HIST 199: American Energy History
Professor Paul Sabin

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Whales, Oceans, Ships, and Colonial Power: The Workscape of Yankee Whaling

by AJ Laird ’24

Nearly every entry in Yankee whaling logs opens the same way. Whether a detailed description or a brief note, these log entries open with a description of the state of the sea, and the force and direction of the wind, even before details like the death of a crewmate, or the capture of a whale.[1] The consistency of noting the weather conditions suggests the influence the natural environment – the ocean, the winds, the whales themselves— on the whaling work environment. At the same time, it suggests the enduring structures that persist across nearly two centuries of whaling history. “Yankee” whaling, or whaling based out of the east coast of the United States, was once the world’s largest whale fishery. The last Yankee whaling ship sailed in 1924, the industry outcompeted by the more modern Southern Ocean factory ship whaling industry.[2] Yet Yankee whaling left its mark on the world. In turn emptying the ocean’s ecosystem of whales, building up coastal towns across New England, and drawing the long arm of US imperial power across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, Yankee whaling existed as part of a much larger story of capital growth and colonial expansion. How did these connections to a wider economic and colonial system shape the work environment of the whaling industry? The influence of these colonial and economic systems manifest in several concrete aspects of the whaling work environment. The framework shaped whalers’ methods of harvest, the specificities

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[1] *Bertha* (bark) of New Bedford, Mass., 1911 October 21-1912 September 7
Part of Collection — Box: 1, Folder: 1, Reel: 1, Reel: 1U. Yale University Archives; *Logbook of the Beluga (Steam bark)* New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library, Digital Logbook Collection; *Logbook of the Cossack (Bark) of New Bedford, 1853.* New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library, Digital Logbook Collection.
[2] James Farr, “A Slow Boat to Nowhere: The Multi-Racial Crews of the American Whaling Industry,” *The Journal of Negro History,* vol. 68, no 2, 1983, pp. 168.

of ship design, and their understanding of their natural surroundings. There is a continual tension between the whaler's deep understanding of their work environment, and the colonial and economic frameworks that alienated them from it.

Imagining a Whaling Workscape

The whaling work environment is a broad concept. Whalers worked in an environment defined by continual change and movement. The work environment of a single whaler would change markedly over the course of a single year, or a single day, as they passed through different weather systems, climates, and oceans. Even within Yankee whaling, as opposed to indigenous whaling or modern whaling, there are countless variations in ship design and the species and methods of harvest. In particular, the context of a colonial framework would have varied widely, depending on the era, the location, and the whaler's own relationships to colonial power structures. In his 2010 book Killing for Coal, historian Thomas Andrew introduces the idea of a workscape, and the idea can be used to frame the interconnecting relationships between whalers, their work environment, and American colonial ideology. For Andrews, the term acknowledges a false binary between humankind and the natural world, suggesting rather that humans, like any other part of the world, exist as a part of their environment. [3] Recognizing this relationship between humans and their environment is not meant to minimize the transformative impact humans can have on their surroundings, but rather to suggest that this transformation is something mutual. As humans shape their surroundings through work, so does their environment shape the way they work, and so does their way of work shape their understanding of their environment.

[3] Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

In Killing for Coal Andrews applies this idea of workscape to the coal industry, and as such, the idea requires some clarifying in the context of whaling. He describes the interactions between the environment, the work environment, and the bodies and lives of the workers. Because of this focus on coal in the early nineteen-hundreds, the ideas of labor Andrews uses to construct the idea of the workscape are intertwined with the ideas of labor that are specifically connected to coal, and by extension, the coal labor movement. [4] Whaling, in contrast to coal, never saw a large labor movement. Andrews uses this idea of a relationship between worker and work environment to interrogate the how and why of a social movement. In the context of whaling, it can be used to interrogate the relationship between the whalers and the wider patterns of industrial growth and colonial and imperial structures.

Colonial Frameworks in the Yankee Whaling Industry

The relationship between the US settler colonial effort and the whaling industry has seen many phases, and its effects on the workscape have been long lived and multifaceted. This relationship can be traced back to the late sixteenth century, when English settlers began purchasing whale meat from indigenous whalers along the coast of what is now Long Island. The development of the Yankee whaling industry occurred as part of the processes of land seizure and settlement along the lands of the east coast of the Americas. [5] As the stocks of whale along the coast of North America were slowly depleted by the settler's whaling practices, the ships were forced further and further afield. The hunt for whale drew Yankee whale ships into the Pacific, Southern, and Arctic oceans. Whaling ships often acted as the first wave of U.S. colonial and imperial power in these areas, with voyages quite literally mapping out areas previously

[4] *Ibid,* 125.
[5] Francis Dow, *Whale Ships and Whaling,* (Portland: Southwest Press, 1925), 5.

untraveled by westerners.[6] In some cases, such as the U.S. forcing the 'opening' of Japan to trade, the whaling played a very active role in the extension of U.S. political power, with whaleships being some of the first western vessels to sail in Japanese waters. [7] The relationship between whaling and U.S. colonial and imperial power strangely extends past the end of Yankee whaling itself, as the U.S. government encouraged the preservation of whaling logs and other materials in order to map flight paths in the South Pacific and the Arctic. [8]

In its earliest years, the workscape of the Yankee whaling industry was shaped by the settlement of indigenous lands. Yankee whaling was born directly from the whaling practices of indigenous communities along the east coast of America. A clear line can be traced between settler and indigenous whaling practices, such as between Wampanoag whaling and New Bedford whaling.[9] Settlers learned the fundamental methods of whaling from indigenous whalers, including the use of a small fleet of boats, and hunting and killing whale with a harpoon. George Waymouth, a settler writing in 1605, described these methods in Kennebec whaling. He wrote that "they go in company… with a multitude of boats and strike him with a bone made in the fashion of a harping iron fastened to a rope." [10] The whaling industry in this period was defined by a kind of forced syncretism. Even after settlement and the establishment of towns like New Bedford and Nantucket, many of the whalers themselves were indigenous. The early whaling industry, like many other settler projects, sought to co-opt indigenous knowledge while breaking down indigenous political systems and forcing indigenous

[6] Bathsheba Demuth, *The Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait,* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 59.
[7] Demuth, *Coast,* 29; New Bedford Whaling Museum, "Pacific Encounters Exhibit," 2005.
[8] Albert Cook Church, *Whale Ships and Whaling,* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co), 39.
[9] Nancy Shoemaker, "Mr. Tashtego: Native American Whalemen in Antebellum New England." *Journal of the Early Republic* 33, no. 1 (2013): 122.
[10] Church, *Whaling*, 7.

communities to assimilate into settler culture. [11] While the indigenous whalers would have had a certain understanding of whaling, whales, and seacraft, the whaling industry and the settlers required them to translate this into a western framework. The relationship of the whalers, both settler and indigenous, to the seas and land they worked on, was shaped by the process of settlement and colonization.

Just as the whalers existed within a colonial framework, they existed in an economic framework, and the economic system was an integral part of American settler colonial ideology. This can be seen in the earliest days of the whaling industry, when indigenous whalers were often intentionally driven into debt and indentured servitude. The monetary system was a part of the wider colonial system imposed on to indigenous whaling. Economic gain continued to be an important part of the American colonial effort, and its relationship with whaling. A U.S. naval officer, writing in the eighteen hundreds, noted that "No part of our commerce of this country is more important than that which is carried out in the Pacific Ocean… It is, to a great extent, not a mere exchange of commodities, but the creation of wealth, by labor, from the ocean." Whalers were seen as bringing "the trade of the civilized world" to the Arctic and Pacific. [12] Even aboard ships, this monetary framework connected to structures of power, as can be seen through the vast discrepancies in pay between captain and crew. [13]

The colonial framework shaped the relationship between whalers within the workscape. The whaling industry was simultaneously a place shaped by the hierarchies of colonial power, and a place that existed outside of these hierarchies, allowing people normally marginalized by the colonial framework to hold positions of power. Early historians of whaling often ignored the

[11] Shoemaker, *Republic.*
[12] Demuth, *Floating Coast,* 29.
[13] Church, *Whaling,* 45.

prevailing presence of indigenous whalers in the Yankee fleet, preferring to frame the influence of indigenous practices on whaling as a quasi-mythic origin story. This was far from the reality. Indeed, one out of five whaling ships of the nineteenth century sailed with one or more indigenous crew members, and a slightly smaller proportion of the crews were Black. For Wampanoag, Narragansett, Shinnecock, and Montauk people, the whaling industry became a way of working within the colonial framework and retaining some form of autonomy.[14] A Wampanoag captain, Amos Haskins, sailed on the whaler Massasoit in 1851 with an almost entirely non-white crew, including his first and second mate.[15] Black Americans were also able to obtain positions of power within the framework of the Yankee whaling industry, and there were likewise whaling ships will all-Black crews, such as the New Bedford brig Rising States. [16]

Indigenous and Black whalers did not exist outside of the colonial framework, they, like their white crewmates, experienced the workscape through this framework. Historian Nancy Shoemaker suggests that the ability of indigenous whalers to hold these positions of power can be understood as a combination of colonial ideas of the 'innate talent' of indigenous people with whale hunting, and the strict hierarchies of the ship, that require complete obedience to rank, no matter race or ethnicity. [17] While there were many cases where Black and indigenous whalers became officers, the racial hierarchies of the colonial system played a part in their lives. Race was noted on crew lists, and even in log entries.[18] The very existence of all Black and all indigenous crews suggest the existence of discrimination on whaling ships with white officers. Likewise, non-white sailors were often paid significantly smaller shares than their white

[14] Kelly Chaves, "Before the First Whalemen: The Emergence and Loss of Indigenous Maritime Autonomy in New England, 1672-1740." *The New England Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2014): 46–71.
[15] Shoemaker, *Republic,* 131.
[16] Farr, *Journal of Negro History,* 166.
[17] Shoemaker, *Republic,* 118.
[18] Farr, *Journal of Negro History,* 166.

counterparts, demonstrating the deep-rooted connections between colonial and economic frameworks. The whaling workscape was both a place shaped by colonial structures, and a place where colonial hierarchies could be challenged. The colonial framework structured the way whalers interacted each other within the work environment.

Workscape, Whaleship

The whaling ship is, in a sense, a physical manifestation of a workscape. Commercial American whaling was a unique industry, in that the harvesting, the processing, and the transport of the energy source was all completed by the same few individuals, within a scant one hundred by twenty-foot space. This space, the whaleboat, was the home, the workplace, and the place of leisure. The design and function of the whaleboat was shaped by the specific ocean environment the whalers worked in, and the specific species of whales they harvested. It was also shaped by the hierarchies of the colonial framework, and the economic needs of the industry. Aboard, within a few hundred square feet of deck space, the whaling crew would live, hunt, butcher, and process whales.[19] Just as every part of the manufacturing process took place onboard, every part of the whalers' lives was confined to the ship in the years they were at sea. Indeed, it was the small scale and relative isolation of this unit of the whaling workscape that gave indigenous and Black whalers like Amos Haskins and the captain of the Rising States the ability to find positions of power. Unlike nearly any other industry at this time in American history, the work was continuous, as the sailing ships had to be constantly manned. While whalers worked in a continually changing environment, the ship was a constant.

Whaling ships were the most fundamental unit of the whaling industry, the medium through which whalers interacted with their physical environment. Whale ships varied in size

[19] Church, *Whaling,* 21.

and type, and even an experienced whaler would need time to adjust and understand the particulars of each ship. Ships were often personified, sometime even blamed for the failures of the whale harvest, leading one frustrated captain to complain his ship was refusing to "sail faster than a dead whale."[20] The ships were constructed around their function. They were very much a part of the western nautical tradition in their design, but function and environmental factors differentiated them from other ships of the time. Tryworks, where the whales were processed, trypots for boiling oil, cooling tanks, and whaleboats.[21] The whaleboats were small wooden craft that were stored on the deck of the ship. These boats were the successors of the small fleets used for whaling off the coast of Eastern North America. The whales were hunted from within these small craft, entirely driven by manpower. A harpooner would stand at the bow, while the other crew rowed the craft. When the whale was harpooned, the boats would be towed behind until the whale died. Countless artworks of this era portray these boats being flipped, sunk, or broken in half by injured whales. [22]

The process of harvesting and processing a whale aboard the ship required many levels of knowledge and physical ability, and this extent of this knowledge can be seen in the ship design itself. Knowledge of sailing, weather, ocean currents, whale behavior, and whale anatomy. The culminating point of this knowledge and ability occurred in the tryworks. While Yankee whaling ships varied in size and type, all had a tryworks, and the processing of a whale in the tryworks was the center of a whale harvest.[23] As the whaleboats and harpoon were driven by human power, so was the process of cutting in the whale. Once the whale was harpoon, the officers would cut "blankets" of whale blubber from the carcass, which would be maneuvered on

[20] Log of the Bertha, Yale Archives.
[21] Church, *Whaling,* 20.
[22] Dow, *Whaling,* 43-252.
[23] Church, *Whaling,* 23.

deck, with the head and other valuable parts of the whale following.[24] Whalers would have had an intimate knowledge of whale anatomy, across many species. While whalers preferred right whales and bowhead whales, most ships were opportunistic harvesters, and whalers would have had a wide spectrum of knowledge regarding different whale anatomies. The process of 'trying' or boiling down whale blubber, would take several days after a harvest, and combined with running the ship, would take up the crew's every waking moment.[25] In a sense, this system of whaling blurs the line between life and work.

If the whaleship is understood as a literal embodiment of the workspace, and the medium for whalers to understand their environment, it can also be used to demonstrate the persisting presence of the colonial framework in whaler's lives. While whalers had an undeniably deep understanding and technical knowledge of the oceans they sailed and the animals they harvested, it was an understanding that existed within a strict hierarchy. This is perhaps most evident in the way personal space was organized on whaleships, as can be seen in the case of Charles W. Morgan, a typical New Bedford whaling ship. The officers, the captain, and the mates had private areas for sleep. These officer cabins were typically astern, the part of the boat with the least motion.[26] Harpooners, held at a slightly higher rank due to their skills, lived in the steerage, and lastly, the regular crew or 'whalemen,' lived in the forecastle, to the front of the ship.[27] While the captain had a leather couch and a spring frame bed, the whalemen had bunks with wooden slats. On the Morgan, at least sixteen whalemen would have shared a single cabin for over a year. [28] This delineation of space demonstrates how hierarchies are quite literally built in to the workscape of the ship.

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[24] *Ibid,* 33.
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] Dow, *Whaling,* Image 173.
[27] *Ibid,* Image 175 -7.
[28] *Ibid.*

On the Sea: Connection and Alienation

Colonial frameworks created value systems and social hierarchies that shaped the ways whalers engaged with their environment. A study of the physical ship design can suggest the depth of the whaler's knowledge and expertise, as well as the continued presence of strict hierarchies, but the physical construction of the ships alone cannot show the connection between these hierarchies, larger colonial and economic structures, and the alienation of the whalers from their environment by these structures. The effects of these frameworks are preserved in the whaler's writings, like those of the early Arctic whalers.[29] One captain described the whaling industry as being built around the principle of "what will make money or save money." [30] Historian Bathsheba Demuth describes this monetary understanding as the central part of the whaler's understanding of their work environment, overriding any other concerns, such as the impending extinction of the bowhead whale. [31] While whalers certainly had a deep understanding of the whales they hunted, this monetary framework was probably exacerbated by the workscape itself. Whaling ships operated on systems of shares, meaning that sailors would receive a small part of the voyages' total earnings, rather than a wage. This system meant that every whale caught, and every barrel boiled, was a part of the whalers' earnings. Such a system surely encouraged the whalers to have a monetary understanding of their surroundings.

Colonial and economic frameworks intertwined with daily life, and the whalers' day to day understanding of the whaling workscape. Whaling logs provide a window into whaling, life, and the simultaneous understanding and alienation of whalers from their environment. The first entry of the log of Bertha, a 1911 New Bedford whaling bark, is written with a distinctly formal

[29] Demuth, *Floating Coast,* 53.
[30] *Ibid.*
[31] *Ibid,* 59.

tone, listing the time of departure, the number of crew, the ship name and type.[32] As the log progresses, there is an increasingly informal tone. Captains often used whaling logs for personal musings, which provide intimate details of both their lives and their relationship to their physical surroundings. On some days, the captain of Bertha drew somewhat whimsical but roughly anatomically accurate pencil drawings of sperm whales in the log margins, perhaps as a record of the catch, or as a small celebration of success. On days where whales were only sighted, the captain would sometimes draw their tales. This is perhaps a merely visual representation of what can be seen of a whale in the water, yet it also demonstrates the transformation the whale underwent after capture: from a diving fin, capable of movement and escape, to a whole, anatomical commodity in the possession of the ship. [33]

Perhaps the most extreme case of the way these colonial frameworks and ways of thinking could transform the whaler's understanding of their environment can be seen in the case of the whaleship Essex. The Essex was sunk by a bull sperm whale, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The crew managed to survive the sinking, escaping into the small rowing boats they normally hunted whale from. The crew made the choice to sail for South America, rather than the nearby Marquesas Islands, as they believed, incorrectly, that the Marquesan people were cannibals. Because of this belief, all but six of the whalers perished, and the survivors spent ninety-three days at sea in small wooden dories. In an ironic twist, they were forced to resort to cannibalism to survive the journey. [34] The Essex may be an extreme example, yet such influences existed on a smaller scale, such worldviews changed the way whalers lived in the whaling workscape.

[32] Log of the Bertha, Yale Archives.
[33] *Ibid.*
[34] Nathaniel Philbrick. *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship* Essex (New York: Viking 2000).

Conclusion

Early whaling historians celebrated the relationship between the whaling industry and the spread of American colonial power. Historian Frank Wood, curator of the New Bedford whaling museum in 1925, wrote in awestruck tone of "Distant journeys to quasi-legendary lands, where strange folk lived; dangers of storms and of uncharted seas, of merciless ice floes in the Arctic, of the sickly heat of the equatorial Pacific."[35] Wood did not separate the whaling industry and work environment from a colonial framework, and likely would not have wanted to do so. The whalers who sailed the Atlantic, Pacific, Southern, and Arctic oceans operated as parts of a larger colonial system, and this system influenced their relationship to their work environment on all levels. From the origins of Yankee whaling in British colonies on the east coast of North America, to the systems of monetary gain whaling ships imposed on the world of the Arctic, the colonial framework shaped the history and the development of the whaling industry. While these frameworks often served to alienate whalers from their environment, whalers were connected to their surroundings through their labor. Whalers were simultaneously connected and alienated from their work environment, and this duplicity is only understandable if the colonial framework is seen as an integral part of the workscape. This framework shaped the physical allocations of space and money within the industry, as well as the ways whalers thought and wrote about their environment. The Yankee whaling workscape demonstrates that a workscape, while rooted in the idea of a relationship between workers and their natural environment, is equally influenced by the human structures and institutions of an industry.

[35] Dow, *Whaling,* x.