

“SOMETHING IN THIS SLIPPERY WORLD THAT CAN HOLD”:  
A TRANS FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF *MOBY-DICK*

A Thesis  
by  
VIRGINIA BUCK

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APPROVED BY:

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Full Name  
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

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Full Name  
Member, Thesis Committee

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Full Name  
Member, Thesis Committee

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Full Name  
Chairperson, Department of Xxxxxxx

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Max C. Poole, Ph.D.  
Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies

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## **Abstract**

### **SOMETHING IN THIS SLIPPERY WORLD THAT CAN HOLD: A TRANS FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF *MOBY-DICK***

Virginia Buck

B.A., Appalachian State University  
M.A., Appalachian State University

Chairperson: Carl Eby

This thesis argues that although Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is not feminist by most criteria, it also does not subscribe to masculinism or gender essentialism, as some reductive readings would have it. On the contrary, *Moby-Dick* presciently dramatizes the conflicts inherent in essentialism generally and the attempts to uplift sex essentialism as liberating for women specifically. Because sex essentialism defines the body as prescriptive rather than descriptive, and *Moby-Dick* has a motif of body modification as well as a theme of searching for ultimate truths in a chaotic environment, the text is able to comment on issues that would not see widespread discussion until over a century after the book's publication. Melville accomplishes these predictions through three of his major characters. Ahab, in his transcendental obsessions and ambivalent attitude towards his prosthetic leg, anticipates sex-essentialist feminists who have internalized scientific and religious patriarchal dogma and conflate culture with nature. Queequeg has accomplished mind/body unity

through his body modifications, thereby exemplifying the body as a descriptive agent rather than something that must be accepted without change, but this self-actualization crumbles in the face of the repressive industry that uses him. Ishmael's lack of physical self-description hints at a fluid identity, which is exactly what saves him from the dead end of the quest for transcendent, essential selfhood. Ultimately, *Moby-Dick* suggests that the healthiest gender and spirituality are a questioning gender and spirituality, not a fixed gender and spirituality.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of all persons who ever died for the sake of another person's or group's ideology.

I also dedicate this thesis to all whales who died for industrial profit, especially those who gave their lives in protection of other whales.

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## I. Introduction

*Moby-Dick* is not a feminist work, per se; as a narrative that excludes women almost completely, it has relatively little to say about female empowerment in the contemporary moment. However, even a text focused solely on a male cast of characters need not reify male chauvinism. That is, despite being overwhelmingly male-dominated, *Moby-Dick* does not suggest a male-superior/female-inferior binary. In fact, *Moby-Dick* largely deconstructs patriarchal hierarchies. To demonstrate how this is possible, we must examine a concept crucial to the comprehension of modern gender and feminist theory: gender essentialism, also known as gender determinism. The most consistent component of gender essentialism and the gender binary on which it rests is that the body is prescriptive.

Whether they are apologists for male chauvinism and patriarchy or trans-exclusionary radical feminists, gender essentialists claim that natal anatomy is destiny. As biologist and trans activist Julia Serano puts it in *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive*:

Many feminists and queer activists embrace gender artifactualism [another model of gender that Serano rejects as reductive] because it seems to counter *gender determinism*—the belief that men and women are born with predetermined sex-specific behaviors and desires... [I]n contemporary Western societies, gender determinists usually rely on biology to make their case. According to this account, women are chromosomally XX and men XY, and this genetic difference leads to differences in sex hormone productions (e.g., estrogen and testosterone), and these hormonal differences lead to differences in women's and men's behaviors and desires... Rarely a day goes by where one does not come across some news report, magazine article, or pop science book claiming that our genes, hormones, brains, and evolutionary history all conspire to turn us into perfect little heterosexual feminine women and masculine men. (139)

To a male supremacist, persons born with penises are Earth's natural masters, celebrated for their supposedly natural aggression, dominance, logical thinking, un-emotionality, and

isolation. Thus, persons born with vulvas are, correspondingly, natural slaves, incapable of rising above their inherent passivity, submission, illogic, moodiness, and a need to attach themselves to persons born with penises. Alongside this commonplace view of the supposedly inherent binary characteristics of men and women (terms that sex determinists see as synonymous with penises and vulvas, respectively) is trans-exclusionary radical feminism. Trans-exclusionary radical feminists claim that sexism and misogyny have an inherent and biological cause, rather than a cultural one. This offshoot of feminism crystallized in 1979 with the publication of Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, which argued that the medical industry invented transsexual surgery as a conspiracy to replace cisgender women with male-created artificial substitutes. To a trans-exclusionary feminist, those born with penises are damned to commit murder, rape, genocide, and other crimes against humanity unless educated out of their sinful nature by persons born with vulvas, who are inherently the avatars of gentleness, creativity, socialization, mental and emotional health, and wisdom. To both, penis equals man equals sire of offspring, vulva equals woman equals bearer of offspring, and ambiguous genital conditions can be rounded off in the hospital and the university office alike. In short, the gender binary and the essentialism that accompanies it require that the zenith—possibly the entirety—of human potential resides in sexual reproduction, or at least the raw materials needed to reproduce sexually.

In gender-determinist feminist belief, if one is born with a penis, for example, then one's maleness is set in stone, and one is naturally ordained to want to oppress women. Nothing, in this view, can be done to change sex; rather, modifying one's sexual

characteristics in any way is a gross transgression against nature. The opposition to body modification looms heavily in essentialist feminist literature.

Referring to the arguments of the aforementioned trans-exclusionary feminists, Judith Butler writes in *Undoing Gender*, “[T]he critique of male-to-female (MTF) transsexuality has centered on the ‘appropriation’ of femininity, as if it belongs properly to a given sex, as if sex is discretely given, as if gender identity could and should be derived unequivocally from presumed anatomy. To understand gender as a historical category, however, is to accept that gender, understood as one way of culturally configuring a body, is open to a continual remaking, and that ‘anatomy’ and ‘sex’ are not without cultural framing (as the intersex movement has clearly shown)” (9-10). In other words, while material critiques are foundational to much feminist thought and action, neither gender nor sex can be defined on a purely material basis. There is no completely natural way of determining self or other. Everything we perceive comes through a cultural filter.

But it is in *Bodies That Matter: The Discursive Limits of “Sex”* that Butler addresses the intersection of gender theory: “[T]hat is, the regulatory norms of ‘sex’ function in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” (6). Indeed, the word heterosexual makes etymological sense only if one assigns gender on the basis of reproductive organs (in which case the sole sex or gender different from male is female and vice versa). Shortly thereafter, Butler adds:

The relation between culture and nature presupposed by some models of gender “construction” implies a culture or an agency of the social which acts upon a nature, which is itself presupposed as a passive surface, outside the social and yet its necessary counterpart. One question that feminists have raised, then, is whether the discourse which figures the action of construction as a kind of imprinting or imposition is not tacitly masculinist, whereas the figure of the passive surface,

awaiting that penetrating act whereby meaning is endowed, is not tacitly or—perhaps—quite obviously feminine. (7)

The horrified disapproval with which some gender-essentialist feminists describe body modification, taken into conjunction and contrasted with the ideas of more expansive feminist authors such as Butler and Serano, leads us back to *Moby-Dick*.

Even a cursory reading of *Moby-Dick* shows that the novel rebuts the essentiality of ethnic origin, and, likewise, numerous sources, both scholarly and popular, note *Moby-Dick*'s homoerotic subtexts. The SFFaudio Podcast, for instance, has described it as “the gayest book ever written” (ep. 374 June 20, 2016), while the storied twentieth-century critic of American literature Leslie Fielder famously included *Moby-Dick* in his pantheon of American novels that feature “innocent homosexuality” as major motifs (300). Also, *50 Gay and Lesbian Books Everybody Must Read* (Alyson Books, 2009) includes the novel alongside other works like the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, and C. L. R. James observes that Ishmael's “relationship with [Queequeg] on land has all the marks of homosexuality,” at least until the setting shifts to the *Pequod* (43). All of which is to say that critics have long noted that the novel seems to at least reject the reproductive imperative. My thesis moves such analysis further: I argue that *Moby-Dick* also rebuts the essentiality of gender and a prescriptive body. The major characters of *Moby-Dick*, in their physicality as it relates to their subjectivities, suggest that a dogmatic view of the body and sexuality is a mistake, and that the body can instead be used to perform many varied gender types, and even that sex is variably descriptive as much or more than it is biologically fixed. By focusing on three of the text's most important characters—Ahab, Queequeg, and Ishmael, all of whom share the crucial motif of body modification—we can see *Moby-Dick* as impressively prescient in its implications about the web of relationships among body,

sexuality, and identity. This thesis lays out those characters' connections to those relationships.

Chapter One, "Ahab and the Tools of Man," first summarizes some of the common readings of Ahab's motivation for hunting the whale Moby Dick and then offers a significantly different interpretation: rather than being motivated out of a simple if obsessive need for revenge, Ahab is driven by a psychological complex similar to Milton's Satan or Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, as other critics have noted, and, in addition, Ahab manifests an ontological interest and drive to know the true nature of things. This thirst for divine-level knowledge informs the psychology behind his actions. He believes that he can transcend the material world and force it to yield its deeper and ideal secrets. Instead of standing out as a man with a mentally abnormal compulsion, he illustrates an extreme degree of an otherwise almost banally common psychological desire for the world to make sense. Beneath this wish—inherently, and not just specifically in Ahab's case—lies a drive to remake the world as one might hope it really is, and even where that world seems to resist such ordering. Ahab despises the fact that his physical body leaves him vulnerable to harm, which he realized when Moby Dick bit off his leg, but he also hates that the world does not render its essential meanings clearly. If he cannot apotheosize and depart from materiality while still physically alive, as his monologues suggest he wishes he could do, then he will spend all his efforts to try to reshape materiality according to his ideals. I also argue that this drive within Ahab comes from a deep-seated need to affirm male selfhood. Ahab's mission is founded upon the need to feel supreme, and it requires a "masculine" violence for its enactment. By slaying the greatest of all animals, the whale, particularly the one that attacked him personally, Ahab believes that he will become the ideal Man, incarnate. *Moby-Dick's* acknowledgement of a

link between male supremacy and forcible subjection of the nonhuman world is reinforced by Ahab's quest's thematic connection to a cross-cultural myth that originated in ancient Sumer and, in its earliest known form, contained clear male-female antagonism. Furthermore, Ahab's prosthetic legs dramatize his complicated relationship with the material world. During his conversation with the ship's carpenter, who makes Ahab's prostheses, Ahab reveals the connections he makes among body modification, the motivations of his quest, and the concept of maleness.

Chapter Two, "Queequeg: The Illustrated Man," focuses on the paradoxes exhibited by Queequeg. He demonstrates the body's potential to describe the inner personality rather than dictate it, a possibility often overlooked in texts that assume a biological basis for sexism and misogyny. Next to Ahab, Queequeg is the character whose body modifications receive the most narrative attention, and, for this reason, he shows the positive side of the modified body. Overwhelmingly, Queequeg uses his body rather than verbal language to communicate, thereby showing a deep level of mind/body integration. Similarly, he introduces the narrator and, by extension, the reader to a new paradigm of sexuality that does not necessarily include procreation, rejecting the reproductive imperative that underlies biological essentialism. Adding to these reservoirs of embodied potential, Queequeg also comes from a country inspired by Melville's experiences of a culture far more expansive in its gender options than his own. All of these attributes point to a more self-actualized character than either Ahab or the narrator Ishmael. However, Queequeg also shows what social-systemic pressures can wreak on such self-actualized persons when they possess a skill or characteristic useful to those systems. As a harpooner, he is a tool essential to the whaling industry. Ultimately, his social situation—a phallogentric and capitalist set of structures that

*use him*—punishes what would be his best qualities under other, nonviolent and less aggressive circumstances. He adds to *Moby-Dick*'s components of tragedy by showing how essentialism and certain ideas of maleness can exterminate persons who do not conform to the social systems founded on those principles. By using a skill upon which the whaling industry depends, he has no choice but to eventually conform to that industry.

Chapter Three, "*Ex Nihilo Nihil Fit: Ishmael's Spectral Presence*," expands the previous two chapters' analysis of Ahab's and Queequeg's bodies to interpret the narrator, Ishmael. While Queequeg and Ahab have physical bodies described in great detail by the novel, both modified in significant ways, Ishmael's body is barely described at all—thus it is constantly open for modification because he is, effectively, a phantom. Although he narrates the novel and could easily describe his body at any time, he avoids the subject entirely. This chapter argues that a character with an essentially unknown body serves as the perfect narrator for a story about, in significant part, bodily sexual identity. Because his body remains without physical description, he functions as a cipher—a floating sign with highly variable potential referents. This extends to his sexuality, which I argue is also fluid to an extent—though his own narration tends to evince a male preference. That is, he identifies himself with a homoerotic inclination and an ongoing identity crisis. Because of his tenuous grasp on his physical self and the world around him, he seeks to classify and analyze everything he sees, as shown with the numerous chapters on cetology and whaling procedure in the book's middle. He does not realize that his best chance for transformation lies elsewhere. A character so aggressively non-self-actualized as Ishmael may seem to be at a distinct disadvantage, but, by the novel's conclusion he has also benefited from this lack of definition.

This thesis is not a declaration of opposition to all gender and/or sexuality labels, nor is it a sort of manifesto for a form of perpetually undefined gender identity. The absence of a standardized label does not equate to the absence of the recognition of a phenomenon described by that label, and the creation of a standardized label does not lead to an exclusively oppressive use of that label. To quote Robert K. Martin, “I do not believe, as some theoreticians seem to, that homosexuality was ‘invented’ in the late nineteenth century” (7). Indeed, the absence of a consolidated identity can feel like a gnawing void, an actively perceived lack of fulfillment. Terms such as “homosexual” thus can have utility in forwarding the goals of self-actualization and community creation. But, even if we do not reject all labels as the creations of a repressive state apparatus, it is important to recognize them as substantially constructed concepts. Sexuality and gender labels always belong more to culture than they do to nature. To assert the contrary is to ascribe a single-minded intentionality to nature that it does not possess, which, as *Moby-Dick* dramatizes, can have fatal results, especially when one projects that intentionality as corresponding to preconceived and socially contingent ideals of what is, and should be, the nature of the world. So, while this thesis does not argue that all gender and sexuality labels are always or inherently oppressive, it does explore how the three main characters who are its subject both fail and succeed in fitting some of those particular labels, and it address the consequences of the same, as dramatized by the novel.

Questions of gender share a foundation with the most salient aspect of *Moby-Dick*: how to divine the nature of reality and how much of reality can be discerned through observation of the physical. Questioning gender and sex, for many theorists (and, for that matter, laypersons), equates to questioning reality itself. Hence, to some extent, we see the

anxiety manifested in some second-wave and second-wave-derivative feminist texts when the issues of sex reassignments and gender theory arise. This anxiety is not dissimilar from the anxiety apparent in traditional patriarchal or male supremacist thought when anything happens to threaten the male/female binary and its inherent determinism.

As Carol Riddell wrote of the aforementioned Janice Raymond in (“Divided Sisterhood: A Critical Review of *The Transsexual Empire*,” “The implications of this kind of axiomatic, dogmatic thinking for the women’s movement as a whole are really terrible... Ms. Raymond attacks the sex researchers for assuming that biology and socialization are destiny (ch. 2), but she assumes just that herself” (150). When we internalize a cultural filter and mistake it for unconstructed nature, or when we conflate material reality with idealized concepts, we cause damage. In imposing order and struggling against chaos, we create more violence. Not recognizing this pattern is itself a cultural design promoted by and for repressive state apparatuses. Surely there is no destructive habit more insidious than one created deliberately by the wider culture and absorbed subconsciously, especially if those who practice this habit embrace it as emancipatory *from* the wider culture.

Symbolically, referentially, and even comically, *Moby-Dick* explores phenomena relating to the axis of body and gender. The novel’s subtle implications about body, gender, sexuality, and identity fit into modernity as well as smart phones, driverless cars, and robot hospital attendants, but they do not share those objects’ “planned obsolescence.” On the contrary, *Moby-Dick* imparts a lesson worth reminding oneself of many times over. Bridging the ancient past with what was then the present day as it does, *Moby-Dick* speaks to a cultural assumption that has its roots in the classical world and still enjoys a certain primacy today but warrants retirement. By examining what *Moby-Dick* has to say about the body as it

relates to concepts of gender and sexuality, we can uncover how cultural assumptions about that relationship might have impacts on actual persons.

## I. Ahab and the Tools of Man

Before the story proper even begins, it should be obvious to the reader of *Moby-Dick* that the narrative will not be a straightforward tale of adventure on the high seas. None of Melville's other works before or after *Moby-Dick* start by curating earlier texts relevant to the novels' dominant images. By presenting the "Etymology" and "Extracts," Melville (or the in-universe characters who collected these materials) seems to suggest that not only are these prior works appetizers for this book, the ultimate whale story, but that the whale exerts a thrall over the human imagination because of some inherent symbolic power. To that end, the reader can easily become deeply and possibly overly invested in trying to divine exactly *what* the White Whale symbolizes rather than contemplating why Ahab dedicates his life to defeating this inscrutable creature in the first place. The citations from older literature may direct the analytical reader to conceptualize Ahab in the context of tragic heroes, which aids in the understanding of his quest, but what remains unwritten is that Ahab incarnates a motivation at once more primal and more cosmic than many other tragic heroes rather than constituting any sort of continuation of their line.

Readings of *Moby-Dick* that compare Ahab's quest to slay the White Whale to Satan's furious rebellion against God in *Paradise Lost* are common, with Leslie Fiedler's reading in this way being an especially well-known example. Melville deliberately invokes Milton in the novel's "Extracts," for instance, and Ahab admits to possessing an inherent "paganism" despite his ostensible Quaker Christianity, and his name—derived from the biblical story of an evil king whose wife convinced him to force his people to worship a heathen god—receives explicit narrative attention. However, while such a view of Ahab as guilty of a Satan-like overreach is broadly correct, it treads the surface of a deeper

motivation: Ahab seeks not to overthrow the Christian God but to become effectively equivalent to the idea of God.

Similarly, two common readings of *Moby-Dick* as a whole—an anti-capitalist parable and a revenge tragedy—of course have merit, but they are not exhaustive. It is Starbuck, not Ahab, who sees the hunt for whales as nothing but a business enterprise, and he criticizes his commander for seeking “vengeance on a dumb brute,” a motive that Ahab dismisses (178) as utterly mistaken. For Ahab, money offers little ultimate satisfaction. Likewise, reducing Ahab’s desire to kill Moby-Dick to simple “vengeance” is itself superficial. Ahab’s motivation is more of a personal crusade: he fights to learn the true nature of reality, even as that crusade leads to tragedy. For Ahab, that ideal can only be discovered through the forcible death of the embodied White Whale. He believes a concept can be, indeed, has already been, made flesh, and he desires to repurpose his own body in relation to that very idea.

Ahab, as the masculine center of the novel, aims to *embody* the concept of Man—not a particular human man, but masculinity in the abstract, an eternal Platonic ideal of which nature ordains specific human men to partake. For him to thus apotheosize requires his transcendence of materiality and the conquest of ambiguity. For Ahab to reach the godlike heights he craves, he must exceed his body, which ties him to materiality, and he must also subject the natural world to an infallible analysis, which requires the belief that everything that exists materially corresponds to a self-evident Platonic essence. He believes that he possesses the tools to force the physical world to yield to his perceptions, which he also considers equal to divine understanding. In short, Ahab’s strategy consists of the self-defeating paradox of transcendence through essentialism. In so strategizing, he embarks upon

a mission at least as old as Plato, one that has reappeared in various guises throughout various historical epochs and human cultures. At the same time, he suffers from the same problem that afflicts everyone guided by such kinds of idealism: the inherent dead end of his path. His quest is doomed before it begins, and it will doom not him alone but everyone under his command.

### **Dark Transcendentalism**

Understanding Ahab's motivation requires examining the worldview of the prominent mid-nineteenth-century philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. In "The Over-Soul," Emerson elucidates the cosmology of his philosophy of Transcendentalism in this way:

The Supreme Critic on the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains every one to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character, and not from his tongue, and which evermore tends to pass into our thought and hand, and become wisdom, and virtue, and power, and beauty. We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one.  
(237)

For Emerson, then, all earthly life shares the same consciousness, even though we may not realize it, and this consciousness originates on a spiritual or heavenly plane. Nature embodies reality, and because humans are part of nature, they contain elements of transcendent reality within them. While this view of the cosmos is positive on the surface—if self and other are

one, then to commit violence against another person or thing is to commit violence against oneself—Ahab’s vision of Transcendentalism is distinctly dark, even perverse. If moral facts guide the universe, and the physical world reflects these moral facts, then those moral facts should be self-evident, neither requiring nor allowing room for interpretation. Since these transcendent truths do not make themselves known on Earth, it is the imperative of a superior person to discover them for himself, at which point he will be beyond criticism.

That the “deep power” fails to make itself obviously manifest in a physical form taunts Ahab. For all the “madness” ascribed to Ahab, he surely does not believe that his leg will grow back if he kills Moby Dick. Something infinitely deeper than revenge motivates him. As Ahab soliloquizes in Chapter 36:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike though the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. (175)

This grandiose monologue encapsulates Ahab’s passionate rage and frustration at his distance from ideal ultimate truths. The “pasteboard masks,” the components that comprise the material world, refuse to divulge the naturally ordained essence that Ahab assumes that they correspond to *a priori*, and Moby Dick represents the zenith of the incomprehensible material entity. “That inscrutable thing” tortures him not only for its symbolizing the unreachable transcendent facts but also for the unknowability of its own actions. All physical objects correspond to some ideal truth; the material form and the ideal concept are tantalizingly related, yet their relation to each other remains hidden. In other words, Ahab is a

Platonic essentialist who longs for transcendence. He feels driven to discover the essences behind the material world, and he largely expects those essences to be fixed rather than fluid: if an object carries one meaning, then that object will always have that meaning and no other. While Ahab believes in an unseen principle that resides above all organisms, he jettisons the positivity to which Emerson ascribes it. Ahab's philosophy may be best comprehended as a dark version of Transcendentalism. Instead of the "eternal ONE" to which all the universe resolves, as Emerson famously put it (237), an enlightened man appoints *himself* the Supreme Critic who overthrows and takes the place of a punitive God but forces punishments on the unruly material world for not conforming to his standards of comprehensibility. In Ahab's view, each "visible object" must correspond to a concept that exists on an idealistic plane that would render objective truth if said plane could only be encountered directly. To his eternal frustration, he cannot touch these ideal concepts; he can only conjecture about them. Killing Moby Dick would not only serve as an act of retribution for the whale's eating his leg; slaying the White Whale, the blank slate onto which Ahab projects the fury of his essentialist passion, would make him objectively *correct* in a way that has thus eluded mortal man. The natural world, by not bowing to predetermined conclusions and being perceived only sensually, is disorderly, which infuriates Ahab, and so he appoints himself its organizer. No vindication could feel more complete than indisputable proof of the correctness of one's perception of deep reality. If Ahab could only kill Moby Dick, he believes, his conjectures about the true nature of the universe would make sense.

In his own words, Ahab reveals that his motivation dwarfs Hamlet's: "I will not say as schoolboys do to bullies—Take some one of your own size; don't pommel *me*! No, ye've knocked me down, and I am up again; but ye have run and hidden" (180). He wars with what

he perceives as an unfairly limiting higher power, one that he intends to defeat once and for all. Furthermore, he describes his envisioned route to his out-of-reach wish thusly: “The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run... Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way!” (183). Indeed, his purpose is fixed—it repels modification, and it exists to establish fixity. The base assumption of a natural order paradoxically limits Ahab’s mind; he does not even consider opening himself to the possibility that the chaotic character of sensually perceived nature might influence or even lead to changes in his beliefs. His phrase “the iron way” thus suggests a double meaning: one, his “way” and the discovery of ultimate truth he hopes to effect mandate the use of “iron tools”—his possession of supreme nerve and dedication; two, the quester who follows the “iron way,” and thus can admit no alteration nor growth to his functional world view, however much empirical evidence or socially transacted experience might suggest such a personal change is warranted. Therefore, Ahab’s yearning to mold his experiences to his predetermined conclusions fits his occupation perfectly, both because he is in concert with Platonism, Calvinism, and similar ideologies, and because these “iron ways” also correspond to a profession predicated on slaying massive, intelligent animals—the only foes truly worthy of man, as described in “Excerpts.”

“Excerpts” anthologizes the many historical accounts of the singular majesty of whales, and it repeatedly implies a profound connection between the profession of whaling with spirituality and even, perhaps incongruously, masculinity. Years before Freud, Melville consciously established the harpoon as a phallic symbol. In Chapter 89, “Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish,” Ishmael jocularly euphemizes sexual penetration as “harpooning”: “[W]hen a subsequent gentleman harpooned her, the lady then became that subsequent gentleman’s

property, along with whatever harpoon might have been found sticking in her” (434). If the reader has not made such a connection independently, then Melville makes it for them: sharp implements equate to phalluses. As Andrea Dworkin wrote in “Why So-Called Radical Men Love and Need Pornography,” “In male mythology, knife or sword is a primary metaphor for the penis; the word vagina literally means sheath... [T]he penis itself is as they have named it, a knife, a sword, a weapon” (145). This symbolism suggests a reading of the activity of whaling in general and of Ahab’s obsession with killing Moby Dick in particular as an attempted rape of nature. Distressingly, the perpetrator of this action needs to expend little effort in convincing his subordinates to succumb to his motivation.

The Emersonian value of self-reliance degenerates into a pathological attempt to embody man-the-mighty-hunter, the worshipper if not the wielder of the phallic totem (which is not to say that these concepts oppose each other; if anything, the mighty hunter may be the most overt image of self-reliance). C. L. R. James describes Ahab as a dictator (50), as does the book’s narration—Ahab is variously called “supreme lord and dictator,” “a Khan of the planks and a king of the sea,” and a “sultan”—but if Ahab assumes such roles, he does so in a subtler manner than those words might imply. He does not need to bluster and threaten; the crewmen, including the narrator, find his bloodlust infectious: “I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts went up with the rest” (194). All the crewmen identify with Ahab’s most fervent desire. The narrative perspective is both universalist and universalizing, positing a common goal that Ahab shares with his crew. Only Starbuck, the devout Quaker, exempts himself from this ambition, although his disinclination to condone Ahab’s goal and his means of achieving it does not equate in the novel to giving him the “correct” perspective; rather, it contributes to the ultimate tragedy of the conclusion, in as much as it prevents him from

staying his captain's hand via mutiny. Ahab is more than a mighty hunter; he is the *commander* of men who are mighty hunters. All the crewmen, regardless of national or ethnic origin, gleefully accept Ahab's invitation to join him in committing a sexual assault against nature.

Despite the narrative's frequent descriptions of Ahab as "mad" and "crazy" (terminology that Ahab even accepts to a degree—"I am madness maddened"), he does not hold a monopoly on erroneous or potentially dangerous motivations, methods, or points of view. His officers, whom the reader might expect could counter Ahab's deadly obsession by periodically voicing reason to him or even organizing against him, display their own specific sets of troubled attitudes towards nature, their fellow whalers, and their relationships to authority. Flask, for instance, wants to exterminate whales altogether, according to his description in "Knights and Squires" ("[He] somehow seemed to think that the great Leviathans had personally and hereditarily offended him; and therefore it was a sort of point of honor with him, to destroy them whenever encountered... [I]n his poor opinion, the wondrous whale was but a species of magnified mouse, or at least water-rat..." [129]), and Stubb masks an intensely malicious personality behind a veneer of affability, as seen in his treatment of Pip, whom he temporarily but deliberately leaves stranded in the ocean for the sake of teaching him a lesson.

Worst of all, Starbuck's Quaker-religious belief in the rightness of a humble subject before God and man prevents him from taking action appropriate to relieve Ahab of command, which his soliloquy makes absolutely clear. ("Oh! I plainly see my miserable office—to obey, rebelling; and worse yet, to hate with touch of pity! For in his eyes I read some lurid woe would shrivel me up, had I it... His heaven-insulting purpose, God may

wedge aside” [184].) Starbuck here too narrowly frames his choices as only between obeying Ahab or, if he rebels, to offend the fundamental axioms of his religion; he concludes that all he can do is hope that divine intervention will intercede to dissuade Ahab from continuing to pursue Moby Dick (180). In other words, Ahab has to rely on his subordinates either welcoming or succumbing to the ideal of ideal man as a mighty hunter, and they all do. Regardless of their official position, they all revere the power of the phallic harpoon, a concept explored in myth that significantly antedates even the hoariest literature selected in the “Excerpts.”

### *Moby-Dick as American “Chaoskampf”*

Melville did not invent the foundations of Ahab’s quest; he expanded upon and updated them. The central conflict in *Moby-Dick* emerges from a source exponentially older than any text from the middle nineteenth century. Even Ahab’s own monologues do not reveal the whole truth about the roots of his motive, so the narrator offers such insight in Chapter 82, “The Honor and Glory of Whaling.” All whalers, according to Ishmael, belong to a “fraternity” (395) that includes Perseus, St. George, Hercules, Jonah, and Vishnu. Melville did not flout mythological or cultural record by relating these figures to one another. At its core, Ahab’s story is an amplification of the *Chaoskampf*, the cross-cultural myth of a wind or air god battling against a reptilian, often aquatic beast that represented primordial chaos. To this motif Ishmael refers when he notes that “in many old chronicles whales and dragons are strangely jumbled together, and often stand for each other” (396). Many ancient civilizations claimed a variant of this story: Thor’s conquest of Jörmungandr, Indra’s slaying of Vedra, Zeus’s killing of Typhon, Jehovah’s taming of Leviathan (to make an explicit

comparison between Jehovah and whalers would possibly be too impious for even this self-admittedly irreverent book), and, most relevantly, Marduk's battle against Tiamat. Man's drive to subdue nature arises from his desire to conquer chaos. If this theme of forcefully imposing order onto chaos arises from an impulse so deep that the Norse, Hindus, Greeks, Hebrews, and Babylonians alike needed to dramatize it, Melville seems to ask, then why not adapt the story for the Americans?

Multiple references link Ahab to the storm gods that wage war against chaos in various mythologies. His crew and the prophet Elijah refer to him as "Old Thunder," a label that he accepts, suggesting a connection between him and the legendary wielders of lightning, such as Zeus and Jehovah. He also very much looks the part of these patriarchal sky gods, whether Hellenic or Jewish: old, bearded, and grim. He has earned a reputation as a skilled harpooner and commands a group of similarly talented men. A narrative description recapitulates the form of the storm god's reptilian enemy as well: "Meanwhile the boat was still booming through the mist, the waves curling and hissing around us like the erected crests of enraged serpents" (235).

Sharp implements such as harpoons symbolize not only the phallus, as mentioned earlier, they also represent the analytical, logical mind in ancient myths and classification systems: the tarot suit associated with air, the mental element, is the sword (Cavendish 114). Making the connection between sexual violence and reduction through the paradigm of masculinist logic and analysis, Dworkin, in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, writes, "A saber penetrating a vagina is a weapon; so is the camera or pen that renders it" (25). Used for certain ends, a pen can be as phallic as a sword or harpoon. Describing a pornographic magazine's photograph of a nude woman bound to a car as a hunting trophy, she continues,

“Man as hunter owns the earth, the things of it, its natural resources. [Woman] is part of the wildlife to be plundered for profit and pleasure, collected, used” (27). If men who portray sexual activity as a hunt see women as game, then it may follow that men on the hunt see their animal prey as an object of sexual conquest. Indeed, Melville sometimes uses sexually suggestive language to describe some of the men’s whaling activities: “Stubb slowly churned his long sharp lance into the fish, and kept it there” (245); “Towards the end, Tashtego has to ram his long pole harder and harder, and deeper and deeper into the Tun, until some twenty feet of the pole have gone down” (346); and, of course, the sperm-squeezing scene elaborated upon in “A Squeeze of the Hand,” an image that juxtaposes orgasm and corpses.

Implications of sexuality, particularly in its aggressive and nonconsensual forms, extend to the ship herself. In this novel so rife with overt symbolism that subtler instances thereof can easily go unnoticed, the *Pequod*’s name suggests that the men who board her will form a pan-cultural tribe that will inevitably become extinct. Rather than a metaphor for the United States in particular, the *Pequod* represents an ideal of the world. The ship is the mother of mankind. Thus, the *Pequod* is the ultimate example of the abstract feminine. Melville’s most significant female characters—Yillah, Fayaway, Marianna—frequently assume such roles: personifications of concepts rather than intricately detailed individuals. (In this way, they may have a connection to Aphrodite Urania, sea-spawned female inspirer of love between men.) By name, the *Pequod* implies an attempt at making a democratic ideal manifest, a goal of which Emerson would surely approve. But the ruler of this motherland has an appetite for dominance over transcendent concepts, not for brotherhood. Moby Dick, the symbol of the demonstrably inscrutable beyond, rips the *Pequod* apart. Chaos tears abstract ideas asunder. This apocalyptic scene presents a confusing tangle of sexual and

gender associations: The female-like yet phallic-shaped sea creature penetrates the *Pequod*, simultaneous motherland of mankind and domain of destructive masculinity. Ambiguity compounds itself, drowning attempts at making the universe orderly. The American *Chaoskampf* breaks the pattern established by its predecessors.

Although Melville could not have known of it (the first published English translation of this text dates from 1902), the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation epic, has the greatest thematic link to *Moby-Dick*. The beginning of this ancient poem expounds upon the universe's first entities, who embodied the primordial sea: Apsu and Tiamat, the latter of which took the form of a massive dragon. Despite creating the progenitors of humanity, Apsu and Tiamat were evil, and eventually Marduk, their humanoid descendent and the god of the sky, slew Tiamat and made Earth and Heaven out of her remains. This creation epic contains two relevant morals: first, the sea is the Eternal ONE—it is all that existed at the beginning of the universe; second, chaos, no matter how much one tries to analyze and compartmentalize it out of existence, will endure permanently. Like the scribes of many post-Babylonian civilizations, Melville pits his warriors against a male sea beast rather than a female one. Unlike them, however, Melville denies Ahab victory, even the initial victory that Marduk scores. Ahab and the entire *Pequod* crew barely so much as injure Moby Dick. As Fiedler states, “In complete contempt of the three-thousand-year-old pattern of myth, Melville permits the dragon-slayer to be slain, the dragon to escape alive; but it is hard to tell whether he really stands the legend on its head, allows evil to survive and heroism to perish. Only Ahab believes the whale represents evil, and Ahab is both crazy and damned” (385). Indeed, this deliberate inversion of the myth-pattern confirms the pathology and futility of Ahab's quest. The man who would be the mighty hunter, maleness incarnate and transcendent,

*cannot* kill the embodiment of what prevents him from apotheosizing. (Melville's linking of his novel to the dragon-slaying myth-pattern raises an unanswered question: if Ahab was wrong in attributing evil to nature, then were the ancients equally wrong?)

Fedallah underscores the mythic import with which Ahab imbues his quest against the White Whale. As a Zoroastrian (a Parsee, in the book's terminology), Fedallah practices a faith based on an orderly, dichotomous view of the universe. Cosmologically speaking, Zoroastrianism influenced Gnosticism, a heretical form of Judaism and later Christianity that emphasized an ontology of the material world as inherently evil and the immaterial world as inherently good. Chapter 41, "Moby Dick," mentions the Ophites, a sect of Gnostics, by name:

That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning; to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds; which the ancient Ophites of the east revered in their statue devil;—Ahab did not fall down and worship it like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. (200)

As Thomas Vargish elaborates in "Gnostic Mythos in *Moby-Dick*," the Ophites, members of a transcendental faith, believed that the creator of the physical world, the Demiurge, was anti-spiritual and therefore evil (273). Ahab co-opts a religion that emphasizes the primacy of the ideal plane and its superiority to the physical. Instead of seeking transcendence through an ascetic lifestyle, Fedallah aids his captain in a mission to kill the physical manifestation of a spiritual evil. Ironically for the practitioner of a dualistic religion and the private harpooner of a man who bases his mission on a dichotomy, Fedallah problematizes the *Pequod's* major binaries. Though a harpooner, he belongs to a proto-Christian faith and is therefore not

precisely a pagan; though a foreigner, he is decidedly not a “savage.” Stubb whispers to Flask that Fedallah may be Satan himself (355); while the novel seems to suggest that Fedallah is a mortal man, he does have a certain Mephistophelean quality. The “deal with the Devil” for which Ahab has subordinated Fedallah—the mission to kill Moby Dick—will consign Ahab to damnation, an engulfing in the mouth of Hell as represented by the briny abyss. Thus, *Moby-Dick* establishes itself not only in the lineage of the *Chaoskampf* but in that of *Frankenstein*: a man’s thirst for divine knowledge causes him to take on an authoritarian role, and in overreaching, he falls to his death. Rather than settling for this well-trodden path, however, *Moby-Dick* extrapolates from another theme introduced in *Frankenstein*: the power of modifying material substance such that man tries to surpass God/nature, with somewhat monstrous results.

### **Prosthetic Masculinity**

Despite his anonymity, the *Pequod*’s carpenter plays a thematically significant role in the novel. He, above all the other crewmen, can create and modify the physical apparatus of the ship and her parts, even to the point of modifying the bodies of the men on board:

A belaying pin is found too large to be easily inserted into its hole: the carpenter claps it into one of his ever ready vices, and straightway files it smaller. A lost landbird of strange plumage strays on board, and is made a captive: out of clean shaved rods of right-whale bone, and cross-beams of sperm whale ivory, the carpenter makes a pagoda-looking cage for it. An oarsman sprains his wrist: the carpenter concocts a soothing lotion. Stubb longed for vermilion stars to be painted upon the blade of his every oar; screwing each oar in his big vice of wood, the carpenter symmetrically supplies the constellation. A sailor takes a fancy to wear shark-bone ear-rings: the carpenter drills his ears... Teeth he accounted bits of ivory; heads he deemed but top-blocks; men themselves he lightly held for capstans. (463)

In his conversation with the carpenter, Ahab encapsulates the other crucial component of his motivation to kill Moby Dick. When Ahab handles the carpenter’s vice, the carpenter warns

him that it will “break bones,” to which Ahab replies, “No fear; I like a good grip; I like to feel something in this slippery world that can hold” (512). This language reveals much about Ahab’s mindset. To hold of course means to grasp firmly, but it also means to remain in stasis, to harbor an attraction to the inflexible. Holding indicates a resistance to change and therefore a resistance to chaos. What does hold is what reassures: preventing the world from slipping out of one’s grasp equates to keeping base assumptions in place. If nothing challenges one’s assumptions or beliefs, then the world makes sense. The tools of man, which he intends to use for subduing nature, reassure Ahab. Like a harpoon, a vice allows one to enact material change at one’s own whim. While a harpoon is an analytical tool, a vice, in this situation, is a diminishing and essentializing tool, preventing the object from exceeding one’s grasp. By essentialist logic, the body should suffice as the holding agent, but the body does not inherently symbolize anything. One’s physical form is not a repository of meaning—unless one opts to make it so. If one accepts the body as a descriptive agent rather than a prescriptive one, then the body becomes an open canvas for displaying modifications that give insight into the personality.

Body modifications contain a heightened if paradoxical significance for Ahab. First, they threaten his view of the orderly world: the most orderly of all possible worlds would be a static realm, one where everything remained permanently fixed and unchanging. But a modified body upsets and challenges such a world. At the same time, however, such a modifiable body presents raw material onto which the subject can inscribe their bodily identity. Ahab’s ivory leg reminds him constantly of these two possibilities in tension. Unlike Queequeg and Daggoo, who chose their body modifications willingly (their tattoos and earrings, respectively), Ahab had no choice; *Moby-Dick* tore off his leg, so he was forced to

have the carpenter make a replacement. Though he despises the bodily vulnerability that this modification marks, Ahab also finds a certain consolation in it. Notably, his prosthetic legs are made not of wood but of whale ivory, and he has a large collection of them. He thus incorporates a part of the whale into himself—into his new and altered body. The *Pequod* bears similar modifications, including some made of whale parts, that reflect her past, as described when Ishmael first sees the ship:

But to all these her old antiquities, were added new and marvellous features, pertaining to the wild business that for more than half a century she had followed... She was apparelled like any barbaric Ethiopian emperor, his neck heavy with pendants of polished ivory... A cannibal of a craft, tricking herself forth in the chased bones of her enemies. All round, her unpanelled, open bulwarks were garnished like one continuous jaw, with the long sharp teeth of the sperm whale, inserted there for pins, to fasten her old hempen thews and tendons to. Those thews ran not through base blocks of land wood, but deftly travelled over sheaves of sea-ivory. Scorning a turnstile wheel at her reverend helm, she sported there a tiller; and that tiller was in one mass, curiously carved from the long narrow lower jaw of her hereditary foe. (77-8)

The *Pequod* wears accouterments of the same material as her captain's prosthetic leg. In a sense, Ahab and the *Pequod* share what James Frazer might call a sympathetic-magic bond. The ship reflects her captain: his state is her state and vice versa. Both Ahab and his ship are systems of perpetual modification. Ahab's own modifications, his prosthetic legs, bind him more closely to the ship than he would be if he had both legs—he can affix his peg leg inside the ship's auger-holes. Unfortunately for his overarching goal, however, he can insert part of himself into the *Pequod*, but Moby Dick, the chaos-inducing beast, inserts and kills: “Retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice were in his whole aspect, and spite of all that mortal men could do, the solid white buttress of his forehead smote the ship's starboard bow, till men and timbers reeled” (622). In this way, Moby Dick is the ultimate embodied male ideal that Ahab seeks: an aloof, indomitable creature that penetrates with ease and finality,

resolving everything with one mighty thrust. Moby Dick, not Ahab, is the *Pequod's* final master in the sense that he conquers and destroys her. The mightiest hunter of all is a creature of nature, not of culture. Furthermore, while Moby Dick occupies a phallic role in this scene and is always gendered male by the *Pequod's* captain and crew, we are never certain that the whale is male in a biological sense; the narrative voice does not examine the White Whale's sex; in one last irony, the embodiment of the supreme phallus remains androgynous, as the primordial sea was before splitting into two. Ahab, of course, does not live to learn this lesson, and endows the physical resources available to him with phallic significance until the end of his life. The cultural paradigm of maleness, which upholds violence as its prime enactment, would have to crown Moby Dick, not Ahab, the better male for accomplishing the deadlier penetration. Such a label would, as far as the narrative divulges, mean nothing to the whale himself, whom the reader has no reason to believe acted out of anything other than self-defense. The irony thus multiplies itself.

Before the text plays its last irony, however, Ahab demonstrates his belief in the power of prosthesis to aid in actualizing maleness. When, in a prescient scene for a nineteenth-century text, Ahab describes his own problems with what the twenty-first century refers to as “phantom limb syndrome,” he asks the carpenter, whom he also addresses as “man-maker,” “Canst thou not drive that old Adam away?” (513). This question occurs shortly after the carpenter disavows any association with molding clay, implying his refusal that his constructed body-part-substitutes are in any way like God forming Adam from clay—as Ahab remarks, sarcastically, “The fellow's impious” (513). But Ahab figures the carpenter as a man-maker, nonetheless, though in a different sense. In Ahab's wild

imagination, the carpenter, because he wields the ship's tool supply, possesses the power to actualize the ideal of man:

[W]hile Prometheus [a revealing epithet for the ship's blacksmith] is about it, I'll order a complete man after the desirable pattern. Imprimis, fifty feet high in his socks; then, chest modelled after the Thames Tunnel; then, legs with roots to 'em, to stay in one place; then, arms three feet through the wrist; no heart at all, brass forehead, and about a quarter of an acre of fine brains; and let me see—shall I order eyes to see outwards? No, but a sky-light on top of his head to illuminate inwards. (512)

Ahab's mechanical construct is a self-sufficient body—it is a perpetual motion machine, the premier rugged individual who neither needs aid nor provides it to others. Other instances of Ahab's dialogue indicate a disapproval of the limited body and a lionizing of the concept of the self-sufficient soul, but his way of thinking admits a loophole in which the self-sufficient soul can be embodied. A self-sufficient soul, in this monologue, is distinctly a male body. As opposed to the immanence of femaleness, maleness is transcendent. Not only does this body never feel the encumbrance of menstruation, pregnancy, or childbirth, it also feels no emotions, not the least of which is the longing for community.

### **Self-Reliance and Its Perils**

*Moby-Dick* presents idealized male fellowship at its most obvious. In the absence of women, particularly, such brotherhood is configured as erotic. Ahab, however, does not deign to engage in the physical or emotional intimacy his crew share. When the situation calls for violence, as in the lowering after whales, he springs to action; when the men indulge in moments of shared physical or even recreational pleasure, as in "Forecastle—Midnight" and "A Squeeze of the Hand," he does not participate. While male supremacy *per se* ceases to have meaning in an all-male environment, the psychological need for dominance remains. According to some feminist scholars, the supreme value of masculinity, even more than

violence, is isolation. Speaking of the morally bankrupt value system promoted in pornographic magazines such as *Playboy*, Judith Bat-Ada summarizes this toxic masculine worldview as “the isolated, mechanistic, aggressive male life-style” and defines the ideal person in this ideology as “the ‘winner’ male” (114). Once again, the virtue of self-reliance becomes pathological.

The value of isolation reaches its crest in Chapter 128, “The *Pequod* Meets the *Rachel*,” in which Ahab refuses to help Captain Gardiner search for his missing son:

"I will not go," said the stranger, "till you say aye to me. Do to me as you would have me do to you in the like case. For you too have a boy, Captain Ahab—though but a child, and nestling safely at home now—a child of your old age too—Yes, yes, you relent; I see it—run, run, men, now, and stand by to square in the yards."

"Avast," cried Ahab— "touch not a rope-yarn"; then in a voice that prolongingly moulded every word—"Captain Gardiner, I will not do it. Even now I lose time, Good-bye, good-bye. God bless ye, man, and may I forgive myself, but I must go. Mr. Starbuck, look at the binnacle watch, and in three minutes from this present instant warn off all strangers; then brace forward again, and let the ship sail as before." (520)

No sense of community remains in Ahab. Even an exclusively male community still requires a certain amount of empathy and caring, and to act on these feelings would prevent Ahab from actualizing maleness and achieving the imposition of order onto chaos. Dworkin stresses that not only male dominance but the male gender identity itself is predicated on sexual violence, which binds inextricably to isolation: “Male desire is the stuff of murder, not love” (147). According to her, most men, like most women, feel a natural intimacy with their own socially identified sex, but because maleness requires isolation, men must avoid bonding with each other in any way that reveals vulnerability, lest they put their identities—and, knowing one another’s propensity for violence, their bodily integrity—at stake. Without women, the boundary men erect between *philia* and *eros* breaks down, but in such a

situation, men also cannot project their sexually violent desires upon women; men have no choice but to realize that they are sexually vulnerable to one another. The aforementioned symbolism of the whale hunt as a rape of nature becomes glaring in this light. The sailors' enthusiastic acceptance of Ahab's lust for Moby Dick's death points to a dramatized attempt at community *through* violence. Maleness as an institution places relationships among men on a pedestal, provided that those relationships are not erotic. In a male-superior paradigm, all relationships rest on a foundation of dominance and submission, and willing submission of one man to another negates not only masculinity but maleness itself. Thus, the best kind of homosocial male environment is predicated on violence enacted by multiple men against an out-group object. The catastrophic ending to which the embodiment of this principle consigns the men on the *Pequod* yet again demonstrates the fallacies of maleness as an essential concept, as does the mutual masturbation ritual over the whale's corpse, though obviously in a different way. Whereas the latter falsifies the idea of members of the socially identified male sex as naturally isolated and disinclined to sharing pleasures with one another, the former illustrates the self-destruction that can result from directing destruction toward others for the sake of reifying the male identity. To a crew of whalers, whales serve as great outlets for pent-up lust and hostility, as would women in other circumstances.

In a misogynistic framework, women exist to prevent men from having sex with men. This scenario should not be construed as situational homosexuality, the phenomenon whereby a man who prefers women or vice versa resorts to same-sex activity in a homosocial environment. Rather, in Dworkin's analysis, heterosexuality itself is a façade. The all-male milieu of *Moby-Dick* brings to light the deeply repressed desires that she postulates lurk within many men. Note that Dworkin does not indict all persons born with penises as the

perpetrators of rape culture; in fact, she means that rape culture strengthens the male identity of a person who identifies with the concept of maleness, both in that person's view and the eyes of other men. When one side of the male/female binary is the most crucial part of a person's selfhood, then clinging to that side in as many ways as possible feels like expanding the self. John Stoltenberg, Dworkin's colleague and partner, expounds upon these matters at length in "How Men Have (a) Sex," which forwards the vision of an alternative Earth that does not divide humans into two oppositional sex categories. According to him, the concepts of maleness and masculinity have no basis in nature and are thus fraudulent, existing only to ensure the continuation of male supremacy:

Anatomically, each creature in the imaginary world I have been describing could be an identical twin of every human being on earth. These creatures, in fact, are us—in every way except socially and politically. The way they are born is the way we are born. And we are not born belonging to one or the other of two sexes. We are born into a physiological continuum on which there is no discrete and definite point that you can call "male" and no discrete and definite point that you can call "female." If you look at all the variables in nature that are said to determine human "sex," you can't possibly find one that will unequivocally split the species into two...

People born with penises must strive to make the idea of male sexual identity personally real by doing certain deeds, actions that are valued and chosen because they produce the desired feeling of belonging to a sex that is male and not female... And there is a tacit social value system according to which certain acts are chosen because they make an individual's sexedness feel real and certain other acts are eschewed because they numb it. That value system is the ethics of male sexual identity—and it may well be the social origin of all injustice. (20)

Stoltenberg updated and shed additional light upon the message of this essay in a 2016

interview with Cristan Williams:

Does one need to believe there is such a thing as a biological black person in order to know that white supremacy and its corollary race hate must be eliminated? Of course not... What's driving both systems of dominance—white supremacy and male supremacy—is nothing innate in human nature; it is the drive to reify an identity construct that exists only through institutionalized dominance and acts of power over and against...

Disagreements pop up as to which metaphor is the correct one for whatever people want or ought to mean when they say the words sex and gender. But really, we're all talking metaphors, mental imagery for different human beings' experiences of human embodiment.

Put another way, maleness is not an essence that can be determined to exist objectively, but because the belief in it is vital to the identities and base assumptions of many, it is reinforced at all costs, as though it does objectively exist and cannot be questioned. Ahab shares a similar attitude. Even at the brink of death, Ahab shuts down Starbuck's desperate assertion that "Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him" (555-6). Why might Ahab willingly consign himself and his crew to certain death "for hate's sake" (559)? Could it be that "the desired feeling of belonging to a sex that is male and not female" drives him so strongly that he would die before relinquishing it? As he confesses in this same final chapter, "Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels" (550), and during the storm in Chapter 119, "The Candles," he admits to the strength of his "queenly personality" (497-8). He confesses, in other words, that he is not the picture of cool-headed, authoritative logic he wants to be; instead, he acts under the command of his emotions, as women supposedly do. In addition, he has the imperious personality of a monarch, and so "demands [his] royal rights." This example of cognitive dissonance constitutes the most painful irony for Ahab, and finally, the "slippery" nature of gender identity infuriates him enough to resolve it once and for all or die trying.

Ultimately, the pen triumphs over the sword after all; Ishmael the chronicler, not Ahab the master of harpooners, survives the deadly quest for the embodiment of a transcendent concept. Ahab epitomizes the deterministic and thus unhealthy view of gender, and in this way has more of a connection to the patriarchal gods of antiquity than Melville declares explicitly.

For all its power, it is not the ending that hints at the profoundest irony in Ahab's character but the dialogue between Ahab and the carpenter. Ahab's body is modified, but he himself refuses to change: the only correct use of modifying tools is to bend reality on the anvil of preconceived notions. Physicality *must* represent a correspondence to an original essence in this philosophy; modifications to the physical form, instead of describing the personality, indicate evil. He warps the tools of modification into instruments of his ideology instead of seeing their potential as ways of describing—not prescribing—the personality. The narrative does, however, provide an excellent example of description through physical modification.

## II. Queequeg: The Illustrated Man

As I argue in the prior chapter in relation to Ahab, one of the central motifs of *Moby-Dick* is its characters' response to a classic, binary view of the world as matter versus spirit. Ahab, driven to force meaning onto an apparently chaotic and meaningless material plane, will only be satisfied with his own vision of imposed significance, as manifest physically by killing the whale. Of course, Ahab's desire to impose meaning fails, but, ironically, the closest example of a successful control of the material world is also on board the *Pequod*: the chief harpooner, Queequeg. Like Ahab, Queequeg has a modified body. However, rather than seeing in his body evidence of a physical weakness that fate compels him to attempt to overcome, as is signified by Ahab's whale-bone leg, Queequeg's tattoos suggest his power to change his body so as to at least somewhat refute Ahab's rigid mind/body dualism, an ideology that mind and body constitute two oppositional essences and that the one is superior to the other. Queequeg, alternatively, exhibits what the novel suggests is a healthier alternative to Ahab's obsessive transcendentalism. He exemplifies a more descriptive body, and, in this way, his physical being militates against "from birth" essentialisms. His body is not set in stone—its physicality is malleable, according to his mind's desires, and he proves this principle by modifying his body via his tattoos, chosen as they have been to symbolize what he has experienced in his life, to reveal his integrated physical and mental subjectivities. In this way, he demonstrates that anatomy need not be not destiny. He exemplifies self-actualization through transition.

Certainly, anatomy and socialization can warp a person who hopes to achieve self-actualization: the repressive state apparatuses of Western society in some ways damage Queequeg—and they ultimately cost him his life when he goes down with the *Pequod*. Spending time in European-American civilization, a milieu founded on significantly different expectations, goals, and beliefs than what the novel elliptically suggests is the utopia of Polynesia from which Queequeg originates, causes him to adopt behaviors that fit into that Western culture, and that same Western civilization figures Queequeg as “The Other” for reasons, more than any other, that are made visible through his body. Indeed, not only does his physicality instantly mark him as foreign to Christian New Englanders, but his tattooed body rebuts the moralistic idea of a fixed self with a physical form that is God-given and must never be subject to intentional change. In this way, he anticipates the discourse surrounding the embodiment of gender, particularly as it pertains to transsexual surgery. As such, he constitutes an unspoken contrast to Ahab, who elevates the mind above the body but still evidently believes that maleness must have an objective physical form.

### **“A Man Like Queequeg You Don’t See Every Day”**

In addition to constituting a distinct character in his own right, Queequeg also symbolizes a literary archetype in the novel: he is a classic “noble savage.” He is both specifically Polynesian (although his exact origin within the “South Seas” is somewhat unclear) and generally foreign: he contains a variety of traits of the native “Other,” combining multiple symbols of “the savage” into a single character. He speaks in a stereotypical “primitive” dialect—for instance, “[H]im bery small fish-ee; Queequeg no kill-e so small-e fish; Queequeg kill-e big whale!” (67), notably unlike the other “cannibal” harpooners, Tashtego and Daggoo, who use complete sentences. He is also a “head-

shrinker”: Peter Coffin describes the curios Queequeg sells to New England residents as “New Zealand heads” (20), implying that Coffin confuses Queequeg as both a Maaori and, simultaneously, an Ecuadoran Shuar. Similarly, Ishmael’s initial introduction to Queequeg focuses on his foreign and “frightening” appearance and religious practices (23-5). Ishmael notes that Queequeg carries a combination tomahawk and pipe, conflating two separate implements that are emblematic of indigenous North American peoples (25). Moreover, Queequeg’s proffered homeland of “Kokovoko” is more a storybook conceptualization of universalized Pacific islands rather than any real place, and the character’s status as a “king” of Kokovoko invokes a monarchical system (60) unknown in most of Polynesia, including in the Marquesas Islands, which Melville personally visited and on which his novel *Typee* is set. Robert Martin reads the significance of Queequeg’s disparate cultural markers in this way: “Queequeg as a composite nonwhite figure illustrates the links between the destruction of the Indian, the enslavement of the black, and the colonization of all nonwhite peoples... He is a representative of all darker races subjugated by Western belief in progress and civilization” (79). As Queequeg symbolizes everything foreign to the Puritan-descended New England milieu, so does Ishmael symbolize everything familiar to a dogmatically Protestant culture while remaining uneasy with his place in such a society, making the two characters complementary to one another. Indeed, it is difficult not to read Queequeg’s ensuing relationship with Ishmael as a microcosm of an alternative vision of white/native relations. Rather than the white man clapping the darker man in chains or the indigenous man sitting at the European-descended man’s feet for instruction in Christianity and English, both men lie peacefully in each other’s embrace. The indigenous person has no wish to harm the white person; indeed, the supposed hostility on the indigenous person’s part is a projection from the

white person's baseless fear. Colonialism's excuses have no foundation. Ideally, two cultures would open to new levels of friendship and love upon meeting, and in this situation, they do.

Before the narrative reaches this scene of an all but eroticized ethnic fraternity, however, Ishmael discloses that Queequeg evidently finds the customs of Western civilization, and in particular, the values of New England, decidedly counterintuitive, and he so he alters his behavior to try to adapt to them, though only with partial success. His morning routine is seen as distinctly awkward by Ishmael, who notices him dressing himself under the bed they shared the previous night: "What under the heavens he did it for, I cannot tell, but his next movement was to crush himself—boots in hand, and hat on—under the bed; when, from sundry violent gaspings and strainings, I inferred he was hard at work booting himself; though by no law of propriety that I ever heard of, is any man required to be private when putting on his boots" (30-1). Queequeg clearly finds following the customs of Nantucket challenging to understand, but he cares enough about being polite in front of Westerners that he nonetheless attempts to enact them. This attention paid to seemingly inconsequential details of Christian civilization foreshadows the subordinated role Queequeg will play under the command of nominally Quaker officers.

At the same time, this early scene offers a glimpse into Queequeg's most salient characteristic. Upon waking during the first morning they spend together, Ishmael asserts that he can assess Queequeg's character accurately by observing him rather than conversing with him. Based on Queequeg's morning rituals, Ishmael draws the conclusion that "[Queequeg] was a creature in the transition state—neither caterpillar nor butterfly" (31). This language characterizes Queequeg as a liminal entity. He does not reside in a fixed state and, as such, counters both Ahab's motivation and the Western cultural insistence on crystallizing into a

permanent self. The insistence that every transition has a definite ending looms strongly in discourse surrounding trans people, as Kate Bornstein describes: “To some transsexuals, the state of transsexuality is itself seen as transitory—a cocoon... Through its insistence and fierce maintenance of the man/woman dichotomy, the culture puts the pre-transition person in the position of needing to say a permanent good-bye to one gender, and then and only then saying hello to another” (154). Bornstein, like many trans people, acknowledges this view of transsexuality as highly reductive. Trans women and trans men do not in and of themselves belong to third genders or spaces between the socially acknowledged sexes. Many trans (as in, non-cisgender) people identify outside the male/female binary, but this phenomenon is separate from identifying on the other side of the gender binary than is societally and medically assigned to one’s sex. The anthropological gaze, normative by design, renders anything outside the cisgender matrix as a quaint state of bizarre liminality, just as the same mode characterizes indigenous cultures as amusing at best and debased and depraved at worst. Bornstein continues, “Anne Bolin describes gender transition in terms of an anthropological model: the individual withdraws from the culture, its rules and its company, in order to effect the loss of one identity and the taking-on of another” (154). With these connections in mind, it becomes evident that the sight of Queequeg acclimating himself to the customs of civilization initially provokes, on Ishmael’s part, a similar reaction to a nineteenth-century anthropologist’s detached fascination. Here, Ishmael’s relationship with Queequeg is just beginning; Queequeg has not yet pledged marriage to Ishmael. Additionally, we can also see in Ishmael’s style of observation an instance of his own projection. Ishmael appears to still be a relatively young man during the events of the novel, and he certainly has a weaker sense of his own identity—little known family history, no

career trajectory, not even a described body—than is the case for the novel’s other major characters. For instance, at the outset of the novel he describes his lack of interest in conforming to the recommended life of a landsman, marking him already as something of a willing defector from the core of Western civilization on land and eager to join the at least somewhat more multi-ethnic, multi-cultural milieu of a whaling ship. In addition, spending the night in the same bed with Queequeg, particularly given his “queer” feelings about being “spooned” by Queequeg the following morning, further challenges Ishmael’s sense of his own “typical” masculinity and maleness—or, more precisely, it has reinforced for the reader that he had a slippery grasp on it to begin with; thus, in this scene we first clearly see what is repeated throughout most of the novel: Queequeg’s mind/body subjectivities challenge the notion that the beliefs and lifestyle of European-American Christians are inherent, naturally ordained, and superior to those of all other cultures.

### **The Flesh is Mightier Than the Word**

Despite Queequeg’s significance to the story, he verbalizes only occasionally, leaving the readers, who are primed to understand the events of the text through the language of its characters, to look to the narrator Ishmael for a deeper insight into Queequeg’s character. Ishmael thus emerges as a kind of translator and interpreter, providing a mediated view of Queequeg’s mind, although even Ishmael does not possess full comprehension of his closest companion’s world-view. However, this mediation of our access to Queequeg’s inner life also serves to highlight how his character is largely understood through his physical presence, rather than through verbal representation, and scholars have long pointed this out. Robert K. Martin, for instance, describes Queequeg as “practically preverbal” but acknowledges that his minimal “language is sufficient to establish a bond of love with

Ishmael" (72), and this evident "love" establishes Ishmael as a relatively accurate "reader" of Queequeg's mind. Most significant, however, is that Queequeg's body—and Ishmael's observations about it—are the principal means by which the character "talks." Queequeg expresses himself with his body and the actions he performs. During the first night Queequeg and Ishmael spend together, for instance, they bond physically even before they bond verbally. Only after Queequeg "affectionately throw[s] his brown tattooed legs over" his companion's does Ishmael engage in "some little chat" with him, a conversation that keeps them awake for some time, but the contents of which readers learn very little. Christoph Hartner notes that Ishmael seems to become more carnal after his first night sleeping with Queequeg, as seen for example in the narrative's description of a young man who possesses a "healthy cheek... like a sun-toasted pear in hue" (33). By example, then, Queequeg indicates a healthy form of identity consolidation—he has integrated his body and mind so much that he is not hampered from making emotional connections even without using much speech. In this way, he suggests an alternative to the mind/body duality that plagues Ahab. To Ahab, the mind is superior to the body, but the ideal body is one and the same as the mind's pre-existing transcendent essence. Queequeg entertains no such cognitive dissonance. For him, the body is as sacred as the mind, and as the mind changes, so the body can change as well. Fleshly happiness gives him the strength to strive for the spirit, and his spiritual beliefs nourish and inform his body.

However, we should not read Queequeg's physicality as all about his appetites. At certain times, Queequeg is rather ascetic, though, at others, he does throw himself wholeheartedly into physical pleasures. Thus, what are positioned as opposite polarities are for the character simply different modes of being combined harmoniously within the same

person. For an instance of the former, Queequeg's religious practices dictate a committed practice of self-denial. Rather than accompanying Ishmael to the docks, where they might select a ship to board, Queequeg insists that Ishmael alone choose a whaling ship in order that Queequeg be able to spend the day in solemn fasting and religious contemplation.

During this time, he appears to avoid all food whatsoever—Ishmael refers to this period as "Fasting and Humiliation" (90). Thus, Beaver has argued that, "Queequeg proves the true ascetic; Ishmael, merely a hollow champion of 'Hygiene and common sense'" (724).

Beaver's reading of the character's religious self-denial, enacted as it is in the context of a "idolatrous" and "pagan-Other" religion, suggests that, even at his most non-Western, Queequeg emerges a better proponent of Puritan values such as bodily self-denial than Western Christians.

At the same time, the novel also makes clear that Queequeg embraces his appetites and his carnality. Early in the novel the ironically named character (given the novel's conclusion) Peter Coffin informs Ishmael that the "dark-complexioned" harpooner "never eats dumplings, he don't—he eats nothing but steaks, and he likes 'em rare" (16). The following morning we witness Coffin's (possibly intentionally intimidating) description of Queequeg's dietary habits. Queequeg only eats steak for his breakfast, even spearing it on the point of his harpoon to take it from his plate. He of course evinces no squeamishness at the sight or consumption of animal meat, and he even consumes it in what itself could be seen as a suggestive fashion, penetrating his bloody food with his long harpoon point before eating it. This unselfconscious physical indulgence continues in Chapter 34, "The Cabin-Table": in stark contrast to the officers, who eat dinner under "hardly tolerable constraint and nameless invisible domineerings" (164), the harpooners, Queequeg chief among them, "[chew] their

food with such a relish that there [is] a report to it” (164); they “[fill] their bellies like Indian ships loading all day with spices” (164). The narrator Ishmael here somewhat essentializes the harpooners’ eating habits, implying that their uncivilized origins dictate their gustatory voluptuousness and sloppy table manners, noting particularly that Queequeg eats “with a mortal, barbaric smack of the lip” (165), though the novel suggests Ishmael is glossing from a standard “Western” perspective here, rather than reflecting a deeply considered and tightly held belief.

Additionally, Queequeg’s dietary appetites bear a sexual significance. According to Caleb Crain, nineteenth-century literature often framed cannibalism as a metaphor for homosexual activity (28), and Christoph Hartner builds on this idea to read nineteenth-century adventure literature generally, and Melville specifically, as marking the consumption of human flesh as a sexual act, noting that, beginning with *Typee* and continuing throughout the Melville bibliography: “[C]annibalism and promiscuous (homo)sexuality were strangely united in the role of the savage of the South Seas” (183). In other words, Queequeg’s posited carnivorous propensity, as well as his habits of eating style, function both literally and metaphorically: he enjoys eating meat without reservation—indeed, he strongly prefers it to all other foods—and this fondness for animal flesh metaphorically hints at his “cannibal” origins in the “South Seas,” an origin which, in combination with his taste for meat, suggests a prodigious sex drive and a preference for males as sexual partners.

In addition to his exotic, cannibalistic, and homo-sexualized origin in the “South Seas,” Queequeg’s tattoos are also significant to his function in the novel. When Ishmael, newly awake in Queequeg’s embrace, gets a close look at the markings on his arm, he describes Queequeg’s flesh as “tattooed all over with an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a

figure” (28). The modifications that express Queequeg’s character are immediately visible, but they are also somewhat opaque and labyrinthine; they are, at least upon initial viewing, nearly indecipherable to Ishmael. Instead of trying to determine their meaning for himself or the reader, however, Ishmael simply speaks of their existence. Their full potential does not appear until much later, and then it is only gestured at. Toward the novel’s end, in Chapter 119, “The Candles,” the St. Elmo’s fire that *Pequod* encounters causes “Queequeg's tattooing [to burn] like Satanic blue flames on his body” (549). In the eerie oceanic light, the narrative voice projects another assumption onto a pagan character, and this assumption derives directly from the sight of the modified body. For context, the other two harpooners receive similar description that emphasizes their specifically pagan and therefore uninhibited (the narrative implies) powers of intimidation: “Relieved against the ghostly light, the gigantic jet negro, Daggoo, loomed up to thrice his real stature, and seemed the black cloud from which the thunder had come. The parted mouth of Tashtego revealed his shark-white teeth, which strangely gleamed as if they too had been tipped by corpusants” (549). This scene hints at the ultimate significance of Queequeg’s tattoos: they connect him to a nature beyond societal normativity. Nature does not mean meekly accepting everything, including one’s body, as it is initially, but, rather, it means embracing change. This nature is pagan and “Satanic” by way of contrast to the submission to a binary status quo demanded by Christian New England (and the Western world in general). The tattoos constitute a subtle but powerful link between Queequeg and Ahab—both characters have body modifications, and the type of modification informs each character’s identity and its expression. Moreover, the first instance of a significant body modification in the narrative implies that the ensuing narrative itself will take a nondeterministic point of view, even if the narrator Ishmael voice does not commit to

this worldview equally at all times. Queequeg thus complicates Puritan-adjacent views of the body and identity and, by extension, gender, in much the same way as real persons who modify their bodies in the contemporary world.

Culturally speaking, body modifications themselves are never value-neutral. Quite the contrary: all changes to the body, according to critical analysis, represent one's relation to and opinion of the status quo. Nowhere do the political implications of the body modification become more evident than in sex reassignment—but, in the abstract, body modifications exist on a continuum and cannot be extricated from one another. Nikki Sullivan describes it this way: “Perhaps at bottom, what procedures as diverse as mastectomies, penectomies, hormone treatments, tattooing, breast enhancement, implants, corsetry, rhinoplasty, scarification, branding, and so on, have in common, is that they all function...to explicitly transform bodily being—they are all, in one sense at least, ‘trans’ practices” (352). She builds on Halberstam's claim that a linkage between transsexual surgery and other more widely experienced forms of body modification can and should help legitimize the former. Sullivan also notes, however, that opinions on body modification are divided, with some scholars arguing that certain forms of body modification are subversive while their opponents hold that such modifications are ultimately conformist, and yet other scholars assert that body modification always signifies submission to constrictive social norms. According to Sullivan, then, opposition to body modification based on the belief that it reinforces societal repression overwhelms the embrace of body modification as a means to self-actualization: “what... I have been searching for high and low [is] a critique of the all too often unquestioned conflation of cosmetic surgery with conformity” (555). In her 1980 government report,

“Paper Prepared for the National Center for Health Care Technology on the Social and Ethical Aspects of Transsexual Surgery,” Janice Raymond expounds the latter view:

While there are many who feel that morality must be built into law, I believe that the elimination of transsexualism is not best achieved by legislation prohibiting transsexual treatment and surgery but rather by legislation that limits it and by other legislation that lessens the support given to sex-role stereotyping, which generated the problem to begin with.

Sullivan also comments on Raymond and other feminists who read body modification, particularly transsexual surgery, as self-mutilation:

What Janice Raymond’s work on transsexualism illustrates most profoundly is that other people will not always read one’s actions and/or one’s embodied being in the same way as one might understand one’s own, and that there are all sorts of very real material effects which occur in and through such a disjunction... The monster, a surgically created yet fleshly being, is, for Daly and Raymond, a symptom of (patriarchal) power gone mad, and if that isn’t bad enough, some women (perhaps even some feminists) have been seduced, they argue, into becoming monsters, or at least into offering hospitality to monsters, rather than responding with the kind of (metaphoric) violence that such a situation calls for, at least in their scheme of things (556-7).

Bornstein further observes that “Raymond and her followers believe in some essential thing called ‘woman,’ and some other essential thing called ‘man,’ and she sees trans women as encroaching on her space... If I attempt to decide my own gender, I am apparently transgressing against nature” (61). To sex essentialists, whether feminist or openly traditionalist, culture and nature are the same: what culture calls female (though not feminine) equates to what is female by nature. No modification can change the essence, according to this mentality. The common denominator among all such denunciations of body modification is the presumed sacredness of the original body, as though the form the human body takes at birth is God’s (or nature’s) intention and that any change made to it is a “sin,” even if that sin is against “nature” rather than God. Although the idea of divine will certainly does not restrict itself to Christianity, the notion that the desire to change the body mandates

guilt for transgressing the divine, or even the “natural,s” will has a distinctly Christian cast.

One of *Moby-Dick*'s central themes is conflict between Christian and pagan cultural values and behaviors even as Christian and pagan men must work together for a common goal, and this tension finds expression in similarly described fears. The narrative voice associates physical modifications with “savagery.” Upon first seeing the ivory ornament-bedecked *Pequod*, herself named for “an extinct tribe,” Ishmael describes her as “apparelled like any barbaric Ethiopian emperor, his neck heavy with pendants of polished ivory... A cannibal of a craft, tricking herself forth in the chased bones of her enemies” (78). As the *Pequod* is a savage, so is she noble: “A noble craft, but somehow a most melancholy! All noble things are touched with that” (78). Put another way, the Christian milieu that gave Ishmael the tools to assemble his perspective on the world does not approve of artificially changing the body. Only “savages” from the distant corners of the globe modify the forms nature assigned them. Because “savages,” coming from pagan and non-European origins, have no connection to Christianity or to the Enlightenment, they (at least as presented in *Moby-Dick*) avoid the prescriptive sexual essentialism of both ideologies.

Melville's own bibliography and life experiences suggest that he might well have had an expansive view about the relations between gender and the mind while conceiving of Queequeg's character. To begin with the most conventional (by Western standards) erotic configuration associated with the South Pacific, the trope of the Polynesian maiden enticing the white sailor sexually, which Melville depicts straightforwardly in the romance between Fayaway and Tommo in *Typee*, receives a homosexual twist in *Moby-Dick*. Queequeg, a fantasy figure by any standard, is at once Ishmael's Fayaway and Kory-Kory: a baritone siren. Furthermore, Polynesian cultures often recognize three genders, the best known of

which is the *fa'afafine*, meaning “in the manner of a woman,” indigenous to Samoa and established in New Zealand (Roen 660). As his semiautobiographical first novel, *Typee*, attests, Melville spent time in the Marquesas archipelago as a young sailor who had jumped ship from his whaler, where he would likely have encountered *fa'afafine*, and, certainly, where he would have discovered a distinct alternative to the European-American system of sexuality: as his autobiographical narrator “Tommo” notes in *Typee*:

The girls are first wooed and won, at a very tender age, by some stripling in the household in which they reside. This, however, is a mere frolic of the affections, and no formal engagement is contracted. By the time this first love has a little subsided a second suitor presents himself, of graver years, and carries both boy and girl away to his habitation. This disinterested and generous-hearted fellow now weds the young couple—marrying damsel and lover at the same time—and all three thenceforth live together as harmoniously as so many turtles. (135)

Attesting to the veracity of what Melville wrote in *Typee*, Caleb Crain notes that “recent anthropology has confirmed the homosexual activity of the Marquesans . . . homosexual and autoerotic play is standard for Marquesan children and adolescents. If women are scarce on a particular island, homosexuality is considered a normal practice for adult men as well” (31). In opposition to Sheila Jeffreys’s arguments<sup>1</sup>, in other words, a culture can approve of homosexual activity *and* permanent gender liminality at the same time. Nineteenth-century New England, however, was pointedly not one of those cultures, and Queequeg must thus adapt himself to that culture, seemingly for his safety when he is among New Englanders but ultimately at his own peril, given his general decline in the later chapters of *Moby-Dick* and his death when the *Pequod* goes down, stove-in by the whale Moby Dick.

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<sup>1</sup> “[T]ranssexuals are people who have grown up in a homophobic society but are attracted to others of their own sex. . . . In order to relate to people of their own sex they need to transform their bodies so that they can convince themselves that they are really heterosexual” (176).

### The Strictures of Western Society

The first sign that Queequeg must bend to the demands of a society that still generally regards him as inferior because he is Other occurs in Chapter 18, “His Mark.” When the *Pequod*’s nominally Christian owners ask for a display of his whale-hunting prowess, he obliges:

Without saying a word, Queequeg, in his wild sort of way, jumped upon the bulwarks, from thence into the bows of one of the whale-boats hanging to the side; and then bracing his left knee, and poising his harpoon, cried out in some such way as this:

"Cap'ain, you see him small drop tar on water dere? You see him? well, spose him one whale eye, well, den!" and taking sharp aim at it, he darted the iron right over old Bildad's broad brim, clean across the ship's decks, and struck the glistening tar spot out of sight.

"Now," said Queequeg, quietly, hauling in the line, "spos-ee him whale-e eye; why, dad whale dead." (97-8)

Upon witnessing Queequeg’s remarkable accuracy with a harpoon, Bildad and Peleg give up their initial insistence that they “let no cannibals on board that craft, unless they previously produced their papers” (96). That is, because he is of great use to white men who claim affiliation with a Christian church, Queequeg can be tolerated and even rewarded—in this case, with a larger share of the whaling profits than most harpooners receive (98). The *Pequod*, then, welcomes men from distinctly non-Christian environments, but only in so far as such men work under the control of white officers who see them as means, as tools for ends as much as humans, whether those ends are financial profits or, in Ahab’s case, the achievement of a transcendental goal.

Significantly, however, Queequeg also exemplifies a masculine ideal—that of the mighty warrior and hunter. That ideal is embodied in the character’s physical skill, and it is

greatly helpful in furthering the goals of the whaling industry, but he simultaneously has qualities the narrative designates as decidedly feminine. Upon his first awakening in Queequeg's arms, for instance, Ishmael feels as if his body is a "supernatural hand" that clutched him during a punishment from his *stepmother*: "now, take away the awful fear, and my sensations at feeling the supernatural hand in mine were very similar, in the strangeness, to those which I experienced on waking up and seeing Queequeg's pagan arm thrown round me" (29). When Tashtego falls into the sperm whale's head, Queequeg rescues him by cutting him out in a manner reminiscent of the feminine folk-obstetrician: "...through the courage and great skill in obstetrics of Queequeg, the deliverance, or rather, delivery of Tashtego, was successfully accomplished... midwifery should be taught in the same course with fencing and boxing, riding and rowing" (376). In other words, Queequeg establishes a union of femininity and masculinity within the same person, and the novel suggests this is thus not only possible, but even desirable. Because these two cultural binary positions carry as much weight as they do, Queequeg cannot escape them, but he can inhabit both at once. For this whaling ship's ostensible mission (not Ahab's desire to kill Moby Dick but generally slaying whales for their oil) to prevail, the crew must have some sense of community and compassion: no man is thus expendable. Even in this violent industry, the participants must have some nurturing tendencies in order to survive. Harold Beaver even reads the above scene as an additional example of homoeroticism that nonetheless has "feminine" as well as "masculine" participants: "In this curious homosexual farrago where male rams male, and brave delivers long-haired brave from a bridal chamber of sperm oil, the erotic roles are as confused among men as the sexual symbolism among whales" [842].) In any case, for all that the *Pequod* requires social support and loving camaraderie to function, its mission—whether

its originally intended one to hunt whales for their oil or for Ahab's repurposed goal to kill Moby-Dick—remains fundamentally destructive, and Queequeg ultimately proves as prone to violence in the name of an imposed sense of a logically ordered world as any of the other characters. In this sense, the book's universalism takes on a grim aspect. All men are created equal, and they are also alike, regardless of ethnic origin, in their propensity for aggression and bloodshed, however much cultures may vary in their mores and views of gender, sex, and sexuality.

In fact, though the *Pequod's* crew are ethnically diverse, racial tension persists, as seen, for instance, in the conflict between Daggoo and the Spanish sailor toward the end of Chapter 40. Nor is Queequeg himself immune from such strife, based on the language he uses in Chapter 66, "The Shark Massacre": "'Queequeg no care what god made him shark,' said the savage, agonizingly lifting his hand up and down; 'wedder Fejee god or Nantucket god; but de god wat made shark must be one dam Ingin'" (329). Here, he employs the othering racial language of some of the white sailors, who have no trouble referring to crewmen of color as savages and cannibals. In this case, "Ingin" becomes a byword for a vicious, untrustworthy entity. By disclaiming any allegiance with American Indians, despite owning what in the eyes of Ishmael appears to be a combination tomahawk and pipe, Queequeg implicitly declares himself to share the view of American Indians held by the white commanders of the whaling ship—and, by extension, the Western whaling industry.

Given that Queequeg has thus, at least to some degree, begun to internalize the values of the West, it is not surprising that the physical tool he uses for his commanders' purposes is, of course, his harpoon, an object that penetrates the flesh of whales. Penetration by the penis, according to Dworkin, constitutes the ultimate masculine method of establishing

selfhood and domination: “the seventh tenet of male supremacy is that sexual power authentically originates in the penis. Masculinity in action, narrowly in the act of sex as men define it or more widely in any act of taking, is sexual power fulfilling itself, being true to its own nature” (24). Because Ahab’s primary motivation is determining his selfhood against the barrier of an apparently immovable natural environment (that is, his desire to remake the world in the image of his own ideal of order), he has much to admire and utilize in Queequeg, who can boast great skill with a harpoon, an obvious phallic symbol. Nor is Ahab’s philosophical quest the only masculinist goal marked in this way. For instance, Starbuck, to whom Queequeg answers directly, has no less ignoble a motive than the captain: whales, for Starbuck, exist only for the good of the “Nantucket market” (177), and Queequeg makes an excellent tool for a violent industry. As Harold Beaver describes this relation, “...[T]hough quick enough to utilize Queequeg, [the Christians of New England] cannot accept him. They can accept only his *function*, that is, not his *person*” (724). Beaver here refers specifically to the ship owners Bildad and Peleg, but his words apply equally to Starbuck and to the business of whaling and its use of “Others”’s almost literal harpoons to achieve its exploitative ends.

Extrapolating from the Christian/pagan antagonism, if Ahab’s body includes a feature identified with pagan cultures—a prosthesis, thus a modification—then the novel thematically links him to the pagan harpooners. By contrast, Starbuck keeps a demonstrably less open mind to the “heathen” crewmen, as shown in his internal monologue in Chapter 38, “Dusk”: “Oh, God! To sail with such a heathen crew that have small touch of human mothers in them! Whelped somewhere by the sharkish sea. The white whale is their demogorgon” (184). Queequeg’s harpoon contains his function; his modified body reveals his person,

whom none of his superiors attempt to understand. Only the narrator cares to understand Queequeg's person, and even then, he never succeeds perfectly.

### **The Coffin**

The significance of Queequeg's modified body and its potential for description rather than prescription reaches its apogee in Chapter 110, "Queequeg in His Coffin." Here, as Queequeg teeters on the verge of death, he best exemplifies that his modified body is something sacred rather than base or profane. Though all the crewmen observe the slowly dying Queequeg with genuine sadness, they do so in silence, and the narrator (barely recognizable as Ishmael at all by this point) implies that their reticence originates from a respect akin to that accorded a religious figure: "an awe that cannot be named would steal over you as you sat by the side of this waning savage, and saw as strange things in his face, as any beheld who were bystanders when Zoroaster died. For whatever is truly wondrous and fearful in man, never yet was put into words or books" (520). The crewmen cannot verbalize their grief because of their reverence at the sight of the dying Queequeg, and his own silence, to some degree, inspires and furthers that awe. Even sailors uninitiated into intimacy with Queequeg can read the sacredness he displays on his face, despite his absence of verbal communication: "...no dying Chaldee or Greek had higher and holier thoughts than these, whose mysterious shades you saw creeping over the face of poor Queequeg, as he quietly lay in his swaying hammock, and the rolling sea seemed gently rocking him to his final rest..." (520). The narrator here offers an insight into Queequeg's view of the afterlife: "not only do [the people of Kokovoko] believe that the stars are isles, but that far beyond all visible horizons, their own mild, uncontinented seas, interflow with the blue heavens; and so form the white breakers of the milky way" (521). Put another way, the Kokovokan vision of the

afterlife of the brave and virtuous is virtually identical to the environs of Kokovoko itself. Earth and Heaven mirror each other as they decidedly do not in Christian scriptures. Once again, Queequeg unites matter with spirit. Earth is a foretaste of Heaven's bliss, not a denial of it. Indeed, Queequeg's ultimate sense of the marriage of Heaven and Earth, and, by extension, of spirit and body, is foreshadowed as early as Chapter 13, "Wheelbarrow," in which Queequeg designates his sky-dwelling god "the great Giver of all feasts" (65). As he did with Ahab, the ship's carpenter uses his skills in material transformation to aid Queequeg's bodily and spiritual journey, but this chapter sees the carpenter approaching his function in a different manner. With Ahab, the carpenter converses freely, albeit guardedly, but here, following the behavior of the other sailors, he offers no comment while building Queequeg's coffin; it is as though this occasion, with this character, requires a level of holy solemnity uncalled for with Ahab.

Surprisingly, for many readers, Queequeg ultimately decides to will himself to live, after all, and he then carves his coffin to match his own modified bodily image: "Many spare hours he spent, in carving the lid with all manner of grotesque figures and drawings; and it seemed that hereby he was striving, in his rude way, to copy parts of the twisted tattooing on his body" (524). He makes what we might think of as a backup copy of his body, and, intriguingly, Ishmael announces here that Queequeg's tattoos constitute, in their own language, "a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold... but whose mysteries not even himself could read" (524). Two different psychological processes take place at once in this passage. In the first, Ishmael begins to realize that Queequeg's tattoos carry genuine meaning; in the second, Ishmael projects his own confusion *about* that

meaning onto his “fast bosom friend” (519). Surely Queequeg understands himself better than anyone else understands him, and the novel hints that he may see himself as innately and intimately connected with both “the heavens and the earth,” as opposed to viewing himself, as Ahab does, as inhabiting a fallen, earthly realm and striving desperately to receive superhuman spiritual grace. Even if Queequeg never verbally discloses his own beliefs about the meaning of life, he certainly never evinces any sort of nihilism. He is content, perhaps even happy, to demonstrate a life lived with purpose.

Because the coffin reflects Queequeg’s body, and he unites his body and his soul as none of the other men on the *Pequod* do, he is with Ishmael in *spirit* at the time Moby Dick sinks the ship. As Fiedler puts this relative success, the coffin, “graven with the symbols of Queequeg’s identity, standing in Queequeg’s stead . . . rises to the hand of Ishmael, who alone among the crew has risen to the surface of the sea” (382). At the novel’s conclusion, then, Queequeg has completed the arc of his moral superiority relative to most of the rest of the crew, particularly the Westerners. Alone of all them, he fulfills an ultimate and almost Christ-like self-sacrifice: his bodily coffin, rather than saving him as a life-buoy, saves Ishmael instead, and thus enables the tragic tale of the *Pequod* to be told. In saving Ishmael, Queequeg enables the novel.

### **The Pitfalls of Perfection**

If Queequeg possesses a relatively healthy psychological and bodily integration as compared to the other main characters discussed in this thesis, and if he also possesses a kind of unique sacredness in (and to) the novel, we might well ask, why does he not survive? Does the novel suggest he is ultimately too perfect for such an imperfect, even sinful, world, as

sentimental Victorian literature might have seen it? Has the violence-making and violence-affirming environment of whaling corrupted him so much, made him so much a part of its own existence, that it is only logical that the novel has him dying along with the maniacal Ahab, the mercenary Starbuck, the motivelessly antagonistic Stubb, and all the rest save the ghostly Ishmael?

Perhaps the question is not how Queequeg's fate is similar to that of the other whalers but how it is different. As I note above, Leslie Fiedler argues that Queequeg's death was a deliberate sacrifice: "[D]ie [for Ishmael] he does, for there is need. Indeed, only by his self-sacrifice is Ishmael's sentence of death finally commuted; only in his symbolic body is Ishmael finally snatched from death" (375). According to Fiedler, then, Queequeg's "sacrifice" is really a success, not a failure, and it underscores Melville's ultimate replacement of the conventional values of nineteenth-century Christianity with the communion of homosexuality, even as Fiedler argues such relations are presented in the novel as "Platonism without sodomy" (375). Fiedler writes, "it will not do to sentimentalize or Christianize Melville's pagan concept of love... It is not *caritas* which he celebrates; and his symbol for the redeeming passion is Priapus rather than the cross... [L]ike the ideal Eros of *The Symposium*, it is grounded in a relationship unequivally rejected by the Judaeo-Christian tradition" (372). Yet Fiedler critiques his own reading of the novel as morally problematic, at least from some conventional points of view: "genteel or orthodox advocates of love should look hard at Melville's text before deciding to applaud the conquest of death he celebrates in *Moby Dick*" (372). According to this reading, then, Melville essentially parodies Jesus's sacrifice for the compassionate love of all humanity with Queequeg's sacrifice for his sexual love of Ishmael. While this interpretation is in keeping with the text's

steady stream of irreverent references to biblical concepts and condemnations of hypocritical Christians, Queequeg's death also makes thematic sense on another level that Fiedler's famous reading does not incorporate. Once Queequeg joins the *Pequod* as a harpooner, his role is sufficiently masculine as to threaten not only all cetaceans but all nonhuman nature—even, perhaps, nature as it was before the first human ever beheld and tried to analyze it. Both Queequeg and Moby Dick bear hieroglyphs on their bodies, but while Queequeg's carvings surely make sense to observers from his own culture, no person can really understand the markings on the White Whale. Even when an individual subject aims to cultivate a deliberately mysterious identity to others (or, simply, meets with lack of understanding by others), a greater enigma will always lie beyond the individual subject. Whereas Queequeg presumably *chose* tattoos that reflected his inner personality and wore them happily, all of the carvings on Moby Dick's body are the nonconsensually applied projections and traces of encounters with hunters. The narrative emphasizes Queequeg's heavily inscribed skin in comparison to Moby Dick's whiteness as a resemblance of a blank canvas, inexplicably marked. That is, Queequeg's body modifications show that the self and the body are subject to change, but they also indicate that bodily human form can be made to reveal something of the mental existence of the subject: conceivably, Queequeg can be analyzed to some degree if the onlooker who "reads" him has the proper time, cultural context, and intimacy. By contrast, the White Whale forecloses any such possibility of a reading of a mind. Nature, to which Moby Dick belongs, constitutes the ultimate in potential fluidity in its impenetrable inscrutability. Even if one attempts to force a meaning onto nature, if one "marks" it as has Ahab and other whalers upon Moby-Dick's blank white

canvass, nature will refuse any human “readers” a satisfying interpretation and understanding of those marks. They reflect only human actions and nothing more.

Thus, Queequeg demonstrates that in rare cases, one can be *too* self-actualized. The self dissolves when confronted with the ultimate example of the unconstructed mystery refusing to submit to categorization or analysis. Ahab, the *Pequod*’s prime authority figure, utilized Queequeg’s skills as a wielder of phallic symbols to establish a sense of superhuman selfhood in himself. Unfortunately, the power of Moby Dick—that which cannot be pierced (analyzed)—refutes the selfhood of all those who possess it. Whether one survives an encounter with Moby Dick does not depend on one’s psychological health or good works. Queequeg’s sense of identity, even if a strong selfhood of mind-body integration, also crumbles in the face of the power of non-human nature.

Non-human nature does reward Queequeg in one way, however, and again it does so to an end that rebuts Ahab’s perceptions. The coffin, as the physical backup of Queequeg’s body, represents his soul as well, so the coffin’s repurposing as a life-buoy—the deciding factor in saving Ishmael from drowning—signifies that Queequeg, the pagan who demonstrated a consistent commitment to Christian values, the greatest of which was brotherly love, has gone to Heaven. Though characterized by inscrutability, which infuriated Ahab to the point of his own death, God would not be so cruel as to deny a self-sacrificing person his salvation. Queequeg’s death thus suggests the greatest tragedy of Ahab’s quest—it was doomed to fail even had Ahab been an integrated and holy prince of both body and mind, for, as the ghostly Ishmael’s survival shows, the only way to survive the perils of nature is to never self-actualize; if one altogether suffers an *absence* of physical identity, one may, like Ishmael, bob up from the whirlpool and live to speak another day.

### III. *Ex Nihilo Nihil Fit*: Ishmael's Spectral Presence

Almost every character in *Moby-Dick* receives substantial physical description. Ishmael himself, however, is largely silent about his own body, although he is the narrator and could easily convey his appearance to the reader. Indeed, like all humans, while Ishmael would know his own appearance only through reflection, via mirrors and photographs, we have no reason to assume he is any less aware of his own appearance than is typical. In fact, a careful reading of his narration, especially as it pertains to bodies, reveals three key ways in which he differs from the novel's essential protagonist, Ahab. While Ahab, whose physical modification constantly reminds him of the imperfection of physical existence, seeks to impose himself on the world around him, Ishmael shifts and incorporates aspects of the external physical world into his own body. Ahab's and Queequeg's embodied experiences speak to certain modalities regarding the body's relationship to gender, but Ishmael's identity hinges more on the body's relationship to sexuality. Lastly, the spectral quality of Ishmael's body—its absence of specific traits—indicates a kind of inner crisis. His defining traits all entwine in their similar nebulousness and changeability. His lack of visual embodiment, gleefully eclectic religious references, sexual preference, and desire for community all spring from the same source: the endless search for identity, which, especially in his case, cannot derive completely from his largely unknown (to himself, and by extension, to readers) body. If any character simultaneously illustrates and problematizes fluidity, it is he.

#### The Primordial Fluid

From the very beginning, *Moby-Dick* stresses that its setting is no coincidence; this novel will not *happen* to take place aboard a ship; it *must* do so to engage issues of identity in

ways a land-based narrative could not. The novel's first chapter, "Loomings," immediately imbues water with human and superhuman significance. Whereas the biblical Jesus, for instance, carefully distinguished mundane water from the water of life<sup>2</sup>, Ishmael ascribes sacred properties to all water. Being at sea saves him from falling into suicidal despair: "Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul... I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship" (4). Thus, the reader's entrance into the story proper contains the text's first Christian blasphemy Ishmael implicates most men with his subtle irreverence: "If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings toward the ocean with me" (3).

His language—"almost all men"—also occludes his intended referent. Does he mean humanity as a whole, or does he refer to men exclusively? The context suggests that he feels the psychological need to escape the confines of a society that demands that men live up to certain expectations of masculinity that he is unable or at least unwilling to perform, and he projects this feeling as being a basic problem for men in general.

"Meditation and water are wedded for ever," Ishmael continues (4). Focusing on water's metaphysical resonance leads Ishmael to pay special attention to the figure of Narcissus: "[S]till deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the

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<sup>2</sup> Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life. (John 4:13-4)

ungraspable phantom of life, and this is the key to it all” (5). In this context, Narcissus is not the bearer of a toxic personality disorder but an everyman figure, a symbol of the lonely self—or a spiritual quester who looked for truth in the body and failed. On one level, the sight of the self in water represents the discovery of the true identity hiding within fluidity. Secondly, this version of Narcissus symbolizes *self-reflection*, the inward searching required for the forging of identity and peaceful coexistence with others. Self-reflection both stems from and yields the conclusion that one will always be a work in progress. This use of the Narcissus figure as the “key to it all” also problematizes the figure himself. Seeing oneself in a pool of water may suggest the impossibility of discovering the essential truth of the self, but the desire to learn the ultimate truth motivates one to gaze upon the reflection in the first place.

Appointing Narcissus as the patron of this quest subtly implies another message: the ensuing story will avoid procreative sexuality. Narcissus possessed almost superhuman beauty, but he never acted on his sexual attractions, if he had any, and he pointedly avoided the advances of the nymph Echo. Herbert Marcuse exonerates Narcissus from the complex associated with his name by grouping him with Dionysus and Orpheus as gods who stand for “the image of joy and fulfillment; the voice which does not command but sings; the gesture which offers and receives; the deed which is peace and ends the labor of conquest; the liberation from time which unites man with god, man with nature” (162). Narcissus, like Ishmael, “abominate[s] all honorable respectable toils” (5), and no toil is more traditionally respectable than reproductive sex. To be a “landsm[a]n,” “tied to counters, nailed to benches” (4), is to restrict oneself to the narrow life of a family provider, a man who expresses his

sexuality exclusively in marriage. Here, the use of Narcissus establishes that the reproductive imperative is far from universal and that the self is fluid.

In the first few pages of the novel's opening chapter, Ishmael characterizes himself as devoid of a definite identity, eternally subject to change, and uninterested in founding a nuclear family but by no means necessarily asexual. Compare the opening paragraph of "Loomings" to Kate Bornstein's rumination on gender and sexual identity in *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (2016): "I love being without an identity—it gives me a lot of room to play around—but it makes me dizzy, having nowhere to hang my hat. When I get too tired of not having an identity, I take one on; it doesn't really matter what identity I take on, as long as it's recognizable" (48). Bornstein forwards a significantly sunnier view of Ishmael's ongoing crisis, but ultimately they offer the same argument: one cannot take one's identity for granted; instead, the self must be sought after. Furthermore, the cyclical design of Ishmael's quests (again, opposed to Ahab's linear one) suggests that identity is not fixed. The present tense of his aquatic monologue implies strongly that his sea voyages, his quests for the truth of the self, are perpetual and periodic. The tension caused by a weak identity increases when one risks punishment for the inclinations one does feel. The one factor common to all of Ishmael's seafaring adventures, he hints by his references to a classical character famed for his permanently reserved and therefore ambiguous sexuality, is a keenly felt aversion to procreative sex, which Ishmael's culture effectively demands of adults. Whereas the realm of solid earth demands a certain permanence and, implicitly, propensity for procreation, the sea allows and even welcomes men with fluctuating identities and a lack of interest in reproductive sex. Based on his initially unreceptive reactions to sharing a bed

with Queequeg, Ishmael may not recognize the latter characteristic within himself when he first sets foot in the Spouter Inn, but he grows to accept it quickly and later revel in it.

Although Robert K. Martin acknowledges that “Ishmael’s [element] is water” (93), he reads Ishmael’s gradually welcoming attitude towards personal non-procreative sexual experience as the deciding factor in his survival of the voyage that kills his fellow crewmen: “Fire is the active principle, water the passive, and Ishmael must therefore move toward a union of the two. This he finds in the novel’s central figure of sperm, or hot water. With the liquidity of water and the heat of fire, sperm brings together the generative power of fire with the calm of water. It is the final ‘creamy pool’ that restores Ishmael to life” (93). However, recreational eroticism alone, despite its importance in Ishmael’s character arc, does not save him. Nor does love alone redeem him—love dissolves into the void, much like all other abstract ideals, no matter how meaningful they are during the embodied experience thereof. What saves Ishmael is what he is *not*.

### **The Depths of Disembodiment**

As his introduction implies, Ishmael’s most salient characteristic is his lack of self-description, particularly of his body. Prior to his decision to lodge in the Spouter-Inn, Ishmael compares the “dilapidated little wooden house” (11), where he will soon spend the night, to his own body: “Yes, these eyes are windows, and this body of mine is the house. What a pity they didn’t stop up the chinks and the crannies though, and thrust in a little lint here and there. But it’s too late to make any improvements now” (12). Ishmael suggests that his body is worse for wear, but he also very vague about the details: Moreover, other than this thin description, the only other concrete physical description of Ishmael is when he briefly, if somewhat contradictorily, mentions his “broad-shouldered make” (85).

Likewise, no other characters refer to Ishmael's physical appearance; indeed, once the story shifts to the *Pequod's* journey, no character speaks of Ishmael at all. For much of the narrative, Ishmael effectively disappears; entire chapters take place without him making any reference to himself. He even narrates events for which he could not have been present, such as conversations hidden within cabins forbidden to crewmen. This incongruity reaches its zenith when he narrates other characters' internal monologues, as in Chapters 37 through 39. In other words, Ishmael functions as a specter, a man without a body, able to move through walls and into other minds. He constructs himself as one who slips in and out of the physical world with ease. Unfortunately, he cannot transcend materiality as freely from negative consequences as his typically detached narration may imply; in Chapter 35, "The Mast-Head," Ishmael confesses that his transcendence-seeking nature makes him ill-suited to keep watch, in addition to nearly killing him: "Let me make a clean breast of it here, and admit that I kept but sorry guard. With the problem of the universe revolving in me, how could I—being left completely to myself at such a thought-engendering altitude—how could I but lightly hold my obligations to observe all whale-ships' standing orders, 'Keep your weather eye open, and sing out every time'" (172). Immediately thereafter, Ishmael cautions the "ship-owners of Nantucket" against hiring "romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men" to man their vessels for this exact reason (172-3). George Cotkin analyzes this chapter as a mockery of "the empty-headed, soaring metaphysics of transcendentalists" but notes that Melville admired Emerson (72).

At one point, Ishmael seems to make a reference to what Neoplatonists and Theosophists might call "astral projection":

It was my turn to stand at the foremast-head; and with my shoulders leaning against the slackened royal shrouds, to and fro I idly swayed in what seemed an enchanted air. No resolution could withstand it; in that dreamy mood losing all consciousness, at last my soul went out of my body; though my body still continued to sway as a pendulum will, long after the power which first moved it is withdrawn. (307)

This brief spell of what initially appears to be a literal mind/body split is, as it turns out, a trance-like state; shortly thereafter, Ishmael returns to full alertness, as if waking from a dream, when he finally sights a whale (308). During his metaphysical interlude, Ishmael was again tasked with keeping watch at the foremast-head, and his indolence was potentially very costly, though the crew noticed the sperm whale too, and just in time. Disembodiment has consequences. Like Ahab, Ishmael cannot transcend materiality while he lives on Earth. He can try, but he is doomed to fail and possibly endanger himself and others in the process. Unlike Ahab, however, Ishmael, who has no interest in assuming a position of authority, manages to avoid the excesses of his captain.

The peripheral, sometimes voyeuristic quality of much of Ishmael's narration also suggests a character whose understanding of community is incomplete. Similarly to his great friend Queequeg, who alternates between self-denial and self-indulgence, Ishmael alternates between participant and bystander. Importantly, he is not alone in this wavering between attachment to and detachment from humanity. Early into his three-year voyage, Ishmael notes that most of the crewmen come from islands, and from there he extrapolates that each man is as isolated as he is: "They were nearly all Islanders in the *Pequod*, *Isolatoos* too I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each *Isolato* living on a separate continent of his own. Yet now, federated along one keel, what a set these *Isolatoos* were! An Anacharsis Cloutz deputation from all the isles of the sea, and all the ends of the earth..." (132). These men, as Ishmael reads them, may live aggressive, lonely lives ashore, but,

afloat, they must collaborate to a single purpose. Here, Ishmael gestures toward the “isolated, mechanistic, aggressive male lifestyle” that Judith Bat-Ada decried (114) and finds it unfulfilling, both for himself and for others. The *Pequod* is a microcosm of the human population, an experiment at creating a brotherhood of man. If one does not derive complete identity from the body, one may potentially find self-identity enhanced through membership in a community. Although the narrative voice does not say so explicitly, the need to find a community in which he feels he “fits” is part of Ishmael’s impetus for his frequent change of occupations: “in my miscellaneous time I have been a stone-mason, and also a great digger of ditches, canals and wells, wine-vaults, cellars, and cisterns of all sorts” (497). New jobs mean new associates, and new rules of community, guild-based and otherwise, and through membership one can discover different possible identities. At the same time, the situations mentioned in the narration center around manual labor, strongly underscoring the importance of the physical body to all such communities, and thus also suggesting why Ishmael, with his all-but-spectral physicality, seems to always have uncertain relationships to his body and community identity. Perhaps more importantly, communitarian men can hardly maintain perfect devotion to the dominant ideal of masculinity, which, again, defines the masculine as isolationist. In community resides compassion, group identification, and collective action, and—as the narrative voice all but says explicitly—beneath such compassion and emotional bonds lies the threat of sexual attraction.

### **The Erotic Component of Brotherly Love**

His absence of physical self-description does not preclude Ishmael from enjoying physical pleasure or from attaching personal and even cosmic importance to such experiences. Indeed, his physical experiences do much to change and expand his identity.

Much scholarship has been written on *Moby-Dick*'s homoerotic subtext, which plays a key role in Ishmael's attempted journey of self-discovery/recovery aboard the *Pequod*: his happiest experiences are simultaneously homosocial and physical, but these matters cannot be extricated from the questions of identity the narrative examines, as whatever void lies within his soul appears to come closest to being filled when he has embodied experiences.

Christoph Hartner observes that Ishmael is "not...a lady's man but a man's man in the queerest sense of the word," rarely voicing interest in women and instead evincing a "conspicuous fascination for the male physique" (182). On only a few occasions does the narrative voice express appreciation for a woman's appearance: a brief admiration of New Bedford women's rosy cheeks (38), a comparison of aesthetically pleasing nighttime skies to "haughty dames" (137), and a mention of "the lovely Andromeda" (395). Notably, Ishmael does not describe Mrs. Hussey or the "olive-hued girls" on the *Bachelor* (537) in any way that would indicate sexual interest. Fiedler notes that Ishmael "seems quite improbably, to have no notions during his last days ashore of picking up a woman, visiting a brothel, even getting drunk" (372). Instead, his moments of greatest pleasure occur in situations of intimate same-sex physical contact.

Initially, when confronted with the necessity of sharing a bed with an unknown harpooner, Ishmael shows reluctance: "No man prefers to sleep two in a bed. In fact, you would a good deal rather not sleep with your own brother... The more I pondered over this harpooneer, the more I abominated the thought of sleeping with him" (18)—and upon waking in Queequeg's marital embrace, he reacts with displeasure (or, possibly, embarrassment): "A pretty pickle, truly, thought I; abed here in a strange house in the broad day, with a cannibal and a tomahawk" (30). He even admonishes Queequeg for committing

“the unbecomingness of his hugging a fellow male in that matrimonial sort of style” (30). Significantly, this very first instance of physical contact between them sees Ishmael using feminine terms to describe himself: “Upon waking next morning about daylight, I found Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife” (28). Immediately, Ishmael identifies with femaleness; he does not describe himself as Queequeg’s catamite. Certainly he does not consider himself the *husband* in this configuration. The language in this passage may suggest that Ishmael has a tenuous sense of gender roles in sexuality—or that his understanding of gender was slippery to begin with but this incident makes him question it even further. At the very least, he does not adhere to the standards of masculinity prescribed in the culture from which he escapes. Perhaps Ishmael disembodies himself as a form of reassurance: if he ignores his body, then he can ignore his physical reactions to being spooned. However, though his disembodiment continues, Ishmael grows quickly to enjoy such intimate sensations and even see them as opening a road to a new identity.

After a day has passed, Ishmael actively desires to share his bed as well as his waking life with Queequeg, a major change in self-concept: “...I began to be sensible of strange feelings. I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it” (57). Ishmael’s choice of language recalls that of the Bible story from which he draws his nickname and sense of identity (see Genesis 16:12). His *hand* is no longer “against every man,” as his biblical namesake’s is—he no longer believes that he must remain isolated from others, and so his identity shifts to include active desire for companionship and, by extension, community. A few paragraphs later, after sharing a smoke and an embrace with Ishmael, Queequeg

pronounces the two of them “married; meaning, in his country’s phrase, that we were bosom friends; he would gladly die for me, if need should be” (57).

To recall the previous chapter, Queequeg has an overtly South Pacific and Polynesian origin, hailing from an island that comprises characteristics of New Zealand, Hawaii, and the Marquesas, the last of which presented the author Melville with an exponentially more expansive and permissive sexual culture than his own when he lived with the Typee on the Marquesan island of Nuku Hiva as a young man. We might well ask, then, what does it mean for Queequeg, the man who effects a major change in Ishmael’s heart and identity, to hail from a generalized construct of the Pacific Islands—notably, a construct based on Melville’s personal experiences in that territory as much as any European-American fantasy of exotic climes—rather than a specific and real location in Polynesia? In his own way, Queequeg’s identity is as representative as Ishmael’s is: he must represent an idealized concept to some degree in order to form a union of equal opposites with Ishmael. While Ishmael is a generic Christian (Presbyterian by upbringing) and implicitly white American, Queequeg is an embodiment of “the world’s strangest foreigner.” Both are concepts as much as characters. To befriend, become infatuated with, and even marry someone from the most alien environment Ishmael can imagine indicates that he need not forge an identity from feelings of loneliness: he can incorporate companionship and thereby reject the central tenet of masculinity. Very quickly he progresses from isolation, the premier “masculine” value, to socialization, the opposite “feminine” principle. For two persons from antipodal cultures to be fundamentally similar also indicates that neither ethnic origin nor the body is essentializing. All men are alike in the eyes of God, Ishmael claims when he joins Queequeg in worshipping his idol, Yojo:

Do you suppose now, Ishmael, that the magnanimous God of heaven and earth—pagans and all included—can possibly be jealous of an insignificant bit of black wood? Impossible! But what is worship?—to do the will of God—*that* is worship! And what is the will of God?—to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man do to me. Now, Queequeg is my fellow man. And what do I wish my fellow man would do to me? Why, unite with me in my particular Presbyterian form of worship. Consequently, I must then unite with him in his; ergo, I must turn idolator. (58)

Their subsequent bedtime conversation reinforces the marriage imagery: “Man and wife, they say, there open the very bottom of their souls to each other; and some old couples often lie and chat over old times till nearly morning. Thus, then, in our hearts’ honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg—a cosy, loving pair” (58). In the United States of the nineteenth century, same-sex friendships could certainly be described with a level of sentimentality that the twentieth century would later abandon, but Queequeg is not from the United States; he is from a country based on Melville’s own memories of a society that encompassed flexible views of sexuality. “In a countryman, this sudden flame of friendship would have seemed far too premature, a thing to be much distrusted; but in this simple savage those old rules would not apply,” as Ishmael puts it when Queequeg proposes marriage (57). As a member of a culture wherein sexual boundaries are far more permissive than those of a Puritan-descended New Englander like Ishmael, Queequeg initiates Ishmael into something his life has appeared to heretofore have largely lacked: carnality. No longer is Ishmael the “prissy... prohibitionist” (372) from the first few chapters but a person attuned to his own capacity for bodily thrills. He and Queequeg share a smoke that “thaw[s] out” whatever “ice of indifference” previously cooled Ishmael’s heart (57) and worship an idol that Harold Beaver reads as phallic (714). During the “hearts’ honeymoon” that ensues after their worship ritual, Ishmael remarks dreamily that “Queequeg now and then affectionately [threw] his brown tattooed legs over mine” (59).

Ishmael refutes masculinity in multiple ways at once: pledging himself to the aforementioned companionship rather than stark solitude (“Nothing exists in itself” [59]) and experiencing embodied pleasure as opposed to pure thought. Their bond—no mere one-night stand but a marriage—is just as much as emotional as it is physical, removing it further from the realm of toxic masculinity. Notably, at no point after his informal conversion from Presbyterian to pagan does Ishmael express a desire for potentially procreative sex. Homosocial embodied experience assumes supremacy instead.

Once the action shifts to the *Pequod*, scenes of Ishmael and Queequeg interacting become scarce, but the two retain their intimacy. Chapter 72, “The Monkey-rope,” recapitulates their emotional and physical bond. “On the occasion in question,” Ishmael says, “Queequeg figured in the Highland costume—a skirt and socks—in which to my eyes, at least, he appeared to uncommon advantage; and no one had a better chance to observe him, as will presently be seen” (348). In other words, Ishmael enjoys the sight of Queequeg clad in only a kilt, but equally important is the language Ishmael uses to describe the process of being tied to Queequeg by an extended rope while the latter cuts blubber out of a dead whale:

So that for better or for worse we two, for the time, were wedded; and should poor Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honor demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake. So, then, an elongated Siamese ligature united us. Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother; nor could I any way get rid of the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed. (349)

Ishmael likens his relationship with Queequeg to brotherhood *and* to marriage in the same breath. The incestuous tones of this passage indicate that Ishmael has moved so far from isolation to a milieu wherein brotherly love is so fetishized as to become literally sexual. Previously, Ishmael implied that he did not make friends easily; if he possessed any trait, it

was isolation. By contrast, he now inhabits a blissful borderland between fraternity and homosexuality. This new psychological environment reaches its apotheosis in Chapter 94, “A Squeeze of the Hand.”

Here, after Tashtego and Stubb have killed a whale, the crew must squeeze lumps of spermaceti, which this chapter’s narration always calls “sperm,” down into liquid for processing. Engagement in this task with his shipmates brings Ishmael to his most rapturous moment in the entire text:

...[A]s I bathed my hands among those soft, gentle globules of infiltrated tissues, woven almost within the hour; as they richly broke to my fingers, and discharged all their opulence, like fully ripe grapes their wine... I forgot about our horrible oath... while bathing in that bath, I felt divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatsoever... Squeeze! Squeeze! Squeeze! All the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say, —Oh! My dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. (455-6)

Robert K. Martin reads this chapter as a thinly veiled description of a sexual orgy: “Solitary masturbation thus becomes mutual, and group, masturbation, and there is an accompanying shift from the self to the community—a community erected by men working, and playing together” (82). Harold Beaver analyzes this scene similarly but concludes with a different evaluation: “This homosexual pastoral—as in a musky meadow filled with pansies in *heart’s ease* or *love-in-idleness*—is the ultimate illusion. This ‘smell of spring violets’ mocks scenes of such immodesty: this ‘bunch of posies’ too masks an unsavoury ‘nose-gay’; this fraternal eucharist of bursting grapes marks the fellowship of Sodom. After a love frolic, then, the

return to blood frolic..." (876). In any case, the language used here recounts a shared gnosis through orgasm, the perfect union of physicality, spirituality, and community. Only in a material, embodied experience in which all boundaries and bodies melt into one another can Ishmael grasp the feeling of transcendence without endangering himself. He feels the paradox of sexual ecstasy: through fleshly indulgence he loses his self-consciousness and thereby gains a brief glimpse of the divine.

But he does not follow this moment of supreme joy by declaring his allegiance to sodomy. Rather, he speaks of heterosexual marriage and reduced expectations: "...[B]y many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity, not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country; now that I have perceived this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally" (456). The call of proper masculinity hypnotizes him in one way or another. As much he wants to "keep squeezing that sperm for ever" (456), Ishmael, for whatever reason, does not believe he can, and he never elaborates upon this pessimism. Perhaps he senses that this favored identity, the man joined in erotic fellowship with his fellow men, must pass. Here, he perceives that fluidity, the everlasting impermanence, contains just as much potential for heartbreak as it does for ecstasy.

### **The Follies of Fluidity**

Fluidity of identity, for all that many queer theorists and activists champion it, is not an inherently liberating concept. Ishmael acknowledges the limitations of fluidity when he refers to Narcissus's insatiable desire for the "ungraspable phantom of life": not everyone finds satisfaction in fluidity. What does anything *truly mean*? If the self is subject to change,

then can anything have a meaning? Peering through ambiguity to uncover the true self is indeed “the key to it all.” Chapter 93, “The Castaway,” suggests the problems inherent in fluidity with the character of Pip, himself already a living contradiction in terms, “so gloomy-jolly” (450). During a lowering, the crew temporarily loses Pip at sea. “By the merest chance the ship itself at last rescue[s] him” (453), but by that time, he has changed for the worse. Pip, while lost at sea, has seen the face of God, the true nature of reality, and it is infinite fluidity. Rather than a loss of identity freeing Pip to find an untapped reservoir of potential, it drives him insane. Indeed, he can talk to no one but “crazy” Ahab after this incident. Beaver observes an implied connection between Pip and Ishmael in this instance: “Only Ishmael, whom ‘nothing dispirits,’ who can take all ‘sly, good-natured hits, and jolly punches in the side,’ survives. For Pip... there is no saving synthesis” (875). We might interpret Pip’s enactment of fluidity as its negative side and Ishmael’s as its positive potential. Pip finds a new bond with Ahab after a traumatic experience, but Ishmael has an unspoken association with the captain before they even meet.

Ishmael’s motivation resembles Ahab’s. Both men want the cosmos to reveal a final answer, and if the universe will not yield one willingly, they will seek it themselves. As Ahab burns with longing for the ultimate truths of the external world, Ishmael yearns for the discovery of his one true self. For both men, the world bursts with symbols and portents, but the two characters differ from each other in two ways significant enough to save one and damn the other: whereas Ahab possesses a distinct and domineering personality, Ishmael himself is an “ungraspable phantom,” a man with little definite identity to speak of; and unlike Ahab, whose quest for order bespeaks the root of toxic masculinity, Ishmael contentedly assumes a submissive, even subservient character, which the concept of

masculinity definitively excludes. Ahab must pursue the core components of masculinity at all costs, but Ishmael, though he does not quite admit it in so many words, has little trouble slipping out of masculinity and adopting an imitation-female role: Harold Beaver refers to him as “Queequeg’s squaw” on two separate occasions (39, 842). However, as mentioned earlier, Ishmael will not or cannot submit fully to this identification. He succumbs to the ideal of masculinity and becomes its promoter:

Men may seem detestable as joint stock-companies and nations; knaves, fools, and murderers there may be; men may have mean and meagre faces; but, man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature, that over any ignominious blemish in him all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes. That immaculate manliness we feel within ourselves, so far within us, that it remains intact though all the outer character seem gone; bleeds with keenest anguish at the undraped spectacle of a valor-ruined man. (126)

Yet for all his ambiguity—perhaps *because* of his ambiguity—Ishmael falls under the spell of masculinity very quickly. Like virtually all the rest of the crew, he unquestioningly sympathizes with Ahab’s bloodthirsty quest for transcendence: “I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest... A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me. Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine” (194). Contrasting this passage as well as its referent in Chapter 36 to “A Squeeze of the Hand” indicates that men can cease their feelings of isolation and band together for two causes: sexual ecstasy or shared bloodlust. Only Starbuck is an exception, but he is ineffectual in altering Ahab’s plans in any significant way. The *Pequod* has no effective voice of reason and no truly enlightened man. Even Starbuck, in his own way, is misguided; his belief in the nobility of humility prevents him from challenging Ahab to any meaningful result, and his materially acquisitive habits to some degree contradict his Quaker faith.

Still, unenlightened men can absolutely deliver insightful statements, and the crew of the *Pequod* exemplify this possibility. While readers may dismiss the novel's often glibly applied classical references as more "empty-headed metaphysics," they in fact carry great thematic weight. *Moby-Dick's* *Chaoskampf* heritage casts a gargantuan shadow over Ahab's quest, and Queequeg wears a "Cretan labyrinth" on his body, but what of Ishmael, who has not personally related himself to a mythological figure since his evocation of Narcissus at the novel's beginning? His other correspondence to the symbolism of the ancient world occurs in Chapter 99, "The Doubloon," wherein Stubb, the novel's most fervent fatalist, delivers a monologue occasioned by the signs of the zodiac inscribed around the titular coin. He characterizes the zodiac as the story of a man's life, beginning with "Aries, the Ram—lecherous dog, he begets us" and ending with "to wind up with Pisces, or the Fishes, we sleep" (473). This monologue, though whimsical on the surface, conceals one of the central messages of the novel: the journey of life is cyclical, not linear, and this cyclical odyssey ends in a fluid state before it begins again with a renewed sense of identity. Even after one reaches the stars, as symbolized by heavenly Aquarius ("The inner substance of this zodiacal type is fluid, light, ethereal, volatile, limpid, transparently spiritual, and, so to say, angelic" [38]), everything ends up in the sea.

The ending of *Moby-Dick* recapitulates the zodiacal structure almost literally, with a lone figure in the middle of the ocean. Ishmael survives the wreck of the *Pequod* not because he has progressed to some mental or spiritual threshold uncrossed by his shipmates but because he has no self to kill. He is as fluid as the ocean itself. As a man without a body or a tribe, Ishmael is a man without an identity, and therefore he cannot die at the jaws of unconstructed nature any more than the White Whale, both ambiguous and material, can die

at the tools of man. Ishmael ends the novel no better than he was at the beginning—but he is also none the worse. Perhaps because he has no fixed identity to defend or protect, Ishmael possesses the most resilience of all the *Pequod's* crewmen. He has not achieved self-actualization, and he likely never will, but ironically, this failure to crystallize proves advantageous. The void within Ishmael that gnaws at him to seek new points of identification, such as among whale men, also rescues him from his own death. The ocean at once embodies the devouring tomb and the amniotic fluid of rebirth. It swallows the rest of the crew but allows Ishmael to emerge anew.

Nature, the final chapter implies, does not prescribe identities. At the end of the quest for an essential truth on which human perception can depend, reality reveals itself as impenetrable to any ultimate perception. As nature rejects essentialist cultural impositions, so does it contain no inherent identity. The masculine warriors have died, and only the manifestation of nature itself, what may be chaos, remains.

## Conclusion

*Moby-Dick* dramatizes an insidious phenomenon. The story's central figure does not so much rebel against a repressive, destructive system as much as he creates another. Rather than enact an ideology that reduces life to matters of profit and loss, as the whaling industry does, Ahab co-opts the whaling industry for the sake of what he believes are ontological and even morally sound purposes. Everything, to his way of thinking, must conform to an order—an order generated in his mind but that he believes exists materially. On one level, it appears that the core theme of *Moby-Dick*, a novel bursting with symbolism, philosophical pondering, and references to older literature, is the drive to discover a world that makes sense. However, Melville does not allow the reader to sympathize uncritically with the frustrations of searching for order in a chaotic universe. Instead, the text delves into the root cause of the quest for an instantly explicable world: the desire for the constant confirmation of predetermined conclusions. To a lifelong whaler, whales are both deadly and inferior to men, and this state of dangerous sub-humanity is a whale's proper place. Even though a whale may kill an entire ship's crew, it is cosmically insulting for whales to "dismast" men and leave them with an irreparably damaged outlook. Ahab believes that he must right a spiritual wrong by killing Moby Dick and restoring order to the universe—but this order exists only in Ahab's mind.

Bending reality on the anvil of preconceived notions, as Ahab attempts to do, is itself an act of masculinism. Male supremacy requires this essentialism based on forced dichotomies in order to exist. Carol Riddell, in her review of *The Transsexual Empire*, draws the reader's attention to Janice Raymond's internalized masculinism, which Raymond disguises in a superficially feminist package. Riddell observes that Raymond not only makes

the same biologically determinist assumptions as the defenders of patriarchy but adopts the persona of a purely logical, emotionless scientist:

[S]he uncritically accepts the male academic establishment's separation of personal feelings and factual presentation. I do not believe that people's feelings can or ought to be ignored in understanding the things they write about. At least they influence the manner in which things are presented. I think it is possible to divine from the text that Janice Raymond feels deeply threatened and scared by the idea of trans-sexualism... If one compares 'The Trans-sexual Empire', say with, 'Of Woman Born', Adrienne Rich uses poetry and personal experience as an integral part of her arguments, whereas Janice Raymond does not admit to any feelings. This attitude just follows the false male division between reason and emotion. (150-1)

Raymond's—and, by extension, trans-exclusionary feminism's—ideal person is the same as Ahab's ideal person: a rugged, indomitable individual possessed of self-evident moral correctness but untroubled by emotions. Raymond's ideal person is assigned female whereas Ahab's is assigned male; no other difference exists between them. Notably, Ahab's construct of a man, the perpetual motion machine he describes to the ship's carpenter, has no genetic material or sexual characteristics but is still male, which points to a crucial underlying message:

Maleness is an idea. Femaleness is an idea. The labels "male" and "female" cease to have utility in a context removed from sexual reproduction, such as the *Pequod*. Still, the urge to reduce life to cultural categories remains strong. To Ahab, maleness exists in a demonstrable, pure form on a higher plane and has only to be embodied. To embody this essence is his ultimate goal. Maleness in the abstract is transcendent, "in the world but not of it." Prizing the ideal of transcendent maleness, whether that ideal takes a form assigned male or one assigned female, is antithetical to the goals of feminism and other justice movements.

Ahab intersects again with the likes of Raymond in his belief that his essentialism constitutes rebellion against repressive forces rather than acquiescence to them.

The recapitulation of cultural oppression in the name of liberation shows itself clearly in the harpooners, particularly Queequeg. All the *Pequod's* harpooners come from decidedly different cultures than their Christian officers, but the “heathens” are given little choice other than to adapt to an industry run by men who claim affiliation to a Christian church. Christianity constitutes a normative force on the *Pequod*, a force for order much like—but, in practice, less powerful than—Ahab’s personal beliefs. By example, Queequeg refutes the essentialist and selectively biblical notion that the “native body” must reflect a cosmic word of law and that to change it is to sin. Rather than changing the system that employs him, the system grinds his expansiveness out of him. Though he previously showed a loyalty to his own affirmative homeland, he becomes a reinforcer of a violent industry predicated on hierarchy. The system rewards stagnation, not change.

Stagnation in body and mind is an adult’s proper state, according to trans-exclusionary thinkers. Here, too, trans-exclusionary feminists confuse rebelling against oppression for the exchange of one brand of oppression for another. Riddell describes Raymond’s abuse of the concept of mind/body integration: “The trans-sexual state after operation [according to Raymond] is an inadequate mode of being. It substitutes a superficial integration for a total human integrity, which would accept the body-mind unity, and alter the conditions giving rise to conflict, rather than mutilating the body” (147). From the trans-exclusionary point of view, the original assigned sex must be accepted and never changed. If the mind does not align with the body, then the emotional pain is the individual’s cross to bear. The native body exists *ex nihilo* and must never be modified or, indeed, separated from

its cultural context. In other words, for Janice Raymond, Mary Daly, Sheila Jeffreys, and similarly minded feminist scholars, what culture (including dictionaries) define as male or female must be synonymous with what nature intends. Modification of the body is an act of savage mutilation; civilized people know better than to disturb nature's temples of maleness and femaleness. The idea that modifying the body is, in some cases, the only method of achieving mind/body integration meets with no acceptance by trans-exclusionary feminists. The "male scientism," as Riddell calls it (150), of theorists such as Raymond belongs to the same rigid, repressive heritage as the cliquish form of New England Christianity that *Moby-Dick's* narrative voice denounces. The voice that would decry Queequeg and his people as misguided island savages who need to be brought to the light of the genteel faith of Christianity sounds eerily similar to the voice that would castigate them for their unscientific, "superstitious" native beliefs—and these voices may in fact be the same. The voice that would shriek in horror at a heavily tattooed indigenous population joins them in its tone of puritanical condemnation. When Queequeg succumbs to the strictures of the nominally Christian, functionally capitalist, and spiritually masculinist whaling ship, he slides into the only role that the missionary and materialist find appropriate for one such as he: the lieutenant of a dominant white man from a Christian background. Absorbing the values of a capitalist, white male-dominated culture does not require one to *be* a white male, and here the trans-exclusionary feminist once again enters, for reasons explained previously. Thus it is that the dominant culture or repressive state apparatuses can undo self-actualization. Queequeg has no choice but to act according to the values of a system that assumes *a priori* that the white man, with his Christian, humanist, and capitalist background, is supreme. In behaving as though he has internalized these values, Queequeg is consigned to his death. The

person with the most overtly modified body dies for the sake of maintaining his captain's sense of transcendent order.

The only survivor of the doomed quest for order is the person of constant fluidity. Rebirth, not the cessation of a linear progression, is Ishmael's primary objective, and only he finds his heart's desire: to let his old self dissolve and his new self emerge. This journey is itself a transition of sorts, in that the character goes from one identity to another, though this newly created self is still unrevealed to the reader. Intuiting all too well the emphasis placed on the cultural definition of the body, Ishmael carefully avoids mention of his own, as though it has yet to form. Aside from his broad shoulders, the only description of Ishmael's body the reader knows is that he has one tattoo and will eventually obtain another. His body is so undefined as to be phantasmal; it is nothing but the site of modification. Integrating the mind with the body requires seeing the body as mutable. The ever-changing self is not admitted as a possibility in trans-exclusionary works (feminist or otherwise), much less upheld as an ideal. Fixity, in trans-exclusionary thought, is a necessity for achieving self-actualization—or, alternatively, the reverence accorded the fixed self precludes affirmative attitudes towards trans people. One should know that one is a man or a woman, based on one's birth-assigned sexual characteristics, according to the trans-negative view, which is necessarily an anti-change view. Melville refutes the cultural assumption that maturity means the end of change, growth, or searching for identity. Ahab intends to crystallize and fails disastrously; Ishmael melts and is recombined into something new.

The body is solid matter, but it is matter as shifting sand and moldable clay are matter. In this way, the body has more in common with the ocean than an initial glance would make it seem. As the dunes meet the tide, so does the body contain the potential to

reflect the changeability of the soul. The body, the self, and the environment do not simply settle into fixed states.

Critics of more open definitions of *man*, *woman*, *gender*, and *sex* than are available in most dictionaries or common usage may consider unusual uses of these terms to catalyze an inevitable degradation of language or state of referential chaos. If one separates the terms *man* and *woman* from their traditional anatomical meanings, these critics may ask, then how can we use universally agreed upon definitions for those words? Jettisoning the dictionary as the authority on what “male” and “female” mean indeed leaves us without objective definitions of the terms, but “male” and “female”—and, for that matter, “sex” and “gender”—never had objective definitions in the first place. All sex- and gender-related terms carry political weight as much as or more than biological or anatomical weight. “Male” and “female” are, at best, shorthand for constellations of anatomical, chromosomal, biological, and hormonal features, not all of which are necessarily present in one body at once; dictionary definitions, for better or for worse, are descriptive, not prescriptive. Taking dictionary definitions as gospel indicates a search for the one source that divulges the true nature of reality. Even if one believes that the King James Bible is the revealed word of God, no edition of *Webster’s* is. Gender is too massive and too mutable to be contained by any analysis. Can any of Ishmael’s disquisitions on cetacean physiological and behavior capture the grandeur of the whale, either as a creature or as a concept? The rigidly scientific approach, like the Romantic approach, is just as limiting as it is liberating.

Perhaps *Moby-Dick’s* ultimate moral is a condoning of curiosity and fluidity as opposed to definition and inertia. No one can determine whatever truth lies behind reality. Eternal wonder is the solution. Allow questions to remain unresolved. Accept nebulosity.

When experiences do not match a theory, then change the theory rather than attempting to sand off the experiences' edges. Let the journey be circular, with all points meeting ultimately in a watery womb-tomb.

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## **Vita**

Virginia Buck was born in Raleigh, North Carolina, to Jennifer and Rex Buck. She graduated from Greensboro College Middle College in May 2009. In August of that year, she enrolled at Appalachian State University to pursue a Bachelor of Arts in English, which she obtained in May 2012. She worked at Measurement Incorporated and as a contract proofreader for Red Adept Publishing until August 2015, when she enrolled as a graduate student in English at Appalachian State University. While there, she worked as a writing center assistant and then a research assistant. In August 2017, she received her Master of Arts.

Virginia Buck currently lives in Greensboro, North Carolina.