

LAW of SALVAGE

Queer Stories of the South Coast



by Beatrice and Elaine Alder

Law of Salvage

“She was derelict in the true sense of the law of salvage. She lay in an open sea, held by an insufficient anchor, surrounded by shoals, dismasted, without a rudder, and with no one on board. She was deserted, abandoned, forsaken.”

– US Supreme Court, *The Blackwall*, 77 U.S. 1 (1869)

In the year 1912, Francis Davis Millet and Archibald “Archie” Butt, two respectable gentlemen, lived in a mansion in Washington, DC. Together, they vacationed, threw stately parties for politicians, and never, ever wrote down anything gay. Francis was an accomplished painter from Mattapoisett, Massachusetts. Archie called him, “My artist friend who lives with me.”

Archie and Francis, returning home from a holiday in Europe, booked their transatlantic passage aboard the RMS Titanic. Francis was carrying a portfolio of sketches—plans for a mural commissioned by the New Bedford Free Public Library. Both men were last seen helping women and children into lifeboats.

But to believe in their love, in our lineage, perhaps you need something you can hold in your hands.

What if I told you that, in a shipwreck at the bottom of the sea, there was a locket? An engraved cigarette case? A bundle of explicit letters? Would that be enough, or would you insist they shared a bed due to the high price of coal?

Our stories may be wrecked, dismasted, set adrift. But they are still there on the open water for the taking. For our ancestors and descendants, we will salvage what is ours.

Needle Made



When you come back from sea, you'll be a man, they said. The men said it proud, the women weeping. They were right, not only because two years have passed. The constant sun and motion, the butchery and boredom—they change a boy. I won't ever sleep or walk or speak quite the same as I did before.

That change is well underway by the time a tattoo marks it: a fully rigged ship for rounding Cape Horn, a turtle for crossing the Equator, a swallow for five thousand nautical miles. Wooden needles, soot, and a long hour with a man who would rather be scrimshandering, and you have something to carry. Like an important man, you'll know where you've been.

The Other Self

George Johnson/Rebecca Ann Johnson and George Weldon/Georgiana Leonard both donned trousers and shipped to sea as whalemens—Johnson in 1848, Weldon in 1862. Both were discovered, outed, and forced back into skirts. Neither left any writings or testimony. We have no idea what they would prefer to be called. But the soda kiln has spoken—during the firing of these pieces, a smear of salt obscured Elaine's portrait of Rebecca Ann.

Was that you, George? I wish we had a better way to ask.



MASTERS *of* VESSELS!

And all others interested, are hereby publicly cautioned.

GEORGE WELDON,

Was greenhand of the Bark "America" of Holmes Hole, for the season of '62, during which time he walloped the cook over a trifling dispute, drew a knife on 2d mate Robert Smith, and picked many a fight with Yankee crewmen over the War, having been a Confederate Cavalryman and a remorseless Rebel. In the course of several months, Weldon proved as manly and boorish a scoundrel as ever shipped to sea.

WHEREUPON,

Before a well-deserved flogging, he avoided his punishment by declaring himself a Woman. Despite being largely indebted to the Bark, he was left in Port Louis with money and a dress. He was last seen serving as stewardess aboard the clipper ship "Renown," under the name of Georgiana Leonard.

LET IT BE KNOWN,

That although he has wheedled mercy from good men with Christian hearts, Weldon has been and remains a tough cuss. He may spin an amusing yarn and dance a clever jig, but we rate him a bad man when aroused. Aboard the "America," he performed all the worst qualities of Man. We have reason to doubt that he will perform the best qualities of Woman.

Before shipping this ne'er-do-well as either sailor or stewardess, Masters of Vessels are requested to ascertain his true character.

*(SIGNED by Mr. ROBERT SMITH
& Respected Members of the CREW.)*

Summary of Moby-Dick

In the town of New Bedford, Ishmael meets and marries Queequeg, a harpooneer and wandering prince. They ship to sea together, under the command of a deranged and selfish captain. Queequeg falls ill and, expecting to die, carves his own coffin, inscribing it with symbols full of power and secret meaning. Queequeg recovers, but the ship is stove by a whale, and only Ishmael survives. He floats to rescue in the coffin once carved by his drowned husband. For the rest of his life, Ishmael scours the sea and sky and tales of men for answers to his questions: Why did he live, and Queequeg die? Is there meaning in this suffering, in this mad world, in all these different kinds of whales?



Sister, Marry a Whaler

My dear Liza,

It has been two months since we set sail, and I cannot forget what you told me in confidence. When you asked for advice, I did not wish to sway you toward spinsterhood, and get blamed by Mother and Father for a dearth of grandchildren. Neither could I bear to see you break with your nature because of something I said. So I said nothing, like a coward. Since then, I have thought long and hard, and now offer my frank opinion on the matter.

You say that to marry would be to betray your dear friend Anne. It would be equally unfair, I think, to sacrifice your companion's comfort for the sake of rigid principle. I will always defend you, but I am so rarely home. Mother and Father already suspect. If you declare yourself permanently single, they are capable of making your life with Anne a living Hell.

Sister, marry a whaler. For two or three years, you may live exactly as you please, while your husband sails the world. No one will question your friendship with Anne, our parents will be appeased, and when your whaler returns, he will hand you the better part of his wages. After a few months of domestic bliss, say your farewells, make a pretty scene on the docks, and enjoy several more years of sovereignty.

I will even go so far as to recommend a man for the position. Ambrose Gifford is twenty-three years old, and second mate of the *Minerva*—a strong, handsome lad made of captainly stuff. We served together on the *Nye* when we were very young rascals, and in all the years since, I have had no finer companion by my side. He is ambitious, energetic, and still a bachelor. You would do well to snatch him up before he makes first mate.

When the time comes to choose, I pray you will value your happiness above your pride. Give my tender regards to Mother, Father, Annie, &c.

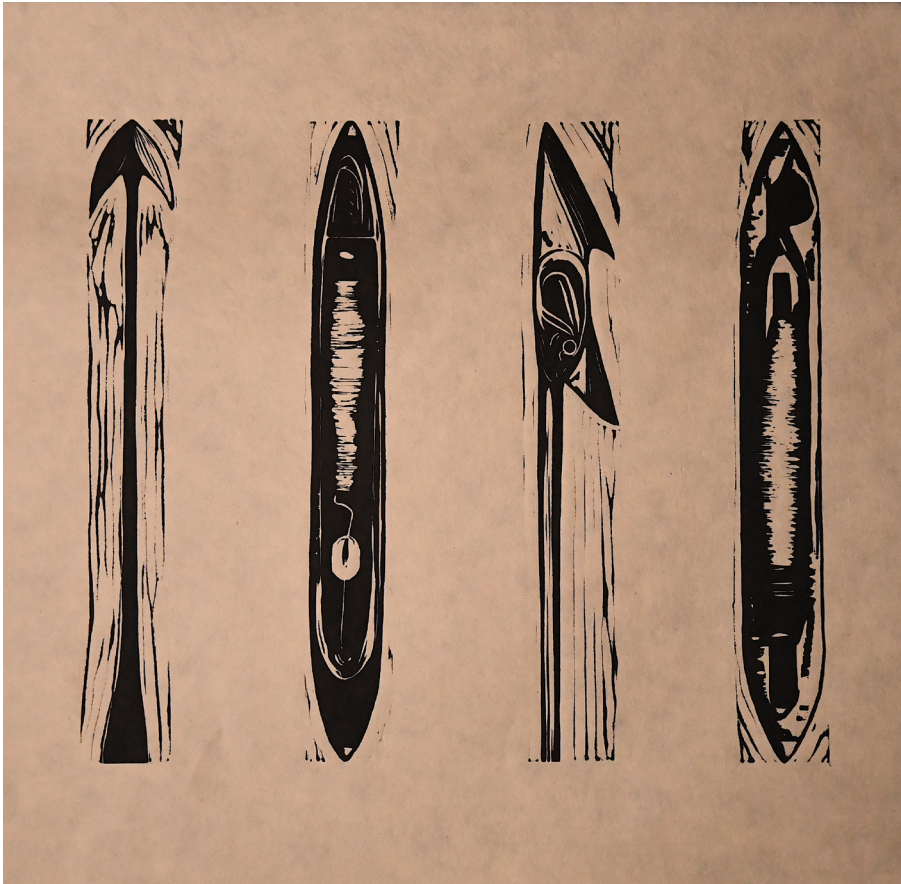
Your affectionate brother,
Ezra



Made to Kill to Live

“It is painful to witness the death of the smallest of God’s created beings, much more, one in which life is so vigorously maintained as the Whale! And when I saw this, the largest and most terrible of all created animals bleeding, quivering, dying a victim to the cunning of man, my feelings were indeed peculiar!” —Enoch Cloud, eighteen-year-old greenhand, 1851

“When I’ve thought what soil the cotton-plant
We weave is rooted in, what waters it—
The blood of souls in bondage—I have felt
That I was sinning against the light to stay
And turn the accursed fibre into cloth”
—Lucy Larcom, Lowell mill worker, 1875



Four objects are depicted in this relief print—two harpoons, and two shuttles. Each pair represents an innovation that improved the life of New England laborers, but which, by increasing efficiency, scaled up ecological devastation elsewhere.

The old style of whaling harpoon shown here on the left was not extremely effective, and many of the whales speared with them were lost. Whalers switched to a single barbed “toggle iron,” based on Inupiat harpoons, but the grommets that kept the toggling head in place didn’t stand up well to wear and tear on iron barbs. In 1848 Lewis Temple, an African-American blacksmith and inventor in New Bedford, improved on the design by adding a little hole fitted with a wooden peg. The wooden peg was strong enough to hold the toggling portion in place while it entered the flesh of a whale, but when the whale pulled against the line, the peg would break, allowing the barb to toggle open. When using the “Temple toggle iron,” very few harpoons or speared whales were lost.

A shuttle is an integral part of a mechanized weaving loom. Before the invention of the self-threading shuttle (rightmost object), weavers would thread each new bobbin by sucking the end of the thread through a tiny hole in the side of the shuttle. While a weaver would be responsible for particular looms, the shuttles themselves were frequently moved around, which meant that many weavers might put the same shuttle to their lips.

This made the weaving room a vector for disease, particularly tuberculosis. Cotton dust and poor ventilation in the mills left workers vulnerable to respiratory infection. Eventually a connection was drawn between the weavers placing their lips against the shuttles and the spread of disease, and the action became known as the “kiss of death.” In 1912 a self-threading shuttle was invented, patented, and put into production, outmoding manual threading altogether.

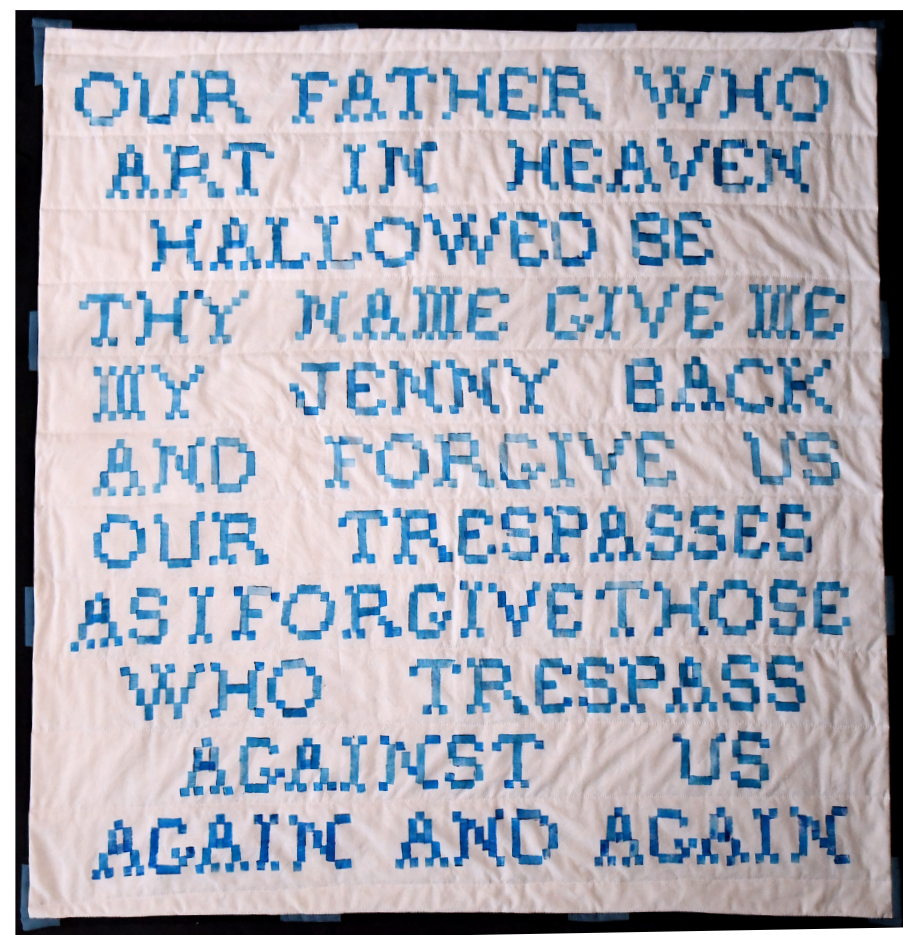
Letters from the Mill

The technique used to construct this small hand-pieced quilt top is referred to as “English paper piecing.” Many of the early pieced quilts of colonial New England were made using this method. Each piece is wrapped around a paper template and stitched together at the edges. The paper templates are then removed and reused. In some cases, the quilts were left unfinished, and the paper templates remained in the quilt top. One such quilt was the Saltonstall Quilt, which was pieced using templates cut from letters, written in indecipherable shorthand.



We imagined two characters—one of whom went to work in the first cotton mill that opened in New Bedford—who wrote letters to one another, and cut up those letters to piece a quilt. Rather than use them as hidden foundations, we chose to integrate the letters into the design, bringing their queer content to the forefront. The narrative is partly inspired by the true story of Dr. Marie Equi, whose girlfriend Bessie Holcomb helped secure funds for her continued education at Northfield Seminary for Young Ladies, and by the countless workers whose health was stolen by the mills.

Give Me My Jenny Back



Daughters of the Loom

This ream of early 20th century punch cards from Kilburn Mill was used to program weaving patterns into carpet looms. Layered over it is a collection of millworkers' accounts, drawn from their writings and oral histories, and photographs of pre-WWI New Bedford millworkers taken by Lewis Hine. Community members were invited to respond to these stories, and address their parents, grandparents, or relatives who worked in the mills.

Grateful for all the hardworking children & adults of the mills you are not forgotten

To the Robitaille sisters: thank you for your hard work, resilience, and commitment to support your family by working in the textile mills. Our generation had the opportunity to fulfill the American Dream for you sacrifice.

The labor of your lives continues to denounce the fabric of families, community, and prepare the next generation. Thank you for your contributions despite being ignored and historically viewed as less central to the establishment of textile and the emergence of an economy.

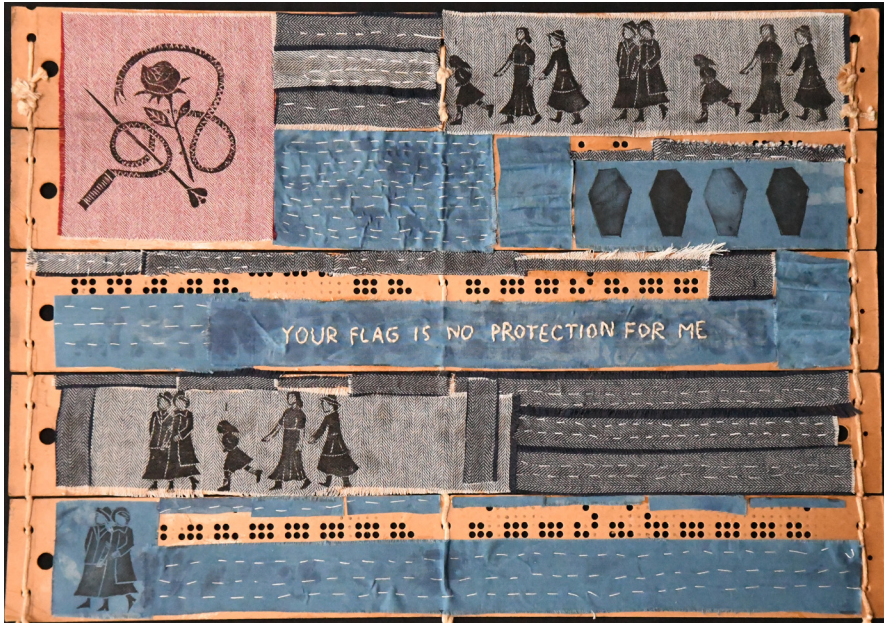
Mae + Bea,
Thank you for giving us the opportunity to go to school!

You are still very successful even when you barely went to school! Thank you for sacrificing your dreams for ours!

They value machines more than our bodies.

I wish it had been easier.

Your Flag is No Protection For Me



In 1917, while protesting U.S. involvement in the First World War, New Bedford-born activist Dr. Marie Equi was accosted by a group of “patriotic” men. When they tried to force her to kiss an American flag, she said, “Your flag is no protection for me.” In the ensuing struggle, Equi ripped the flag—an incident that was considered damning evidence against her, years later, during her trial for sedition.

Equi’s major heresy—besides advocating for striking workers and being openly queer—was her accurate claim that the United States government had financial motivations for entering WWI. For that, she was sentenced to three years in prison. (The sentence was later reduced due to public outcry and her own good behavior, though the ten months Equi served permanently damaged her health.)

This flag bears a three-part emblem inspired by Dr. Equi’s resistance to oppression: the hatpin with which she once threatened to stab a policeman, who was using force to break up a female cannery workers’ strike; a horse whip, which Equi used to threaten a corrupt reverend who refused to pay her schoolteacher girlfriend the salary

he had promised, and a rose, for the dignity and beauty that organized labor was fighting for (“Bread and Roses”). The stripes of this flag depict girls and women who worked in the New Bedford textile mills, and who were photographed by Lewis Hine in 1911. New Bedford’s cotton mills shut down in the 1930s. The last of that generation of workers—with lungs already damaged by cotton dust—succumbed in recent years to COVID-19.

Seditious



righteous defender, lesbian, anarchist, mill worker, doctor, stormy petrel, anti-war activist, abortion provider, mother, Da, labor organizer, street medic, political prisoner, soapbox orator, Doc, suffragist, Queen of the Bolsheviks, disaster medic, radical, medal of honor recipient, socialist, birth control advocate, daughter of immigrants, anti-capitalist, threat to national security, inmate 34410, Saint Lawrence congregant, pardoned, Nonna, scapegoat

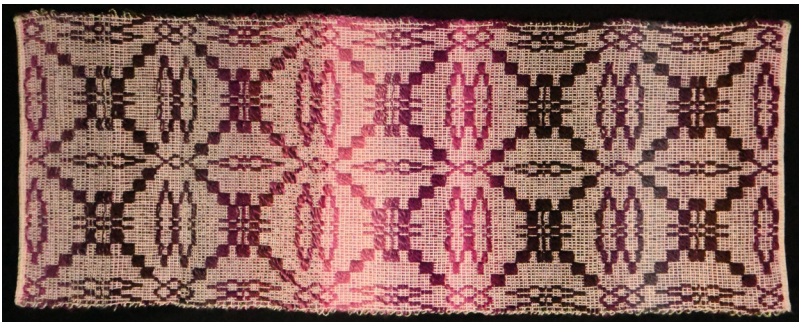
Kilburn Weaver

When I step from the cold street into the mill, I am not alone. They are drifting with the dust motes in the shafts of light, climbing with me up the stairs. I slip off my shoes and step with my sock feet onto the worn wood, where pins and staples were embedded long ago by the crush of the machines. No belts whir over my head, and I keep my hair short anyway. There is only the soft squeak of the loom shafts and clack of the treadles as I move my feet, the shuffle of the beater as I lock each pick in place, the occasional drip that comes from the oozing leak in the ceiling and lands in a rubbermaid tub nearby.

Sometimes I hear the children making music next door—they're learning to play electric guitar—and lose my count. I don't mind. They were always here, the children. They swept the floors, changed the bobbins, operated looms and cards before they came of age. They sang then, too. Now some of them are resting, some are playing music. Most of them grow up. They wear clothes made by someone else's children, millworkers who weave to live, in factories thousands of miles away.

If my shed isn't good, if my shuttle goes for a dive, if I made an error twenty rows back, I take my time—fix the flaws—or decide to leave them. No one is going to fine me 58 cents and force me to take a stand. I work with a threading that's already in place, alter it several times, get it to my liking. I reverse the direction of my treadling, call it a feature of design.

And when I'm done for the day, after three or five hours or more, I leave the way I came. Down the stairs they all walked down, and out the door.



Can You See Me?

“All at once my wife raised her head, and with a smile upon her face, which was a moment before bathed in tears, said, ‘I think I have it! ...I can make a poultice and bind up my right hand in a sling, and with propriety ask the officers to register my name for me.’ I thought that would do. It then occurred to her that the smoothness of her face might betray her; so she decided to make another poultice, and put it in a white handkerchief to be worn under the chin, up the cheeks, and to tie over the head. This nearly hid the expression of the countenance, as well as the beardless chin. My wife, knowing that she would be thrown a good deal into the company of gentlemen, fancied that she could get on better if she had something to go over the eyes; so I went to a shop and bought a pair of green spectacles. This was in the evening. We sat up all night discussing the plan, and making preparations. Just before the time arrived, in the morning, for us to leave, I cut off my wife’s hair square at the back of the head, and got her to dress in the disguise and stand out on the floor. I found that she made a most respectable looking gentleman.”

- William and Ellen Craft,
Running a Thousand Miles For Freedom

In December 1848, Ellen and William Craft—a married couple enslaved in Macon, Georgia—embarked on a dangerous journey to the North to emancipate themselves. Ellen, who was light-skinned, disguised herself as a wealthy White man, while her darker-skinned husband posed as her slave. Traveling by foot, train, stagecoach, and steamship, the Crafts made it to Philadelphia, and later to Massachusetts. There, they toured the abolitionist lecture circuit and told their story to thousands of people—including in New Bedford, where they stayed with Nathan and Polly Johnson.



The success of the Crafts’ escape depended in part on Ellen’s appearance of disability. Bandaged, small, and in need of assistance, she avoided scrutiny because—we can imagine—most of her fellow passengers avoided looking directly at her. Queer people, disabled people, people of color, and those at the intersections know what it is to be stared at, and what it is to be dismissed or ignored. The Crafts ingeniously used these social patterns to their advantage. But when it comes to writing history and making art, we cannot look away.

One image remains of Ellen in male dress. She still wears her sling, but the bandages on her face are gone. As William wrote, “The poultice is left off in the engraving, because the likeness could not have been taken well with it on.”

At what point does Ellen’s likeness become clear enough, good enough, to be recorded for posterity? How many poultices did they apply before she vanished? How many must come off before her invisibility peels away?



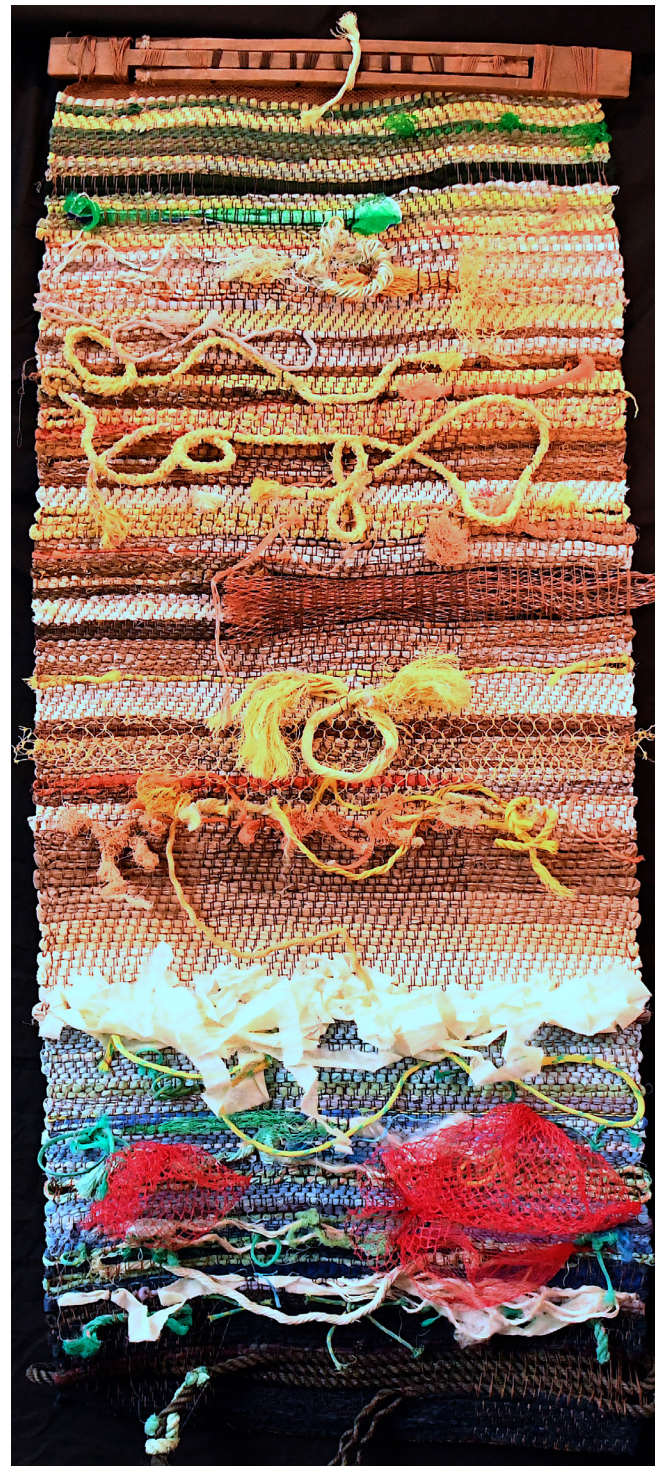
Autonomy

This graphite rendering of Ellen Craft dressed as a southern plantation owner is based on an engraving, which in turn was based on a daguerreotype she sat for. As far as we know, it was the last time she put on the outfit that shielded her and her husband during their flight for freedom. The Crafts sold the engravings to raise money to purchase the freedom of William's sister. They told their story to anyone who would listen. They wrote a book. They wanted to be remembered.

Today it is easy to take thousands of photos of yourself, and present to the world the version that best represents your internal self. But once the image is out there, who owns it? Who can edit it, or use it to their own ends? Who can tell you to keep it hidden? In a nation where the rights of Black people, transgender people, and women are increasingly under attack, being able to control your image is individual expression, is enjoyment of life, is survival. It is autonomy, bodily.

Record

So you've seen how we butchered the whales, boiled them down to nothing, all their intelligence, their beauty, their relationships, their critical role in the ecosystem reduced to a gaping hole. Then we tidied ourselves up, washed our hands, neatly wiped our mouths with a cloth napkin, and declared that we'd make a little money elsewhere: the whales and sailors were all used up and we could get our oil from the ground. Turn it into fuel to fill up the newer, bigger ships that thunder down the shipping lanes, bring you your shoes and your cars and your food, dull the senses of those who remain. Turn it into plastic to stuff their bellies, like the cotton in your lungs (your bodies turned out to be more profitable than those of whales). And when you're all used up, whether you've been working in the weave room or the card room, or sweeping the floor, or picking the cotton, or sitting at a computer churning out numbers, or serving someone else's coffee with a smile, we'll find someone else to make our money, and we'll find someone else, find someone else, until all that's left is the money (the plastic). And when they're picking through the remnants (whoever's around to see or notice), they'll wonder at all these scraps of film and brittle shards, all these little bits that record how we're living now. I don't know who wants to read that, but I hope when they do, they feel as [enraged, uncomfortable, devastated] as I felt when I learned what they did to you.



Note: Each artist wrote the text that appears with their work unless otherwise noted. The bold text is the title of the written piece, and often the title of the the artwork. Where it differs, artwork titles have been italicized.

Letters from the Mill

Collaboration by Beatrice and Elaine Alder

Indigo dyed cotton, mushroom and cochineal dyed silk, paper, ink.

Fabric donated by Boott Cotton Mills Museum.

Beatrice Alder

Law of Salvage

Introduction by Beatrice

Needle Made

Cotton, relief print

Summary of Moby Dick

Domestic Happiness on the Pequod

Porcelain with slip inlay

Sister Marry a Whaler

Porcelain with slip inlay

Daughters of the Loom

Acrylic on reclaimed material

Punchcards donated by Kilburn Mill,

fabric donated by Boott Cotton Mills

Museum

Your Flag is No Protection For Me

Cotton, relief print, embroidery on reclaimed material

Punchcards donated by Kilburn Mill

Can You See Me?

Relief print on cotton

Fabric donated by Boott Cotton Mills

Museum

Elaine Alder

The Other Self

Porcelain with slip inlay

Writing by Beatrice

Made to Kill to Live

Relief print

Seditious

Charcoal

Kilburn Weaver

Ladyslipper

Cotton, handspun wool, linen overshot

Childhood Linoleum

Cotton overshot

Autonomy

Graphite, ink, cotton thread

Record

Cotton, reclaimed marine debris

Acknowledgements

Our heartfelt thanks to the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park for making this project possible, and to UMass Dartmouth for welcoming us so warmly at the Star Store campus. We would like to personally thank Professor Rebecca Hutchinson, Cathy Randall of the Lowell National Historical Park, New England Quilt Museum Curator Pam Weeks, and Megan Thomas of Maypole Weaving for sharing their time and expertise. We especially appreciate the coordination, problem-solving, and encouragement by Ranger Lindsay Compton.

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