultural Society (Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation) to support the development of a cultural centre at Yuquot that would integrate the story of Chinese arrivals while foregrounding the MMFN's own history.

expeditions to Yuquot and made contact with the Mowachaht, the Indigenous people who have inhabited Yuquot for thousands of years. I quickly came to realize that the Chinese newcomers arriving in 1788 were part of a larger story in which Indigenous peoples were independent and, indeed, central actors connecting Europe with Asia via Yuquot. As my perceptions changed, so too did this article. The current version asks how Yuquot has been remembered and how it might be remembered: As a site of white arrival and discovery or as a site of Indigenous life on the Pacific? It provides a basic introduction to Mowachaht/Muchalaht history and focuses on the story of Comekela's transpacific voyage as well as the many Chinese labourers who crewed the ships and worked at Yuquot in 1788–89. These Yuquot stories provide an opportunity to rethink our approach to coastal history and to recognize the multiple, overlapping networks of Pacific peoples who interacted at this historic site, thereby clarifying what it means to both Indigenize and decolonize local and Pacific histories.

## BACKGROUND

In 1923, the newly formed Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) identified the first two locations in the province of British Columbia to be designated as sites of historic significance: Fort Langley, site of a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) fort built in 1827, and "Nootka Sound." The following year a plaque was placed on a cairn erected at Yuquot on the shores of the Pacific:

### NOOTKA SOUND

Discovered by Captain James Cook in March 1778. In June 1789, Spain took possession and established and maintained a settlement until 1795. The capture of British vessels in 1789 almost led to war, which was avoided by the Nootka Convention of 1790. Vancouver and Quadra met here in August 1792 to determine the land to be restored under that convention.

Today, the plaque that adorns the cairn carries a different message:

### YUQUOT

To the Mowachaht-Muchalaht First Nations, Yuquot has always been the centre of their social, political and economic world. Whaling was a vital part of the life of the Mowachaht-Muchalaht, and of all the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples. Near here stood the Whalers' Washing House, a

unique ceremonial structure and the most significant monument to a purification ritual on the West Coast of North America. In the late 18th century, Yuquot became an important site of early contact between First Peoples and Europeans. Explorers and traders were attracted to this safe harbour, which they called Friendly Cove. As a result, Yuquot, also known as Nootka, developed into an important centre of trade and diplomacy, and it was briefly the site of Spain's only military establishment in present-day Canada. Yuquot became the focal point of the Nootka Sound Controversy of 1789–1794, when the rival interests of Great Britain and Spain brought those countries to the brink of war.

As historian and museum curator Robin Inglis has suggested, the change of wording is significant and reflects a long struggle by the Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation (MMFN) to regain sovereignty over its stories and territories.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the first plaque, which focused solely on the arrival of Cook and a Spanish–British confrontation in 1789, the second identifies Yuquot as the centre of the Mowachaht world. And so it was – for thousands of years.<sup>3</sup>

Yuquot is located on the west coast of Vancouver Island approximately eighty kilometres north of Tofino. It is the home of the Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation and the colonial government-designated IR 1 – Indian Reserve 1.<sup>4</sup> The Mowachaht inhabited Yuquot continuously for at least forty-three hundred years. Shifting alliances among the communities in the region eventually led to the emergence of the Mowachaht Confederacy in the 1700s – a community of familial houses at Yuquot of which the most powerful assumed the hereditary title of “Maquinna.” The population of the area in the seventeenth century is conservatively estimated to have been at least four thousand people when European explorers began arriving in the 1770s. It declined to fewer than one hundred in the 1920s. From contact on, the Mowachaht/Muchalaht proved resilient in the face of smallpox epidemics, appropriation of land, and cultural dispossession, including the ban on potlatching, the raiding of treasures (including the famous Whaler's Shrine at Yuquot), assimilationist policies in residential schools, and the attempted

<sup>2</sup> My thanks to Robin Inglis for sharing an unpublished paper on the plaques.

<sup>3</sup> See John Dewhirst and William J. Polan, *Indigenous Archaeology of Yuquot, a Nootkan Outside Village*, vols. 1–3 (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> This story is based on a number of sources, including Mercedes Palau, Carmen Fauria, Marisa Calés y Araceli Sanchez, eds., *Nootka: Regreso a una Historia Olvidada* (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Spain, 1998); and Yvonne May Marshall, “A Political History of the Nuu-chah-nulth People: A Case Study of the Mowachaht and Muchalaht Tribes” (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 1993). I thank Robin Inglis and Margarita James for their assistance in finding sources and educating me about Yuquot's history.

extinction of their language.<sup>5</sup> Conscious of the threat to their very survival as a people, the Mowachaht/Muchalaht demonstrated ingenuity and flexibility as they confronted ongoing challenges, most of which derived from colonial dispossession. Yuquot remained their anchor – a sanctuary, safe haven, and permanent residence for most of the families in the MMFN. However, in the 1960s, government policies drove them from Yuquot (see Claxton and Price, this issue, for details).<sup>6</sup>

Today, Mowachaht Elders Ray and Terry Williams are the sole residents at Yuquot. Its designation as a historic site has meant little in the way of financial resources, particularly compared to the millions of dollars that have been poured into its colonial counterpart – the old HBC fort now regally named “Fort Langley National Historic Site of Canada.” The heart of the Mowachaht/Muchalaht, however, remains in Yuquot, and many believe their future is tied to this site that, for many years, was a strategic depot on the Pacific. In 1992, Chief Ambrose Maquinna called for the development of Yuquot as a site for tourism and cultural revival, where the MMFN could “share our history with the world” (see James, “My Transpacific Life,” this issue). Every summer, MMFN families return to Yuquot, camping out and engaging in activities to replenish their spirits, and each year visitors are invited to share Yuquot at an annual Summerfest celebration. Today, Chief Michael Maquinna carries on the tradition started by his father: “What we were wanting to do was make sure that we didn’t lose contact with our homeland, Yuquot, being our most significant place of living and we also wanted to make sure that our kids, our young kids, our newborns, know where it is that they come from and that Yuquot is their home.”<sup>7</sup>

The Council of Chiefs and the Land of Maquinna Cultural Society (a non-profit organization whose purpose is to support heritage education) continue to dream of revitalizing Yuquot, building homes there, and creating an interpretive centre to be called “Nis’Maas” after the name given to the Maquinna Big House that stood prominently at Yuquot for

<sup>5</sup> On the Whalers’ Shrine, see Aldona Jonaitas and Richard Inglis, *The Yuquot Whalers’ Shrine* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> As the main village of the Mowachaht Confederacy, Yuquot and other Nuu-chah-nulth villages were the centre of Euro-American exploration and trade in the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. Accounts of these early arrivals are extensive – a comprehensive list can be found in Schedule A, accessible through the Law Society of British Columbia database of court decisions, CanLII, at <https://www.canlii.org/en/bc/>.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Chief Michael Maquinna, 21 July 2018, Yuquot. This interview was one of five undertaken by Asian Canadians on Vancouver Island (ACVI) and UBC’s Asian Canadian and Asian Migration program at Summerfest 2018.

hundreds of years. And it was from Nis'Maas that Maquinna's younger brother, Comekela, departed over 230 years ago on his epic voyage.

#### COMEKELA GOES TO CHINA

In 1786, Comekela left his home village of Yuquot and crossed the Pacific to China, where he stayed for nearly a year. He arrived back in Yuquot in May 1788, twenty-one months after his departure. He made these transoceanic passages aboard vessels engaged in the nascent trade in sea otter furs, commerce based out of Macau and Guangzhou (Canton), where the pelts fetched a pretty penny. The fierce competition among Euro-Americans for the China market in furs, and the ensuing imperial conflict with Spain over control of the Pacific Northwest, reflected the centrality of the Pacific in colonial rivalries for global hegemony.

For Comekela and the Mowachaht people, the Pacific represented life itself. Like many Indigenous communities on the ocean, they had developed a sea- and river-based livelihood and culture centred on fishing and, in the case of a number of West Coast peoples, whaling.<sup>8</sup> Mowachaht canoes were ocean-going, often spending weeks on the high seas seeking the grey and humpback whales coveted for their flesh and oil. Trade in sea-based foods and products, including sea otter pelts, predated the arrival of Europeans by centuries. Thus it comes as no surprise that, as the mean of transportation evolved, Comekela should seek to board a ship that would traverse the sea that had sustained the Mowachaht from time immemorial.

In 1786, he crossed the Pacific aboard the *Sea Otter*, captained by James Hanna, a British trader who twice made commercial visits to Yuquot: once in 1785 and then again in 1786.<sup>9</sup> Hanna's was among the first of the fur trade expeditions aimed at capitalizing on Captain Cook's 1784 report on the lucrative market in China for sea otter furs.<sup>10</sup> On the heels of a financially successful first trip, Hanna departed Macao again on 4 May 1786, arriving at Yuquot on 18 August. No firsthand accounts of Hanna's second visit to Yuquot exist, but according to contemporary reports made by other sea merchants, Comekela gained passage aboard Hanna's ship

<sup>8</sup> Eugene Arima and Alan Hoover, *The Whaling People of the West Coast of Vancouver Island and Cape Flattery* (Victoria: Royal British Columbia Museum, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> This account of Hanna's second voyage is based on W. Kaye Lamb and Tomas Bartroli, "James Hanna and John Henry Cox: The First Maritime Fur Trader and His Sponsor," *BC Studies* 84 (Winter 1989–90): 25; Bob Galois, "The Voyages of James Hanna to the Northwest Coast: Two Documents," *BC Studies* 103 (Fall 1994): 86–87.

<sup>10</sup> J.C. Beaglehole, ed., *The Journals of Captain James Cook on His Voyages of Discovery: The Voyage of the Resolution and Discovery, 1776–1780* (Cambridge, UK: Hakluyt Society, 1955–1974), 195.

the *Sea Otter* when it left Yuquot for northern waters on 3 September: “They carried away with them a Boy, who was brother to Mokquilla (Maquinna), and brought him to good health to China; this they acknowledged to have done secretly, but with the Lad’s own consent.”<sup>11</sup> Departing the coast on 1 October, the *Sea Otter*, with Comekela aboard, arrived in Macao on 8 February after stopping over in Hawai‘i in mid-December for supplies.

Comekela’s arrival in Macao in early 1787 marked the beginning of a yearlong stay in China. Preliminary research has not yielded any documentary record of his time in Macao or Guangzhou (Canton). However, his return to Yuquot is well documented in the journals of John Meares, who first met Comekela in Macao and agreed to transport him back to Yuquot aboard the *Felice Adventurer* in 1788.<sup>12</sup>

An ambitious trader initially based in India, Meares mounted his first expedition to the Pacific Northwest in 1786 to find the sea otter pelts that were reportedly fetching high prices in China.<sup>13</sup> This expedition had begun in India, then a British colony. Meares recruited mainly Europeans to sail the ships, adding ten Lascars (South Asian sailors) when he arrived in Madras.<sup>14</sup> He funded this first expedition through the sale of opium from India, but it ended in disaster when he decided to winter in Alaska with his ship, the *Nootka*. Many of his crew died of scurvy and cold. The other ship on this expedition, the *Sea Otter*, never returned.

Meares embarked on a second expedition to the Pacific Northwest in early 1788. He commanded one of his ships, the *Felice Adventurer*, and Captain Douglas the other, the *Iphigenia Nubiana*. The latter carried four Hawaiians, including the *ali‘i* (chief), Ka‘iana, across the Pacific while Comekela endured the three-month journey aboard the *Felice Adventurer*. Meares’s journal, a seven-hundred-page tome printed in 1790, exaggerated Meares’s accomplishments and reflected his paternalism towards Indigenous peoples, including the Mowachaht and Comekela.

<sup>11</sup> Robin Fisher and J.M. Bumsted, eds., *An Account of a Voyage to the Northwest of America in 1785 and 1786, by Alexander Walker* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 203.

<sup>12</sup> John Meares, *Voyages made in the years 1788 and 1789 from China to the north west coast of America: to which are prefixed an introductory narrative of a voyage performed in 1786 from Bengal in the ship Nootka, observations on the probable existence of a north west passage, and some account of the trade between the north west coast of America and China, and the latter country and Great Britain* (London: Logographic Press, 1790). Available at [https://archive.org/details/cihm\\_36543](https://archive.org/details/cihm_36543).

<sup>13</sup> J. Richard Nokes, *Almost a Hero: The Voyages of John Meares, R.N., to China, Hawaii and the Northwest Coast* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1998), 9–12.

<sup>14</sup> The story of Lascars crossing the Pacific deserves some dedicated research. See Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand’s Colonial Past* (Wellington, NZ: Bridget Williams Books, 2012).

Nevertheless, it remains an important source of information regarding the early fur trade at Yuquot and almost the only source providing any information about Comekela.<sup>15</sup>

Meares recorded that Comekela had stood the ocean-crossing well and was excited as they approached Yuquot on a stormy morning on 13 May 1788. After an absence of seventeen months, Comekela was understandably happy to be home. However, Maquinna and the second-ranking chief of the Mowachaht Confederacy, Callicum, were away at the time. That morning Chief Hannape, who had been left in charge at Yuquot, came out by canoe to greet Comekela. Accompanying him were a number of other canoes filled with “men, women, and children,” who brought with them large supplies of fish, and Meares “did not hesitate a moment” to purchase “an article so very acceptable to people just arrived from a long, and toilsome voyage.”<sup>16</sup> For his arrival, Comekela had dressed in “a scarlet regimental coat, decorated with brass buttons, a military hat set off with a flaunting cockade, decent linens, and other appendages of European dress.”<sup>17</sup> Waiting for the sea to calm, Comekela, Meares, and others set out that evening “for the shore, when a general shout and cry from the village assured him of the universal joy which was felt upon his return.”<sup>18</sup> A feast then took place in Maquinna’s big house that lasted long into the evening.

Meares subsequently wrote about the return of Chiefs Maquinna and Callicum three days later. The flotilla of a dozen war canoes surrounded the *Iphigenia*, with the warriors chanting a song and providing a “solemn, unexpected concert” accompanied by the drumming of paddles on the sides of the canoes “to produce an effect not often attained by the orchestras in our quarter of the globe.”<sup>19</sup> Meares’s journal does not mention Comekela’s reunion with Maquinna or Callicum, but one of its illustrations (see Figure 1) may, in fact, capture the reunion between Maquinna and Comekela.

Suggesting that the illustration has been mislabelled “Callicum & Maquilla, Chiefs of Nootka Sound,” historian Jim McDowell asserts that the engraving, done by Thomas Stothard from a sketch by someone on the *Iphigenia*, captures the reunion between Comekela and Maquinna, with Comekela shedding his foreign attire, which lies at the feet of the

<sup>15</sup> For a short critical assessment, see Barry M. Gough, “Meares, John,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, available at [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio.php?id\\_nbr=2552](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio.php?id_nbr=2552). A more balanced assessment is Nokes, *Almost a Hero*.

<sup>16</sup> Meares, *Voyages*, 109.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 112–13.



Figure 1. Chief Maquinna and ? Illustration by Thomas Stothard based on a sketch by an unknown artist reportedly accompanying Meares. Reproduced from John Meares, *Voyages Made in Years 1788 and 1789, from China to the North West Coast of America* (London: Logographic Press, 1790). Source: Royal BC Museum, A-02694.



two men.<sup>20</sup> Further evidence that this may be the case surfaced after Comekela's death, a point to which I return later.

John Meares had great hopes that Comekela would act as his agent among the Mowachaht Confederacy, but Comekela seemed to go his own way:

Comekela was, at first, very active in forwarding our commercial arrangement; but he had become very deficient in his native tongue, and he now spoke such a jargon of the Chinese, English, and Nootkan languages, as to be by no means a ready interpreter between us and the natives; besides, in returning to the manners of his country, he began to prefer the interests of his countrymen, and, amidst the renewed luxuries of whale flesh, blubber and oil, to forget the very great kindnesses we had bestowed upon him.<sup>21</sup>

Increasingly disenchanted with Comekela, Meares still hoped to use him, claiming that he arranged his wedding in an attempt to boost his chiefly position.<sup>22</sup> While Comekela did indeed wed, the marriage was arranged by Maquinna. As a warrior and a younger brother to the chief, Comekela's loyalties lay with Maquinna and the Mowachaht. In August 1788, he accompanied Maquinna on a punitive voyage against one of their northern neighbours:

The power that Maquilla carried with him on this occasion, was of a formidable nature. His war canoes contained each thirty young, athletic men, and there were twenty of these vessels, which had been drawn from the different villages under the subjection of Maquilla. – Comekela had the command of two boats: – They moved off from the shore in solemn order, singing their song of war. The chiefs were clothed in sea-otter skins; and the whole army had their faces and bodies painted with red ochre, and sprinkled with a shining sand, which, particularly when the sun shone on them, produced a fierce and terrible appearance.<sup>23</sup>

When Meares left Yuquot for China that September, he was annoyed with Comekela for not attending the departure:

Comekela, of whom we never entertained a very favourable opinion, and of whose deceitful conduct we had ample proof, notwithstanding

<sup>20</sup> Jim McDowell, "Who Were These Two Mowachaht Men?," *British Columbia History* 47, no. 2 (2014): 12–15.

<sup>21</sup> Meares, *Voyages*, 121.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

our kindness to him, while he was at China, during his voyage from thence, and after his return to Nootka, confirmed us in our opinion of his ingratitude, by leaving the Sound, without shewing us the least mark of attention or respect: – He therefore lost, as he deserved, the present which was reserved for him; and we suffered him to depart without any token or remembrance from us.<sup>24</sup>

Meares's petulance, so clearly expressed in this passage, reflected his continuing belief that Comekela was beholden to him. He was unable to recognize that Comekela, as a member of a chiefly family, had his own responsibilities. Meares's remarks, as it turned out, seem particularly spiteful in light of events the following year, when Comekela tried to warn him of impending disaster.

On 4 July 1789, nearly a year after Meares's departure, Comekela came out to greet the *Argonaut*, the second of two ships to arrive at Yuquot from Macao as part of the third and final expedition sponsored by Meares.<sup>25</sup> According to Robert Duffin, the chief mate of the *Argonaut*: "In the morning several natives came off, with the rest Comekela (that was brought by you from Macao to Nootka); from him we learnt there were five vessels in Friendly Cove, but could not learn of what nation they were; however he informed us they had captured the North-West American schooner, commanded by Mr. Funter."<sup>26</sup> It would seem that Meares's deprecation of Comekela as an inconsiderate and unreliable ally missed the mark. Awaiting Meares's vessels were the Spanish, who seized a number of them, thus starting what became known as the Nootka Crisis (1789–95).<sup>27</sup> This is the last mention of Comekela in Meares's *Journal*.

One of the few sources to mention Comekela in later life is the account of Dr. John Scouler, a Scottish scientist on board the *William and Anne*, an HBC ship that visited the Pacific Northwest in 1825.<sup>28</sup> Anchoring near Yuquot in July, Scouler recorded:

Here Moaquilla came on board with his two sons. The elder bears his father's name, & is, as far as we could judge, of a very mild temper. The younger is called Sadoo. Before venturing on board the old man inquired from what country we came, & on being informed we were English, he & his people clapped their hands & seemed highly

<sup>24</sup> Meares, *Journal*, 17 September 1788, 218–19.

<sup>25</sup> Nokes, *Almost a Hero*, 140.

<sup>26</sup> Meares, *Journal*, Appendix No. XIII, 12 July 1789.

<sup>27</sup> On the Nootka Crisis, see Daniel Clayton, *Islands of Truth: The Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver Island* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> John Scouler, "Dr. John Scouler's Journal of a Voyage to N.W. America [1824–26], III," *Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 6 (June 1905): 159–205.

delighted. On showing him the portrait of Mr. Mears [*sic*] he soon recognized his old friend, & had not forgot the Spaniards or C. Vancouver. When we showed him the portraits of himself & Calicum, he easily found-out the unfortunate chief & told us that Komkela was dead for many years.<sup>29</sup>

It seems quite conceivable that the chief that Scouler met was the same Maquinna who greeted Meares in 1788. At that time, Maquinna was reported to be a young man, and Callicum, the second in command, was much older. If correct, Maquinna would have been thirty-five years older, perhaps sixty-five or so, when he met Scouler in 1825. Why Comekela's name came up during this conversation related to the portrait is also noteworthy. From Scouler's account, he first showed Maquinna a portrait of Meares and then a portrait of "himself and Calicum" (as far as is known, this is the same portrait reproduced for this article), but the only words Scouler records is that Maquinna "told us that Komekela was dead for many years." One cannot help but be drawn to the possibility that, when Maquinna saw the portrait, he recalled Comekela because it was indeed his younger brother who was portrayed and not Callicum, a suggestion that reinforces McDowell's contention that it is Comekela who is portrayed in the engraving, not Callicum.

By the time Maquinna met Scouler, the Mowachaht's economic circumstances had declined, but they continued to rely on the sea and its many resources. Even though Comekela had depended on British ships for transportation, the Nuu-cha-nulth peoples had a long seafaring tradition of their own, as did the Haida and many other Indigenous peoples.<sup>30</sup> In that regard, an article written by a second mate on the *Sea Otter* in 1786, and published in the *Morning Chronicle* on 20 November 1787, sheds important comparative light on the woodcrafting skills of the Mowachaht:

Their canoes and paddles are made better, both with regard to the regularity of shape and polishing, by these savages (though we found no other tools among them but small knives crooked, made of iron hoops or some other thin pieces of iron and good for nothing) than most part of [the] country joiners in Scotland could pretend to, with all their tools. They are cut out of the solid tree. I saw one of them, which was seventy-three feet long, eight feet broad and had seats for thirty men to paddle, besides which she could easily have carried

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 30 July 1825, 192.

<sup>30</sup> In addition to Arima and Hoover, *Whaling People*, see Alan D. McMillan, *Since the Time of the Transformers* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999).

twenty more; this was called a war canoe and was adorned round the gunwale with three rows of human teeth.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples had a long tradition of whaling in the open seas, and other coastal Indigenous peoples had extensive trading and kinship networks extending from Bella Coola to the Columbia River, to which they gained access mainly via coastal seaways.<sup>32</sup> That a son of a seafaring chief should cross the Pacific and stay in China is hardly surprising.

Comekela's story is not the only example of Indigenous seafarers plying the Pacific and arriving in China in this era. In the fall of 1787, the noted Chinese artist Guan Zuolin crafted a portrait of a man of immense proportions, clad in traditional clothing of the nobility of Hawai'i (colonial: Sandwich Islands).<sup>33</sup> This was Ka'iana, a member of an *ali'i* family of Hawai'i.<sup>34</sup> How, we might ask, did a Hawaiian nobleman find himself in China 238 years ago? Just as Comekela had gained passage on James Hanna's ship the *Sea Otter* in 1786, so Ka'iana gained passage on John Meares's ship the *Nootka* in 1787 when it arrived in Hawai'i after its arduous winter in Prince William Sound (today's Gulf of Alaska). He then hitched a ride to China. He returned to Hawai'i via Yuquot in 1788 and was aboard a small schooner, the *North West America*, when it was launched at Yuquot. According to Meares, Ka'iana's "every power was absorbed in the business that approached, and who had determined to be on board the vessel when she glided into the water."<sup>35</sup> When it did, Ka'iana "could only express his astonishment."

Ka'iana's yearning to traverse the seas and his obsession with the launch of the schooner were hardly accidental. As Kānaka Maoli, he came from a long tradition of seafaring Polynesians (from the Marquesas and Society Islands) who settled in Hawai'i over a thousand years earlier.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> As cited in Bob Galois, "The Voyages of James Hanna to the Northwest Coast: Two Documents," *BC Studies* 103 (Fall 1994): 86–87.

<sup>32</sup> One of the most important whaling communities was the Makah. See Joshua L. Reid, *The Sea Is My Country: The Maritime World of the Makahs, an Indigenous Borderlands People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> The provenance of the image remains unverified.

<sup>34</sup> For an in-depth treatment of Ka'iana and Winnee, see David A. Chang, *The World and All the Things upon It: Native Hawaiian Geographies of Exploration* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

<sup>35</sup> Meares, *Voyages*, 221.

<sup>36</sup> On the Hawaiian present on the coast, see Jean Barman and Bruce McIntyre Watson, *Leaving Paradise: Indigenous Hawaiians in the Pacific Northwest* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006); Tom Koppel, *Kanaka: The Untold Story of Hawaiian Pioneers in British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest* (Vancouver: Whitecap Books, 1995); and Jean Barman, *Maria Maboi of the Islands* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2004).

In fact, according to Meares's journals, two other Kānaka Maoli, a "stout man and a boy from the island of Mowee (Maui)," were on board Meares's second ship, the *Iphigenia*, when it departed from China on 22 January 1788. The man was identified as "Tawnee" by the ship's captain, William Douglas, but so far I have found nothing else about him or the boy accompanying him.<sup>37</sup> Prior to Ka'iana's exploits, a Hawaiian woman known as "Winnee" had boarded the *Imperial Eagle* in 1787 as a companion to Mrs. Frances Barkley, the wife of the ship's captain. As such, she visited the north coast of North America and returned with the ship to China. She died as she was returning to Hawai'i aboard the *Felice Adventurer*.<sup>38</sup>

Winnee's and Ka'iana's voyages were only the first in what would become a tradition of transpacific sojourning, particularly to the North American coast to work. By 1843, over 40 percent of HBC employees at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River were Kānaka Maoli.<sup>39</sup> Hawaiian labour was a mainstay for the Alberni Mill, the first sawmill on the Alberni Inlet, Vancouver Island. Kānaka Maoli were also hired to work in the Wellington coal mines.<sup>40</sup> Others settled on the Gulf Islands and, like many in that era, intermarried with Indigenous people on the coast.

#### TRANSPACIFIC CANTONESE MIGRATION

If the stories of Comekela and Ka'iana shine light on the seafaring traditions of the Indigenous Pacific, the story of the Cantonese labourers and crews who came to Yuquot in this period highlights the importance of transpacific migration and settlement. A half-century ago historian and principal of the Chinese Public School in Victoria, David Lee, recorded in *加拿大華僑史* (History of Chinese in Canada) that Chinese arrived on ships captained by John Meares and James Colnett in 1788 and 1789, respectively, and concluded that this "marks the beginning of the arrival of Chinese in Canada."<sup>41</sup> Often excluded, or mentioned only to

<sup>37</sup> Nokes, *Almost a Hero*, 44.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>39</sup> Koppel, *Kanaka*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> See Barman and Watson, *Leaving Paradise*, for a detailed index of Hawaiians who settled in coastal America, 219–433.

<sup>41</sup> 李東海. *加拿大華僑史* (台北: 中華大典編印會, 1967) [David Lee, *A History of Chinese in Canada* (Taipei: Zhonghua Dadian Bianyinhuì, 1967)], 319–32. My thanks to Wenjuan Lu for translation assistance.

be summarily dismissed, the Chinese presence at Yuquot has not been considered significant by most historians of the fur trade.<sup>42</sup>

For example, Frederic Howay, a distinguished justice and lay historian of British Columbia who was appointed to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada in 1923, was a key figure in the decision to designate Yuquot as a historical site. His interest, as reflected in the original inscription on the cairn, was its location, which was where Europeans first came to the coast. Howay possessed an avid interest in the maritime fur trade, and he “at least acknowledged” an Indigenous presence in the province. However, he was vitriolic about Asian Canadians, whom he labelled “little yellow men.”<sup>43</sup> Such attitudes reflected the consolidation of white supremacy in the province, a process that had begun in 1872 when, in a single stroke, the BC legislature denied Indigenous peoples and Chinese newcomers, who together represented 80 percent of the province’s population, the right to vote. Given this, it is not surprising that many historians have given the arrival and role of Chinese newcomers to Yuquot short shrift – what is surprising is the durability of the erasure. As recently as 2008 Freeman Tovell omits any reference to the Chinese sailors and craftspeople who crewed with James Colnett in 1789, even though many were with him when the Spanish arrested him and his crew and took them to San Blas and Tepic in Mexico (a topic that Tovell treats in some detail). This stands as testimony to the persistence of their exclusion from the historical record.<sup>44</sup>

Among those who may note the Chinese presence, we often see conflicting or confused accounts. Thirty years ago, Charles Lillard, in his 1987 introduction to Gilbert Sproat’s classic chronicle *The Nootka*, suggested that “Captain James Colnett, *Argonaut*, carried 29 Chinese craftsmen to Nootka for the purpose of building the *North West America*, the first ship launched on the island,” an assertion that, as we shall see, is erroneous.<sup>45</sup> More recently, Horsfield and McKenzie, in their new book *Tofino and Clayoquot Sound: A History*, state: “He [Meares] arrived at Nootka in May 1788, following a nearly four-month voyage

<sup>42</sup> An important exception in this regard is a seventy-year-old article: George I. Quimby, “Culture Contact on the Northwest Coast,” *American Anthropologist* n.s. 50, no. 2 (1948): 247–55. And, more recently, Chang, *World*.

<sup>43</sup> As cited in Chad Reimer, *Writing British Columbia History, 1784–1958* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 81.

<sup>44</sup> Freeman M. Tovell, *At the Far Reaches of Empires: The Life of Juan Francisco de la Bodega Y Quadra* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008).

<sup>45</sup> Charles Lillard, annotated footnote, page 24, in Gilbert Malcolm Sproat, *The Nootka: Scenes and Studies of Savage Life*, ed. and annotated by Charles Lillard (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1987).

from China in the Portuguese-registered *Felice Adventurer*. On board with him, Meares had twenty-nine Chinese workers, including ‘seven carpenters, five blacksmiths, five masons, four tailors, four shoemakers, three sailors and one cook.’<sup>46</sup> Another mistaken assertion. Most recently, the Royal BC Museum asserted that fifty Chinese were “hired to work at a British trading post in Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island.”<sup>47</sup> These conflicting figures and descriptions reflect persistent confusion about the early arrival of Chinese at Yuquot. This misunderstanding is in part due to the complexities involved in tracking what amounted to three distinct expeditions undertaken by John Meares to the northwest coast, the involvement of multiple ships in each expedition, and some overlap between expeditions.

In the following section, I document the early arrival of Chinese labourers at Yuquot and clarify their numbers and their roles in order to better discern the complex networks that transited the Indigenous Pacific. For too long the Pacific (named by Magellan) has been perceived through a European lens in which this largest of the Earth’s oceans has been portrayed mainly as a site for European possession or control. As Epeli Hau’ofa put it in his landmark article: “Social scientists may write of Oceania as a Spanish Lake, a British Lake, an American Lake, and even a Japanese Lake. But we all know that only those who make the ocean their home and love it, can really claim it theirs. Conquerors come, conquerors go, the ocean remains, mother only to her children. This mother has a big heart though; she adopts anyone who loves her.”<sup>48</sup> Centring the Pacific as Indigenous and at the same time recognizing it as a site of transit for many non-Indigenous peoples, not all of whom were imperial explorers, allows a fuller story of the Pacific to be told.

Of all the secondary sources on the Meares expeditions, the most reliable is J. Richard Nokes’s *Almost a Hero: The Voyages of John Meares, R.N., to China, Hawaii and the Northwest Coast*.<sup>49</sup> Nokes’s account provides substantial detail regarding the crew and passengers on Meares’s ships. However, even his account avoids some thorny issues that arise

<sup>46</sup> Margaret Horsfield and Ian Kennedy, *Tofino and Clayoquot Sound: A History* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2014), 51. According to their notes, these numbers were taken from Alan Twigg, *First Invaders: The Literary Origins of British Columbia* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2004).

<sup>47</sup> See RBCM website, <http://learning.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/pathways/chinese-canadian-experiences/>.

<sup>48</sup> Epeli Hau’ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, ed. E. Waddell, V. Naidu, and E. Hau’ofa, 2–16 (Suva, Fiji: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, 1993).

<sup>49</sup> Nokes, *Almost a Hero*.

from the primary sources. In order to clarify matters, I build on the insights offered by Nokes and review in detail the primary sources related to early Chinese arrivals to the territories around Yuquot. The main Meares source for the purposes of this article is his report of the 1788 and 1789 expeditions.<sup>50</sup> The journal of James Colnett, the captain of the ill-fated *Argonaut*, is an additional important primary source that offers insights into the fate of the Chinese crew.<sup>51</sup>

From all accounts, no Chinese were on Meares's first expedition. During his second (1788) and third expeditions (1789–91), Meares relied quite heavily on Chinese sailors and artisans for his crews. Why? In this era there was a dearth of European sailors in Macao and expeditions began to tap into the rich human resources of the surrounding area. In his account of the 1788 expedition, Meares stated that he considered the Chinese "hardy, industrious, and ingenious," and also an inexpensive source of labour. However, his appreciation went beyond generalizations. He attested: "The Chinese armourers were very ingenious, and worked with such a degree of facility that we preferred them to those of Europe. The instruments they employ in their work are extremely simple, and they very shortly accomplish any design that is placed before them."<sup>52</sup>

In his account of Meares's 1788 expedition, Nokes asserts that hundreds of Chinese wanted to crew for him and that, after careful screening, "50 were chosen ... These were the first Chinese known to visit the Pacific Northwest, and they were also the first to reach Hawaii."<sup>53</sup> This assertion that there were fifty Chinese on board the two ships paraphrases the original passage from Meares's *Voyages*:

A much greater number of Chinese solicited to enter into this service than could be received; and so far did the spirit of enterprize influence them, that those we were under the necessity of refusing, gave the most unequivocal marks of mortification and disappointment. – From

<sup>50</sup> Meares, *Voyages*.

<sup>51</sup> James Colnett, *The Journal of Captain James Colnett aboard the Argonaut from April 26, 1789 to Nov. 3, 1791*, edited with introduction and notes by F.W. Howay (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1940). Available at [http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/item\\_record.cfm?Idno=9\\_96874&lang=eng&query=Colnett,%20James&browsertype=Author](http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/item_record.cfm?Idno=9_96874&lang=eng&query=Colnett,%20James&browsertype=Author). Hereafter referred to as *Argonaut*.

<sup>52</sup> Meares, *Voyages*, 88. Meares suggested difficulties in adaptation: "Our head carpenter was a young man of much ingenuity and professional skill, who had served his time in London; but the Chinese artificers in this branch had not the least idea of our mode of naval architecture ... It was, therefore, a matter of some difficulty to turn the professional skill of our Chinese carpenters to a mode of application entirely different from their own habitual experience and practice."

<sup>53</sup> Nokes, *Almost a Hero*, 43.



the many who offered themselves, *fifty* [my emphasis] were selected, as fully sufficient for the purposes of the voyage: they were, as has been already observed, chiefly handicraft-men, of various kinds, with a small proportion of sailors who be used to the junks which navigate every part of the Chinese seas.<sup>54</sup>

This, then, is the source for the oft-cited figure of fifty Chinese that came to Yuquot.

However, overlooked by Nokes and others is an earlier passage in which Meares attests that “the crews of the ships consisted of Europeans and China men, with a larger proportion of the former.”<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, according to Meares, “the command of the *Iphigenia* was given to Mr. Douglas ... The crew contained artificers of various denominations, among whom were Chinese smiths and carpenters, as well as European artizans; forming in the whole a complement of forty men.” As for the crew of the *Felice Adventurer*, it “was composed of the same useful and necessary classes of people, and amounted to fifty men: – this ship was commanded by myself.” If the two crews totalled ninety and Europeans formed the largest proportion, then there could not have been fifty Chinese on board the two ships. Given the lack of further documentation, this contradiction is not easily resolved. Further research from sources in Macao or China may offer possible clarification. For the time being, the available documentation seems to suggest that Meares’s second expedition included forty to forty-five Chinese sailors and artisans as part of the crews of the *Felice Adventurer* and *Iphigenia* when they arrived off Yuquot on 13 May and 27 August 1787, respectively.

At Yuquot this first contingent of Chinese workers played an instrumental role in several important ways. They constructed the first British fortification on coastal North America and they used their skills to assemble and build the first European-style schooner on the northwest coast, the *North West America*. They were not alone in these endeavours; indeed, the Mowachaht were working together with the labourers from China and a number from Europe. Unfortunately, little documentation exists regarding these men’s interactions, and to date no oral histories have come to light.

We do know, however, that the Chinese crew on the *Felice Adventurer* returned with Meares to China, arriving in Macao on 5 December 1788. Three of the Chinese crew from Meares’s other vessel, the *Iphigenia*, were seconded to crew the newly constructed *North West America*. According

<sup>54</sup> Meares, *Voyages*, 3.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

to an appendix in *Voyages*, Meares appointed Robert Funter as master and other Europeans as crew, but “also assisting, a native of China, a carpenter, and Affee and Aehaw, mariners of the same country, to compose her crew, to trade along the North-West coast of America.”<sup>56</sup> The third Chinese crew member, the carpenter, is unnamed. This would have left approximately fifteen Chinese crew on the *Iphigenia*. Both the *Iphigenia* and *North West America* wintered in Hawai‘i (from December 1788 through March 1789) and did not return to China. One of the Chinese crew jumped ship in Hawai‘i and is commemorated as the first Chinese newcomer to settle on Kānaka Maoli territories.<sup>57</sup> Thus Meares’s second voyage ended with approximately twenty or so Chinese crew members returning to China and fifteen to twenty wintering in Hawai‘i aboard the *Iphigenia* and *North West America*.

Meares’s third expedition (1789–91) included four ships, the *Iphigenia* and *North West America*, both returning to Yuquot from Hawai‘i, and the *Argonaut* and *Princess Royal* under the command of James Colnett. The latter two ships departed China in April and May of 1789 with, according to the Meares Memorial, “several artificers of different professions, and nearly seventy Chinese, who intended to become settlers on the American coast, in the service, and under the protection of the associated company.”<sup>58</sup> This figure of “nearly 70” may well be an exaggeration given later accounts by James Colnett and others (see below), but it may also refer to the total number of Chinese on the four ships. As shall become apparent, there were twenty-nine on board the *Argonaut*, fifteen or so on board the *Iphigenia*, three on board the *North West America*, and fewer than fifteen on board the *Princess Royal*. Of the four ships on the third expedition, the first to arrive at Yuquot was the *Iphigenia* on 20 April 1789. Upon arrival, a Chinese crew member, “Acchon Aching,” fell while taking down the masts and yards. He died the next day, and his remains were buried at Yuquot.<sup>59</sup> This is the first recorded death of a Chinese worker on the coast and may be the first non-Indigenous person to be buried at Yuquot.

At this point, however, the story becomes even more complicated. Spanish officials had decided to confront the growing Russian and British

<sup>56</sup> “Deposition of the Officers and Men of the Schooner North-West America,” Meares, *Voyages*, 2, appendix 10.

<sup>57</sup> For the Chinese presence in Hawai‘i, see Clarence E. Glick, *Sojourners and Settlers: Chinese Migrants in Hawaii* (Honolulu: Hawaii Chinese History Center/University of Hawaii Press, 1980).

<sup>58</sup> Meares, *Voyages*, 3, app. 1.

<sup>59</sup> William Douglas, “Extract of the Journal of the *Iphigenia*,” in Meares, *Voyages*, 1, app. 12.

presence on the north coast, leading to what has become known as the Nootka Crisis.<sup>60</sup> Spanish ships arrived at Yuquot and seized the *Iphigenia*, the *North West America*, and the *Princess Royal*. While the *Iphigenia* and *Princess Royal* were eventually released, what happened to their Chinese crew members is unclear. According to Meares's *Voyages*, the Spanish "had thought fit, however, to detain the Chinese, and had compelled them to enter into the service of Spain; and that, on the departure of the *Columbia* [an American ship at Yuquot], they were employed in the mines, which had then been opened on the lands which your Memorialist had purchased."<sup>61</sup> Though Meares's contention that he purchased lands has been discredited, and mining is not known to have taken place, the journal of James Colnett, the captain of the ill-fated *Argonaut*, is an additional primary source that offers insights into the fate of this Chinese crew.<sup>62</sup> In the journal he states clearly that, for the purpose of settlement, he embarked with twenty-nine Chinese on the *Argonaut*, including seven carpenters, five blacksmiths, five bricklayers and masons, four tailors, four shoemakers, three seamen, and one cook.<sup>63</sup> However, these numbers are solely for the *Argonaut*. The manifest of the *Princess Royal* included a crew of fifteen but Colnett does not indicate whether any of them were Chinese.<sup>64</sup> The journal also records that, when the Spanish detained him and his crew, "the Chinamen with all the Portuguese, except two, remain'd with the Spaniards at Nootka."<sup>65</sup> According to a footnote in the journal, the Chinese and Portuguese "were brought to San Blas when Martinez abandoned the settlement at Nootka, October 31, 1789."<sup>66</sup>

Addenda in the Colnett journal also show that at least twenty-nine Chinese had remained in Yuquot working under the Spanish until November 1789, and then that December twenty-five were brought to San Blas on board the *Princesa* and four on board the *San Carlos*. Whether the others were repatriated earlier or not is unclear but seems unlikely given the Spanish desire to use the Chinese as labourers. Further research in Spanish archives might render new insights into their fate.

<sup>60</sup> Many have noted the crisis but few have explored it in depth. See Freeman M. Tovell, "Other Side of the Coin: The Viceroy, Bodega y Quadra, Vancouver, and the Nootka Crisis," *BC Studies* 93 (Spring 1992): 3–29.

<sup>61</sup> Meares, *Voyages*, 8, app. 1. This latter contention regarding a land purchase was later contested by Chief Maquinna.

<sup>62</sup> Colnett, *Argonaut*.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, n2.

The key Spanish figure in the Nootka crisis, Martinez, wrote a report on the incidents, and it can be found in the Archivo de las Indias in Seville, Spain.<sup>67</sup> This report includes the names of the Chinese who were captive in San Blas:

Sinfo	Acchan	Tong
T.. ...o	Accah	T'...ou
Allon	T.. ou	Caphou
Te.. en	Asseu	Annam
Attou	Uppo'vah	Achee
Ah He	Assam	Artoyah
Amusayah	Acch'ou	T'...ou
Ammey	Attahac	
Ahoy...ha	T'ou	
Acchog	Assan	
Acchang	Accong <sup>68</sup>	

Of these, six petitioned for permission to return to China via Acapulco on one of the Spanish galleons then travelling regularly to the Philippines. Their fate is unknown. The fact that the two Chinese sailors named by Meares (Affee and Aehaw) as crew members on the *North West America* do not appear in this list suggests that they either returned on the American ship the *Columbia* or remained in Yuquot.

Upon their release by the Spanish, the remaining Chinese crew, twenty-three in all, sailed with Colnett back to Yuquot in 1790. Their release occurred with the signing of the first Nootka Convention between the British and Spanish governments.<sup>69</sup> Colnett hoped to gain possession of Meares's other ships. They failed to materialize, but Colnett and his crew remained off the west coast trading for sea otter pelts until their return to China in 1791.

It seems, then, that at least seventy-five Cantonese labourers were part of the Meares expeditions, many of them coming more than once to the shores of Mowachaht territory between 1788 and 1791. This includes about forty to forty-five Chinese sailors and artisans who were on the two ships in Meares's 1788 expedition, of whom twenty or more returned to China and fifteen or so remained on board the *Iphigenia* and *North West America*

<sup>67</sup> For details, see Bruce McIntyre Watson, "Pacific Interconnectedness: The Story of Chinese Craftsmen and a Mexican Connection," *Ricepaper* 12, no. 3 (2007): 60–62.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>69</sup> The conventions are in the British and Spanish archives but are accessible online at [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Convention\\_for\\_the\\_Mutual\\_Abandonment\\_of\\_Nootka](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Convention_for_the_Mutual_Abandonment_of_Nootka).

when the two ships wintered in Hawai'i. These twenty or so returned to Yuquot in the spring of 1789 and were joined by another twenty-nine aboard the *Argonaut*, plus an unknown number aboard the *Princess Royal*. Of these only the fate of the twenty-nine from the *Argonaut* seems clear – six left Colnett in Tepic and twenty-three apparently returned with him to China in 1791. However, it is also conceivable that some of those who left Colnett in Tepic stayed in Mexico and that some who worked in Yuquot or returned there with Colnett in 1790–91 remained in Nuuchahnulth territories.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, as Zhongping Chen suggests in his article in this special issue, the numbers of Chinese arriving on the coast may well have surpassed the numbers cited here.

Spanish-British rivalries and growing Mowachaht resistance to colonial incursions meant that transpacific Chinese migrants had little opportunity to settle on the coast at this time. Nevertheless, this episode highlights the fact that, because of the long and arduous journey from Europe to Asia or coastal America, European labourers were a scarce commodity in Asia and the Pacific. This was an era during which there were essentially no overland or rail routes and thus proximity to the sea was a significant factor in determining the nature of the labour force as (re)settlement proceeded.<sup>71</sup>

## REFLECTIONS

I first approached Yuquot and the MMFN to better understand the story of Chinese arrivals in 1788–89. In the process, I found that a significant number of Chinese arrived, were recognized (even at the time) as skilled craftspeople, and had become essential to the operations of many vessels plying the Pacific during the fur trade. Furthermore, from Yuquot some went to Hawai'i, others to San Blas. Harbingers of transpacific migrations of the future, they point to the multiple, overlapping networks of migration and trade in the Pacific.

Significantly, however, the travel adventures of Comekela shifted the story in ways I am still seeking to understand. As partial as the record may be, his voyages across the Pacific, as well as those of Hawaiians who came to Yuquot, brought to the fore the importance of the Indigenous

<sup>70</sup> See Gilbert Malcolm Sproat's 1868 account in Sproat, *Nootka*.

<sup>71</sup> For recent, excellent analyses of the labour force, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, see John Lutz, *Makúk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008); and Rod Mickleburg, *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2018). An important classic is Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1978).

Pacific. I came to understand that Indigenous stories were and are integral to correctly locating histories. They constitute a key reference point for all that comes after, including the Americanization of the Pacific when US strategists reconceived the Pacific as an “American lake,” a concept criticized by American progressives seventy-five years ago but with little recognition that the historical roots of the American Empire lie deep in the colonization of Indigenous North America, Hawai‘i, and elsewhere.<sup>72</sup> The overlapping tides of Indigeneity, imperialism, and migration/diaspora can and should be given their proper weight if we are to adequately grasp the varied paths to decolonization.<sup>73</sup> Discerning and unwrapping these complex and ever-changing tides and currents demands a collective approach. Although beyond the scope of this article, enhancing conversations among critical transpacific studies (including in Asian/North American studies), works on the Indigenous Pacific, and Indigenous critical theory and history should yield important benefits.<sup>74</sup>

From a local perspective, the multilayered approach suggested above opens up alternative ways of approaching and conceiving the past and present of the Islands (Vancouver Island and its adjacent islands) and the coast. Today, many scholars agree that, for too long, the emphasis has been placed on which explorer landed where and/or the contention among colonial powers (be they British, Spanish, French, American, or others). But overcoming and replacing that narrative is far from easy. We can draw inspiration from the MMFN, who, over the course of decades, has successfully challenged such colonial narratives and articulated its own past. Indigenous resurgence on the Islands and elsewhere is obliging scholars and the public to recognize and include Indigenous peoples in their accounts of the past. But inclusion alone

<sup>72</sup> See Eleanor Lattimore, “Pacific Ocean or American Lake,” *Far Eastern Survey* 14, no. 22 (1945): 313–16.

<sup>73</sup> Some transpacific scholars are leading the way in this endeavour. See John Carlos Rowe, “Transpacific Studies and the Cultures of US Imperialism,” in *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*, ed. Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen, 134–50 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014).

<sup>74</sup> On the Indigenous Pacific, for example, see the volume by E. Waddell, V. Naidu, and E. Hau‘ofa, ed., *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands* (Suva, Fiji: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, 1993); Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson, ed., *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics and the New Pacific* (London: Rowan and Littlefield, 2012); and Chang, *World*. On new ways of looking at the transpacific, see Hoskins and Nguyen, *Transpacific Studies*; and Lisa Yoneyama, “Toward a Decolonial Genealogy of the Transpacific,” *American Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (2017): 471–82. On Indigenous critical theory, for example, see Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); and Eileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

does not necessarily displace colonial narratives – dislodging Cook, Vancouver, and other imperial explorers from their foundational bases in accounts of coastal history is an ongoing challenge because the weight of colonial history remains heavy. The multitude of stories related to the Pacific are derived for the most part from English-language or other European-language sources, steeped in the annals of colonial history. Furthermore, resistance to revising colonial history can be strong as it is often rooted in white identities that are tied to colonialism and empire. Though the stories of imperial contact and settlement cannot be ignored, reconceiving the coast as part of an Indigenous Pacific will help us meet the challenge of decolonization, allowing descendants of settler families such as myself to understand white privilege, move to collectively replace “pioneer” stories of settlement, and begin to situate ourselves in relation to Indigenous peoples as sovereign peoples.

Integrating migration histories with Indigenous stories can also be beneficial. In 2018, a delegation from mainly Chinese Canadian communities took the long trip to Yuquot from Vancouver and Victoria to participate in the annual Summerfest celebration sponsored by the MMFN. It was an opportunity for the delegation, young and old, to learn about MMFN history, especially as the theme was to celebrate the 230th anniversary of Comekela’s return from China and Yuquot’s transpacific history. It was also an opportunity for the MMFN’s members on the campout to learn for the first time the story of Comekela. Attending the event was Elder Larry Grant (x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əy’əm–Musqueam) who generously shared his family history. His mixed-heritage (x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əy’əm–Chinese) story has been told through the film *All Our Father’s Relations* and was also shown at Summerfest. It was followed by a Chinese meal prepared at Yuquot by chef Clarence Tay and delivered to the campers. A highlight of the day was the honouring of Gloria Maquinna (widow of former chief Ambrose Maquinna and mother of Chief Michael Maquinna) in a blanketing ceremony – a gift of the Asian Canadian and Asian Migration Studies program at the University of British Columbia.

The Chinese labourers who came to Yuquot in 1788–91 may not have remained; however, as colonization and settlement of the Islands began after the signing of the Treaty of Oregon in 1846, Chinese migration and settlement did start, only to be met by fierce resistance from the white settler state. The Chinese, as well as Japanese and South Asians who later came to these shores, persevered and were able to lead productive and creative lives, despite the impediments they faced from state-sponsored racism. Their positions thus differ from those of the white settlers who,

directly or indirectly, occupied positions of privilege or power. The achievement of Asian Canadian voting rights after the Second World War, the struggle to reform racist immigration laws, the onset of the liberal, multicultural state, and now an era of Indigenous resurgence and change underscores the importance of constantly reappraising history to address the complexities of the past and the present. This will help us to find anchors, reference points that can reorient us in the quest for knowledge and justice. Resituating coastal stories within the frame of Indigenous history and territories, locating these as part of an Indigenous Pacific, and carefully discerning the place of transpacific migration are all challenges that must be met as the process of decolonization unfolds. As we work collaboratively to do this, building relations along the way, we will open doors to a different kind of decolonization, one that, as Jodi A. Byrd describes in *Transit of Empire*, “restores life and allows settler, arrivant, and native to apprehend and grieve together the violences of ... empire.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, 229. In the original passage Byrd focuses on “US empire,” but I believe it also applies to other empires, including the British.