

Moon Shot



I was not expecting to learn anything in particular at the orientation for the 38th Voyage of the whaleship *Charles W. Morgan*; it was a prelude to the marvels of the voyage itself, where the real action would take place. On a damp, drizzly April a few months before the historic cruise, I joined my fellow voyagers (civilians from a range of backgrounds designated as cultural interpreters) at Mystic Seaport, where I imagined we would be briefed on the ship's history and renovation, as well as on the importance of the whaling industry within U.S. economic and cultural history. I have been studying American maritime history and visiting Mystic Seaport and the *Morgan* for years, and I believed—complacently, indefensibly—that I had approached the limits of what this kind of institutional wisdom could teach me. I instead set my sights beyond the orientation day in anticipation of the experiential knowledge, the living act, that I thought my time under sail on the *Morgan* herself would bring.

I was dead wrong: about the focus of the orientation itself, about our opportunities for institutional action, about the very conditions that create horizons for the imagination. The narratives written about the 38th Voyage of the *Charles W. Morgan* will likely focus primarily on how splendidly the 173-year-old ship sailed; how hauntingly beautiful its days among the whales of Stellwagen Bank were; how extraordinary and momentous an event the voyage proved. But in this space I wish to marvel instead at the logistical and theoretical work that enabled the *Morgan's* triumphant return to sea in the first place. The process by which we voyagers were authorized as institutional partners by Mystic Seaport was conducted with no less a degree of expertise (or a kind of seamanship, say) than the handling of the ship herself. The orientation transformed my sense both of the *Morgan's* 38th Voyage, and of the possibilities for collaborative institutional work. The supposed auxiliary event to the whaleship's grand time-traveling act taught me a great deal about how we might better invite our students and the public to engage history. As a

professor who has held various administrative positions on my campus and in scholarly organizations in recent years, I took from my time with the *Morgan* an energized and reconceived sense of how to stage participatory projects, both within the academy and under the aegis of other cultural institutions.

Here is how Mystic Seaport did it. The *Morgan* had not sailed since 1921, and it had not originally been the goal to return her to sea at the outset of the major renovation that concluded this spring (it took five and a half years). That epic alteration in outcome came, in part, from the *Charles W. Morgan* herself, we were told; as the restoration was in process, the ship seemed to signal somehow her seaworthiness. "We didn't contrive this; *she presented herself*," the president of the seaport, Stephen C. White, said in the museum's chapel on that cool orientation day in April. "This is our moon shot." The chills in the room were not from the weather alone. But like the visionary apparatus of the space program to which he alluded, the dream of slipping the *Morgan's* moorings—of casting off from Chubb's Wharf—was predicated on an enormous amount of logistical work and institutional investment. The scale of this project was far greater than I knew.

As I have suggested, the orientation did not touch on the history of the *Morgan* in any detail (we were all given copies of a book on the topic—no need to waste orientation time on research we could do ourselves). Nor did it focus on whaling. We were instead briefed on the "moon shot" itself: the logistical and conceptual planning for the 38th Voyage. Mystic Seaport conceived of the endeavor as a participatory project that would welcome the involvement of outside contributors and trust in their abilities. The museum engaged scores of institutional partners, among them the maritime museums and boat shops that built (and donated!) the *Morgan's* whale boats; the boats hailed not just from New England but from Alexandria, Virginia, and Cedarville, Michigan, as well as from a Bronx, New York, shop for underserved youth called [Rocking the Boat](#). The museum also received in-kind donations from over eighty partners, representing federal agencies such as the Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Navy; marine supply companies; museums and historical parks; municipalities ranging from Long Beach to Galveston to Vineyard Haven; Real McCoy Rum; and, unexpectedly, the Jefferson Davis Home and Presidential Library. (Many of the renovated *Morgan's* new boards are southern live oak salvaged from Hurricanes Hugo and Katrina; I imagine that the Jefferson Davis contribution falls into this category.)



Logistical planning for the dockside exhibits. Photograph of the 38th Voyage dockside model by Hester Blum, courtesy of Mystic Seaport, Mystic, Connecticut.

Four of the major program partners for the project (the city of New Bedford, the New Bedford Whaling Museum, NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, and Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary) reflect the maritime history of the U.S. as well as present ecological and preservationist urgencies, which

were the major themes of the voyage. This venture had an education focus, in large part. For students, Mystic Seaport provides a range of [K-12 educational programs](#), with supplementary [resources](#) for the current “Year of the *Charles W. Morgan*.” At most of the ports of call made this summer by the *Morgan*, the museum staged large dockside exhibitions for the visiting public which included live demonstrations, hands-on activities, whaleboat exercises, historic interpretations, and a live-sized inflatable sperm whale with the crowd-sourced name “Spouter.” The presence of Spouter at the dockside exhibit was designed to show the scale of the whale next to the ship and the whale boats. (Neither the living humpbacked whales that joined the *Morgan* on Stellwagen Banks nor Spouter was harmed during the voyage.) During the ship’s stay in Boston, docked alongside the *USS Constitution*, Captain Kip Files threw out the first pitch at a Red Sox game. The collaborative organizational work in the present deepened our shipboard immersion in the collective maritime work of the past.

The “38th Voyagers”—the writers, artists, teachers, journalists, scientists, museum professionals, and maritime enthusiasts in whose company I was honored to count myself—were part of this undertaking. Our participation was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities; a grant reviewer said that this was “far and away the most comprehensive and exciting public history/museum/humanities project I have ever had the privilege to review.” Teaching us precisely how the ambitious venture came about, from conception to grant proposals to logistical planning to troubleshooting to execution, produced a level of investment that went beyond our enthusiasm for the extraordinary nature of the voyage itself. We were behind the scenes throughout our orientation day, whether reviewing logistics whiteboards on possible contingencies, or opening climate-controlled artifact drawers in the Collections and Research Center, or descending into the usually off-limits hold of the *Morgan* to see what modern electronics had been temporarily installed for the 38th Voyage to meet safety and crew comfort requirements. It made us not only part of the story of the voyage, but better able to tell the story of the voyage—which was, after all, our role.

The logic for the participatory aspects of the project’s conception were laid out for us by Elysa Engelman in a presentation on the theory behind the 38th Voyage. She cited the influence of Nina Simon, whose work is likely familiar to those in museum studies but was new to me. Simon is the author of the book [The Participatory Museum](#) and the blog [Museum 2.0](#), and advocates for collaborative “participatory institutions,” in which the authority (here, Mystic Seaport or the *Charles W. Morgan*) serves as the platform provider for users or visitors, rather than the top-down content provider. In other words, the visitors provide the knowledge and experience, rather than consuming it from an authority. In classroom terms, a participatory museum would be a seminar table with all class members contributing to the discussion. The traditional museum structure would be the large lecture hall with only one professorial voice as the authoritative, non-interactive source of information.

When I would tell academic colleagues and friends that I was going on a cruise

on an actual nineteenth-century whaling ship, many people presumed—and why wouldn't they—that the trip would be long: “a month? semester? a year? how will you charge your phone?” I felt abashed every time I had to confess that my voyage leg was less than 24 hours long, as were all the short, careful transits the ship made along the New England coast this summer. After my orientation at Mystic Seaport, however, I no longer felt any need to justify the voyage length. That training day made me feel embedded in the institutional forces and historical weight supporting and propelling my day of sail. In its arrangement of partners and events, the range of voyager projects chosen, and the transparency of the logistics shared, the caretakers of the *Charles W. Morgan* demonstrated to us on the training day not simply how to think about this ship or this museum, but about how to conceive of a process of creating a voyage, building a mission, enabling the exploratory wonder of a moon shot.

Institutions get a bad rap, and with good reason; they can be and usually are stifling, faceless, cruel, administratively bloated, and governed by neoliberal logics functioning antithetically to the intellectual missions of higher education and scholarly inquiry. For many of us who work within them, though, there can be moments when the possibilities and paths for institutional good become illuminated. My brief time in the logistics room at Mystic Seaport and before the mast on the *Charles W. Morgan* made me see how we might multiply opportunities at our own institutions for participatory action: not just on the level of events themselves, but on the structural level that make those events possible. Seaport President White said of the *Morgan's* unanticipated voyage that “the institution had to have the capacity to embrace this possibility.” Scholarly institutions have substantial, pre-existing logistical resources; they should not be so focused on outcomes that they miss—as I might have—the surprising pleasures and revelations of the participatory process. This increased participation can happen when institutions trust in the value and contributions of their intellectual workers—their students and faculty and staff—and provide the resources to allow us, like the *Morgan* herself, to *present ourselves*, and launch something previously unimagined.

Further reading:

On whaling and the *Charles W. Morgan* in the nineteenth century: Most of the *Morgan's* [logbooks and papers](#) have been made digitally available by Mystic Seaport's G. W. Blunt White Library. The log of the first voyage was kept by mate James C. Osborn, who recorded an impressive “List of Books that I have read on the Voyage” on its [185th page](#). Nelson Cole Haley's *Whale Hunt: the Narrative of a Voyage* (New York, 1948) describes his cruise in *Morgan* from 1849-1853; Haley's journal was printed nearly a century after the voyage. J. Ross Browne's *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise* (London, 1846) is perhaps the best-known nineteenth-century whaling narrative other than *Moby-Dick*. For a good overview of the industry published recently, see Eric Jay Dolin's *Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America* (New York, 2008).

On the 38th Voyage itself: Mystic Seaport has done a terrific job in documenting the undertaking through their [38th Voyage](#) portal, which includes links to historical and digital collections, social media sites, and news reports. The ship's "[Stowaway](#)," Ryan Leighton, kept a particularly compelling blog. Several fellow voyagers have themselves posted narratives online: see the accounts of [Michelle Moon](#), [Charles Foy](#), [John Bryant](#), [Robert K. Wallace](#), and [Lesley Walker](#). I have assembled a [photo narrative](#) of my experience; a longer account of my response to the time I spent asea was published in the [Los Angeles Review of Books](#) (August 3, 2014).

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