Call Me Shamu: *Moby-Dick* as Post-Humanist Whale's Tale

Deborah Paes de Barros

For Emory Elliott

Sighting the Whale—Again

Let me begin with the summer of the whales.

Climate change—or call it what you will—has resulted in the warming of the water off of the California coast. In the summer, sharks and dolphins and birds of all kinds and, of course, the whales, bask in the balmy water, pursuing the bait fish and content to stay north rather than following their usual course down to Mexico.

Sitting on the shore last summer, I could watch them, frothing the water with their tails, shooting geysers from their blowholes, and projecting their whole vast bodies upward into the sky. When I went out on a boat only a mile or two from the harbor, I was suddenly surrounded by more than seventy whales, the young ones cavorting and diving, the older ones grazing and herding. I could even hear the mysterious sounds of their secret communications. The whales' beauty moved the other people on the boat as well. Several individuals wept while the rest of us stared, beatific, out at the sea. These whales were a far cry from SeaWorld's performing Shamu and in their profound play bore no resemblance to Melville's malevolent Moby Dick. The whales—mostly gray and humpback—existed outside the semiotic context that Western culture has designed for them, defying categorization.

When we see whales, we cannot help but see the problems of species, capital, and exploitation. Indeed, the whale is the signifier of these issues. Herman

0026-3079/2020/5901-053$2.50/0 American Studies, 59:1 (2020): 53–70

Melville intuited that the whale poses a nearly irresolvable question, forcing us to at least approach the notion that consciousness is not strictly a human claim. Melville asks the reader to posit for a second the possibility of consciousness outside of the human and thus to inadvertently ask the even larger question: What is human? What is sentient? And he goes further, for Melville's whale possesses an agency equal to our own. Moby Dick demonstrates that he is not a pale object on which we may project our own fantasies. More problematically, Melville's whale swims in critical ambiguity—a symbol of evil but also a sign of a different and perhaps higher order of morality. Caving in the chase boats with a slap of his tale, successfully perceiving human weakness, and traveling around the globe to confront his nemesis, Ahab, the white whale troubles us all.

Moby Dick's difficulty is not, strictly speaking, his own. Whales possess a double signification. They are perceived both as predators from the deep—dangerous, opposed to humans, of importance only because of their oily centrality to the industrial revolution—and, alternatively, as mystical, gifted with language and resonating with some other, more graceful way to view the cosmos. While we may lack a single cohesive explanation for the power that whales assert on our own consciousness, it cannot be doubted that they have nearly always enjoyed a mythic status. Cave paintings and ancient religious tales have long referenced whales. One might posit that this is at least in part because of their amazing size. They dwarf humans. Their special fascination also reflects their ability to live in variant media and to be creatures simultaneously of air and water. It is also possible to read whales as signifiers of the deep unconscious and thus to be fascinated by the revelations they bring. Whales "symbolize images of our deepest fears and anxieties."[1] Yet, as sea creatures, they can bring danger or bliss, appearing to us as "monsters" or the consorts of mermaids. They represent death or the capacity for life. The whale emerges from the deep as the devouring mother or the law-giving father.

There is some history to this discussion. The whale since mythological times has held a certain divided claim on the human imagination, a claim with even biblical components. According to the book of Genesis, whales—leviathans—were one of the first creations, entering the oceans on the fifth day and demonstrating the power of their creator. The ancient Greeks were fond of dolphins and small whales, portraying them as the periodic escorts of the gods. But Cetus himself was a giant sea monster of a whale. The hero Perseus saves Andromeda from the jaws of Cetus after Poseidon has her chained to a rock in the sea to be devoured as a punishment for Cassiopeia, Andromeda's mother, who took inordinate pride in her daughter's beauty. The biblical Jonah is swallowed by an immense whale after proving false to God, only to be vomited up, repentant, three days later.[2] The whale is both terrifying and beautiful, an instrument of justice and a dark representation of the underworld.

It is convenient and common to argue that the beauty of Melville's *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* lies in that very moral ambiguity and that its central question represents the very unknowability of the universe. It is also easy to anthro-

pomorphize the cetaceans of the deep, and to endow Moby Dick and all of his watery descendants in literature and in theme parks with human sentimentality. But Melville's whale does not simply offer a critique of the whaling industry and the cruel exploitation of animals. *Moby- Dick* offers an alternative comprehension of consciousness—a consciousness that is extra-human, post-human and post-capital. In understanding Moby Dick, we come to recognize the iconography of the whale in our larger culture and the way the whale reveals our relation (always) to both the Other and the larger natural world.

It is my contention here that it is of undoubted importance to understand *Moby-Dick* as a critique of the treatment of both animals and the sea—as an ecotext in other words. Moreover, *Moby-Dick* surely reflects the Transcendental values of its era, and these values are not utterly disconnected from postmodern criticism. These are essential points. However, I argue that *Moby-Dick* goes far further; the novel suggests that while our existences may be fragmentary and singular, we are also linked at least momentarily in intense encounters with others. "Other" is the operative word here, for in these encounters the Other necessarily moves from mere object to (sometimes shared) subjectivity. The white whale's unabating rage is at least in part directed at his status as object. My own reading of Melville's text asserts that whales viewed through the lens of capital will necessarily be objectified. But, importantly, if we lose this lexicon of value, Melville offers an alternative semiotic space where we and the whales operate as post-human equals.

Post-humanism is finally a rejection of the old classical insistence that "man is the measure of all things." The rapid growth of technology and artificial intelligence problematize our very conceptions of what is human, and, as a result, distinctions between the human and nonhuman must elude us. Subjects and objects mutate and change place, reminding us that they are always nomadic, "transversal, relational, affective, embedded and embodied."[3] Nothing is fixed; subject becomes object, while object replaces subject. Power relationships shift. The old hierarchies—master/slave, human/animal—no longer hold. Swimming the seas, shifting from sign to presence, from prey to predator, the whale Moby Dick insists on this lesson.

Melville's novel explores the slippage of category and power. On the most apparent level, the white whale's ascendant power defies the culture's anthropocentric notions. The entire enterprise of whaling illustrates the human's assumed relation to the whale and to nature at large. Ahab's error lies in his objectification of the whale. Further, the *Pequod* itself is doomed by insistent obedience to the dominant hierarchies: by the sailors' celebration of Ahab's errand, by their acceptance of authority, and, finally, by the crew's unwillingness to comprehend the separate agency of the whale. Melville's novel offers a meditation on this theme, a topic almost more powerful today than when Melville first penned it.

We ignore the whale's tale, then, at our own peril.

Earlier Sightings

Critics as diverse as the New Critic F. O. Matthiessen, discussing Melville and the American Renaissance, and Cody Marrs, addressing current Melville scholarship in the postmillennial era, offer different interpretations of *Moby-Dick* the text and Moby Dick the white whale.[4] The whale is rife with potential readings. And studies by a variety of Melville scholars (whom we will shortly examine here) make evident that many of *Moby-Dick*'s themes lie squarely within the philosophical and literary movements of the nineteenth century. Melville's Leviathan, in this historic context, offers a critique of the rising power of industry and capital. The intellectual current—defined by Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and both Mary and Percy Shelley—ultimately provides a basis for Derrida's postmodern work, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*—and for the growth of the larger animal studies movement in general.[5]

Philip Armstrong notes in his essay "Moby-Dick and Compassion" that the compassion that Melville's text displays for the suffering of the whales has fueled a number of scholars working in the animal studies arena.[6] The attention paid to the whaling industry in *Moby-Dick* as well as the horrifying details that accompany the description of successful whale hunts provide telling support for the reader who seeks sensitivity on Melville's part. Armstrong pays particular attention to the episode when the *Pequod*'s crew takes on a nameless sperm whale. "It was a terrific, most pitiable and maddening sight," writes Melville. As the whale wallows and suffers in his own blood, the lesser harpooner Flask begs to spear the whale yet again and over the objections of Starbuck stabs the whale on the site of a preexistent and painful ulcer.[7] The suffering of Melville's whales resonates with some contemporary critics but also reflects concerns of his own era.

While Melville might well be perceived as being at odds with Emerson's optimistic spirituality, there can be little doubt that he had some intellectual traffic with the Transcendentalist movement. This correspondence certainly finds reflection in Melville's texts. We know of his relatively brief but intense friendship with Nathaniel Hawthorne, an active member (at least at times) in the so-called Transcendentalist Club,[8] and we know too that Melville was sufficiently interested in Emerson's philosophical direction to satirize the thinkers of Concord in his short work "Cock-A-Doddle Doo."[9] While most readers would contend, I think, that Melville's texts were much darker than those of Emerson and his cohorts, notions of the Over-Soul and the concentric circles of existence clearly resonate with much of Melville's writing. Decades ago, critic Egbert Oliver commented in the *New England Quarterly* on the impact of Transcendental thought on Melville's work.[10] Other critics too have theorized that Melville's texts often reference and critique Emerson, Thoreau, and the larger Transcendental project.[11] Melville's biographers have made much of his friendship with Hawthorne and his wife Sophia during the years between 1850 and 1852.[12] (Although Melville may have largely distanced himself from the core

group of the American Transcendentalist movement, he was clearly positioned so as to be aware of and potentially influenced by their ideas. But as I will note later, reading past these conventionally Transcendentalist tropes may be more interesting.)

Before returning to my own reading of the text, however, it is also intriguing to consider some of the other forms of contemporary criticism. More recent scholarship, drawing on this long established Transcendental aspect of Melville, has sought to connect Melville—and *Moby-Dick* in particular—to environmental studies. Such ecocriticism correctly remarks both on Melville's concern for the sea and its inhabitants and on how the text of *Moby-Dick* enjoins all beings in a sort of "Great Circle of Life" with evident Emersonian echoes. Zachary Vernon, in "'Being Myriad, One': Melville and the Ecological Sublime and Faulkner's 'Go Down Moses,'" writes, "For Ishmael . . . the confrontation with the sublime results in an egalitarian vision wherein they imagine the interconnectedness and interdependency of all people and all earthly materiality."[13] For Vernon, Melville's novel is about the transcendent sublime. This twenty-first-century Transcendentalism illustrates our contemporary debt to Emerson, for like him we often continue to observe the world as a series of interdependent circles, particularly in our discussions of Melville. We have come to understand Melville frequently through what Elizabeth Schultz terms our "intrinsic and irresistible interdependency."[14]

In a slightly more pragmatic manner, other recent writers contend that Melville was prescient in his ecological concerns. Certainly viewing Moby Dick himself and cetaceans in general through the lens of the animal rights movement and acknowledging the existential significance of the oceans adds considerably to the discourse surrounding Melville. Hester Blum recently commented on this in "Melville and Oceanic Studies," contending that *Moby-Dick* raises both "political and etiological questions" regarding agency and hierarchy for the oceans themselves, governmental structures, and all beings.[15] For Blum, *Moby-Dick* is contemporary and political. The novel is about resisting authoritative structures of all sorts, be they political or more largely anthropocentric. Addressing this same theme, Geoffrey Sanborn writes in "Melville and the Nonhuman World" of "Melville's tendency to lateralize."[16] What Sanborn refers to is Melville's consistent rejection of all authoritative doctrines of superiority, be they religious, institutional or even, potentially, human.

These more ecological examinations provide real insight into *Moby-Dick*. The evident metaphysical claims of the text and the significant ecological and environmental aspects of the book feel freshly contemporary. These are important points of argument and contribute considerably to my own reading of the novel. Melville does not only touch on the rights of humans and whales, but also on the signficance of the seas and on the implicity connection of everything in the universe. The text asks us to understand what whales mean both mythologically and in a post-human world. For *Moby-Dick*, whales are both consumer products and sentient beings (as are we). Moreover, I think that for

Moby-Dick and for us postmodern readers, there is no great (Emersonian) Sublime into which we and the whales and the sea must ultimately merge. We are not in a state of becoming. Rather, this universe and sea contain our existence; we do not live in a future tense. Emerson, reading the universe through his platonic prism, presupposes a unity toward which he suggests we must all aspire. I suggest here, however, that our whale encounter is not about an ultimate motion toward spiritual unification but rather a moment wherein we deconstruct the given hierarchies of our world and read it in its fragmented presence. This presence is represented by the whale and by its fractured representations. For me, the whale is more about physics than metaphysics. The whale is real. Moby Dick smashes our notions of who retains power and agency. The whale is the irreducible Other.

Let us return to the text and contemplate the whale.

The Whale and the Romantic Monster

There is a context for Melville's empathetic discussion of the whale. Post-Enlightenment European literature sheds light on Melville's thinking. As early as 1713, Alexander Pope would write in his "Against Barbarity to Animals" that modern society makes "ill use" of our ability to dominate other species.[17] He outlines the hideous treatment of farm animals, suggesting that their very lives were created by human "artifice" for our own pleasure. Pope argues, in language that sounds strangely contemporary, that this "tyranny" over other species is vulgar and evil and coextensive with slavery:

> I cannot think it extravagant to imagine that mankind are no less in proportion accountable for the ill use of their dominion over creatures of the lower rank of beings, than for the exercise of tyranny over their own species.[18]

Citing Montaigne's work as a precursor to his own, Pope continues on in his attack on human gluttony and cruelty.[19]

Mary Shelley's famous *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) offers its own critique of science and the rising industrial culture, again creating a context for Melville's later argument. Interestingly, Shelley's Creature—neither man nor authentic animal, a kind of post-humanist hybrid one might say—eschews meat. "I do not destroy the lamb and the kid to glut my appetite," proclaims the Creature, who is more human that his creator.[20]

In her text *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, critic Carol Adams comments on the creature and on the vegetarianism of Mary Shelley herself. Vegetarianism is a theme in feminist (and many romantic) texts, argues Adams, for the treatment and othering of women finds ample illustration in the objectification, treatment, and othering of animals. "The vegetarian Creature's situation matches that of many women" writes Adams.[21] The Creature—and animals at large—correspond for Adams to the objectified Other:

> In Frankenstein we find a Creature seeking to reestablish the golden age of a vegetarian diet . . . a Creature who eats Rousseau's ideal meal; a Being who, like animals eaten for meat, finds itself excluded from the moral circle of humanity.[22]

The romantic revolution would be a recovery of that lost garden, rejecting commerce, industry, and opportune brutality toward women and animals. These earlier texts anticipated Melville and subsequent philosophical shifts.

A Whale of a Text

It is in the midst of this ideological tension (some would say between the authentic and the mass produced, between commerce and life) that Melville writes *Moby-Dick* and publishes it in 1851. Melville's concerns about the treatment of animals, the reduction of the great leviathan into lamp oil, and the abuse of power were central to the debates of the nineteenth century. *Moby-Dick* clearly articulates these concerns. But, not content with a mere romantic rejection of animal consumption or abuse, Melville's novel contends that rather than being subspecies, animals—and in particular whales—share consciousness with humans and thus join us as equals in that great chain of being. It is not only, according to Melville, that we should be kinder to animals—we are the animals.

Melville's compassion for the whales is clear. He shows them suffering in their death throes, spouting dark blood through their blowholes. The whales are tortured with spears, their heads severed from their bodies, and finally they are cooked down into oil as their carcasses disappear into the sea. As pre–animal studies critic Robert Zoellner notes in his 1973 *The Salt-Sea Mastodon: A Reading of Moby-Dick*, the death throes of the animals are so excruciating that Ishmael identifies with the whales rather than his fellow sailors.[23]

Moby Dick himself possesses a keen intelligence and sentient consciousness that rivals that of Ahab. It is Moby Dick who contrives to place himself in the way of the captain, to repeatedly and metaphorically castrate Ahab as the whale bites the captain's leg twice. Moby Dick not only staves in the pursuing whale boats but also sinks the mother ship and her remaining vessels. He turns his destructive attention on the ship itself, understanding that without the ship, the men are lost. Unlike Ahab, who focuses on the goal of slaying the white whale Moby Dick, the whale considers the total effects of his actions, demonstrating perhaps that the whale comprehends Ahab to a greater degree than Ahab apprehends the whale.

It is through the agency of Moby Dick that Ishmael and the reader are truly brought to consciousness. As the crew finally espies the object of the white whale, they are forced to understand that they do not simply, literally, see the whale (and thus earn the doubloon hammered to the mast). The whale—the

Other—is defined by their consciousness of him, but they too are defined by the process of watching. The whale sees and changes them. The sailors understand finally that the fate of the whale is their own fate. The crew and the whale are joined, a fact emphasized by Ahab's demise as he is dragged by the harpoon's lines into the deep. Enjoined in consciousness, we are the white whale.

This mutual consciousness—a space where animal, man, and whale are the same—is examined throughout the novel. In chapter 31, "Queen Mab," about one-quarter of the way through the text, Stubb, the *Pequod*'s second mate, relates his dream to Flask, another seaman.[24] The very name of the chapter is intriguing. Queen Mab is most obviously associated with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, where Romeo's cousin Mercutio jokingly identifies Queen Mab as the conveyor of (mostly erotic) dreams. But Queen Mab has been a personality in English literature since before the time of Shakespeare. She was a famed Celtic fairy who brought insights through dreams to a variety of subjects. In 1813, Percy Shelley published his own poem titled "Queen Mab; A Philosophical Poem; With Notes."[25] In Shelley's very long dramatic poem, Queen Mab gives the sleeper a vision of a utopian earthly future, where all injustice is removed and where man lives in complete harmony with nature. In conversation with his "fairy" interlocutor, the narrator learns of the history of man's atrocities, which include war, violence, economic disparity, and a populace largely fed on "butchery," "blood," and a "devastated earth."[26] But this world, the fairy says, is not necessary. We are made, the poet concludes, to be egalitarian vegetarians, but we have been corrupted by the modern world and its commerce. Shelley's short text speaks of a world where the purpose of man and animal is aligned, a place where "our disembodied souls" are yoked.[27] Our treatment of other species, says Shelley—our subjugation and torment of them—corresponds to industry's subjugation of the authentic and the human.

So popular was this poem that it was published multiple times, and the text of Shelley's *Queen Mab* became associated with resistance to tyranny and injustice. The text's very use of Queen Mab underscores the importance of the deep terrain of the unconscious, the dream state and human consciousness itself. It is also highly possible that Stubb's dream suggests an allusion to Shelley and his animal rights agenda as well as Shelley's larger call for justice. As the *Melville's Marginalia Online* makes evident, Melville had a profound interest both in the romantic poets and in Shakespeare, making diligent notes about poetry and *A Midsummer's Night Dream*.[28] Indeed, Melville comments on the play, on Queen Mab, and on the dream sequence in particular in his own short piece "The Piazza."[29] While it is highly likely that he was aware of Shelley's use of Queen Mab, I can find no references to the poem itself. But Shelley's larger agenda was widely recognized, and Shelley's work is important here, as it is indicative of the association between animal rights and human rights, a cause with which Melville would assuredly have been familiar.

Stubb's dream is also interesting. Two chapters before, Stubb has an actual altercation with Ahab, who calls Stubb a dog, tells him to get to his kennel, and

threatens him with violence. Stubb, who wants to argue vehemently against his association with a canine or any sort of animal, departs voiceless in the face of Ahab's mad anger.[30] Stubb is troubled by the need to identify the distinction between man and animal and thus to refute Ahab's accusation that he, Stubb, is a "cur." The space between human and animal has collapsed in the captain's diatribe. Stubb is even more vexed by Ahab's seeming demonic power and the knowledge that he himself has no recourse. While Ahab continues to pace the deck, Stubb retreats to the hold and to sleep. But even his sleep is disturbed.

As Stubb later relates to Flask, "What a queer dream, King-Post, I never had."[31] Stubb has dreamed that Ahab kicked him but tells himself that Ahab's leg is "false" and thus cannot do him real injury. But as Stubb contemplates this, "an old merman" with a white humpback swims up to him, and for a moment, Stubb considers kicking the merman. But the dream figure shows Stubb all the harpoons and weapons stuck in his own now merman's body, hundreds of "marlinspikes," and Stubb sees the error of attacking the merman.

The passage is filled with animal references but, more than that, cues the reader (just in case she is somehow not aware) that this is a novel about the mind—the conscious and unconscious mind. Stubb's dream merman is, in fact, the whale. The captain equates Stubb to a dog, a donkey, a mule and an ass, suggesting that Stubbs is similarly powerless and unable to understand his larger purpose. For Captain Ahab, Stubb performs as the Other, that subspecies defined by Pope, Shelley, and Adams. Stubb is, says Ahab, no matter what his protestations, a dog and a lowly animal. In these pages, then, the distinction between man and animal is dissolved, as is the idea that "animals" possess no consciousness, no agency, and no deep connection to humanity. To be animal is to be powerless. As such, Stubb, disempowered as he is, forfeits his human stature. (Even his name expresses this; he is a "stub" of a man, a cipher with no claim to power. But interestingly too, Ahab's leg is a stub. His amputation has left him similarly linguistically, unmanned.) The dream also makes both the captain and Stubb function as sea creatures. In Stubb's dream, the "merman" body—the quasi-human body—is subsequently pierced with harpoons and spears as it swims through the water. The human has become fish and prey. In a great paradox, the dream whale becomes human—a merman—while the humans have become pursued whales. This segment of the text suggests significantly that humanity—humanness—then is not a fixed category but rather an expression of power that waxes and wanes. Stubb's dream sequence deconstructs a hierarchy that places man at the apex of creation.

Three-quarters of the way through the novel, Melville's Ishmael contemplates the spouting of the whales, arguing that for "six thousand years" and "no one knows how many millions before," "whales have been mystifying the gardens of the deep with so many sprinklings and mystifying pots."[32] Despite having by this point in the tale rendered numerous whales, Ishmael cannot understand the purpose and the mechanisms of the spouting process. Instead, as he describes the whale's biology, Ishmael returns to the concept that the whale

is mysterious because he belongs to the realms of both air and water. And as the whale negotiates these twin realms, he necessarily "envelopes" vast territory with "snowy, sparkling mist."[33] This mist intrigues Ishmael, and he comments on mist and fog over the water in many passages. The mist is as important as the whale's corporate body. Indeed, much of the time, long before the whale itself is apparent, it is the waterspout that marks his locale. The spout is the Derridean "trace," the mark for what cannot really be apprehended. It is this absence that Ahab seeks to fill with the carcass of the actual whale. The waterspout shows the whale and yet hides it—it defines the common space between water and air, and it includes both the whale and any human near him in its dampness. Just as various whales mentioned in the text—Moby Dick, the whale that collapses the *Essex*, other whales that Ishmael hears of that swim from Greenland to the Pacific—possess individual consciousness and agency, Melville offers that these whales also share a larger consciousness with all sentient beings and that they may even supersede human agency.

The whales breathe air yet live in the water, inhabiting two realms that easily correspond to the conscious and unconscious mind. They are both mammal and fish, inhabitants of the water world and breathers of air. Moby Dick becomes the id of Ahab and the dark water of his peculiar unconscious, but the silvery waterspouts are beacons both of the terrifying and unknown deep and of the celestial domain above the ocean.

The whales' connection to an expanded consciousness is apparent in much of the text. In the chapter "The Spirit-Spout," Ishmael recounts being far south on a "serene and moonlit night, when all the waves rolled by like scrolls of silver,"[34] and suddenly seeing a whale's spout. The spouting water was spirit-like and "celestial," so cerebral and ruminative that the shipmates would let the "herd of whale" pass them by. Yet under the egis of Ahab, the sailors begin to "read" the whales—to announce the appearance of the whales and to even attempt to pursue them in the dark. But the spout that the whalers pursue then disappears into the sea. It was a phantom, the ghost of a whale, a projection of Moby Dick, a mark of the whale's consciousness. The spout was "unbearable," Ishmael tells the reader, a flitting apparition, leaving "showers of silver chips . . . foam flakes . . . ," demonstrating the "desolate vacuity of life."[35] This mist permeates the minds of the sailors, frightening them and animating Ahab.

The spout is a language that the sailors cannot translate. The whale signifies outside of human discourse. In the black, reflective sea marked with the periodic waterspouts, the sailors of the *Pequod* see the state of their minds—terror of the whale, fear of the dark, homesickness—mirrored back. Their sense of self and humanity fragments in the vast ocean. Ahab believes he sees his alter ego in the white whale shadowed in the mist, and his shadow is not human.

At the end of the novel, when Ahab plunges to his death in the sea, fatally connected forever to the white whale, Ahab and the reader understand that Ahab and the whale are two equal entities, each with intelligence, purpose, and obsessions. Ahab cannot best or control the whale. Ahab's tragedy is that in

this desire for mastery, he did not understand their mutual dependence and his relation to the Other. In seeking to objectify the whale, Ahab ignores the real being—the real encounter—with the white whale. Simultaneously Ahab disregards the larger truth that power is unfixed and constantly in flux. For Melville, the whales speak/spout in an alternate lexicon as they demand an equivalent and dissimilar agency, resisting assimilation and representation.

Postmodern Leviathan

It is this very notion that the so-called animal world is, in fact, our world that Derrida explores in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.[36] He recalls staring at his cat and realizing that his cat is also staring back at him and that ultimately he—Derrida—is "naked," stripped of all supposed human pretense under the feline gaze.[37] He suggests that the very distinction—animal versus human—is false, another kind of othering and a way of diminishing anything that is different.

Our claim of humanity (versus animality) is specious. We use language as a threshold, contends Derrida, and then define language in such a limited fashion that nothing outside of ourselves can be understood as a species with linguistic ability. While numerous studies, from bees to whales to dolphins to chickens, suggest sophisticated systems of communication, these systems are not our own and so miss that carefully erected threshold of human. Famed animal behaviorist and StonyBrook communications expert Carl Safina details these systems of communication at length in his book *Beyond Words*: *What Animals Think and Feel*, arguing that language and communication are a "tangled topic," tempered by "anthropocentrism."[38] Based on his wide studies of elephants, dogs, bees, monkeys, dolphins, and numerous other species, Safina contends that syntax and means shift but that nearly all species have language. We value linguistics and words, but words are varied, imprecise, and only tools in the vast pool of communication.[39] We employ our own narrowly apparent humanity to privilege ourselves and to divide ourselves from all other species in the way that powerful individuals and cultures have always claimed difference and superiority to effectively other and diminish those outside their privileged position:

> This whole anthropocentric reinstitution of the superiority of the human order over animal order, of the law over the living . . . testifies to the point Freud spoke . . . to the second trauma, the Darwinian . . . [that is our relative and evolution to the other/animality].[40]
>
> We use the human-animal equation to divide ego from id.[41]

But as Derrida demonstrates, to claim distinction based on language or tool-creating ability misses the absolute and most significant bond that ties all sentient

being together. We all suffer. Suffering, according to Derrida, is that great cosmic equalizer.[42] We all suffer, and thus we are all the same. This bond precedes all others. And as his cat looks at him, everything else falls away, and the philosopher is naked, revealed, and ashamed. The cat, the subject of her self, looks at him, and he, Derrida has become the object. This same transference plays out in *Moby-Dick,* for although Ahab sees himself as the pursuer, sees himself looking through the spyglass to find the object of his quest, it is Ahab who is seen by the whale and ultimately pursued. Even the title of the text reflects this; it is the story of Moby Dick after all. Ahab is an object, a production, even to the point that part of his body is produced. Ahab wishes to claim superiority but, as the text shows at some length, he himself is a hybrid, for some of his leg bones are, in fact, whale bone.

As theorist Rosi Braidotti argues in "Animals, Anomalies and InOrganic Others: De-Oedipalizing the Animal Other," the "metaphysics of otherness" is based always on power, "modeled on the ideals of whiteness, masculinity, normality, youth and health."[43] All that is not human is "zoomorphed," made animal and thus deviant and "monstrous." The animal is thus the dutiful subservient familiar, or it is that fantastic predator. But these are Oedipal conceptions, claims Braidotti, based on patriarchy and production:

> Animals have long spelled out the social grammar of virtues and moral distinctions for the benefit of humans. This normative function was canonized in moral glossaries and cognitive bestiaries that turned animals into metaphorical referents for norms and values . . . this is best expressed in contemporary culture by the entertainment ranging from King Kong to the hybrid blue characters of *Avatar*, without forgetting Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* star dinosaur.[44]

It is time, says Braidotti, to "de-oedipalize" all creatures.

The white whale is not simply becoming one with the universe; it is, it exists fully in the moment. Its significance lies not in what is ultimately possible but in its physical presence. Ahab's failure lies in his inability to read beyond the simple symbolism of the whale—evil, destiny, masculinity, profit, leg, phallus, or whatever. He does not fully encounter the Other. Donna Haraway argues in *When Species Meet* that humans need to "become with" other species and to acknowledge mutual needs and authority.[45] The relationship cannot be asymmetrical, she contends, wherein one species claims greater significance or presence. As the world evolves and becomes increasingly more complicated, as humans struggle and artificial intelligence asserts itself, this need to bond symmetrically with other species—the Other—will become more evident. Haraway continues in this vein, contending that in a world of multiple intelligences, the Marxist notion of "value" and its inherent place in capitalism must give way to the concept of "encounter value," wherein our ability to interact on a hori-

zontal level with all Others (and their particular intelligences) will enable our survival.[46] In other words, in a complicated, postmodern world, it will be necessary not to dominate and subordinate or to reduce to mere symbolism the complicated and other sentient beings of the world. Of course, this is exactly what Ahab does. He reduces Moby Dick to a symbolic object, in a romantic, economic, moral, and psychological manner. He encounters the whale as everything except its pure self.

The Whale as Performance Art: SeaWorld's Shamu

If Ahab and his whale are mere constructions, they remain with us still. We too read whales as symbols, as narratives we control, be they monstrous or comfortable anthropomorphic projection. Whales are too vast and dramatic to be ignored in the narratives of any era. The story of Melville's white whale gives way to our own narratives about killer whales. For many people, their first and perhaps only interaction with whales comes today not through oceanic commerce but through the corporate entity of SeaWorld. Both the whaling industry and marine parks are commercial ventures that objectify the whale.

The popularity of oceanic parks and marine displays illustrates the whales' continuing allure. Of all these popular narratives, perhaps the most famous whale story is that of SeaWorld's Shamu. So successful has SeaWorld's marketing narrative been that the icon of the whale is recognized across continents in a manner reminiscent of the way Moby Dick's visage was known across the seas. For decades, SeaWorld has taught their master narrative about the whale. And interestingly, it is in this post-humanist era that their narrative is challenged. The debate concerning the marine park's use of whales provides a curious pop culture tale that provides illustration of Melville's discussion of whales, men, and variations of power.

Of course, Shamu is a stage name, a composite for most of the whales that perform at various SeaWorld venues. Moby Dick's name too is a nom de plume, suggested to Melville by an article in *Knickerbocker Magazine* in May 1839 about "Mocha Dick."[47] The article concerned the pursuit and successful capture of another white demon whale. Like Shamu, Moby Dick is a composite of our fears of the Other. Both became corporate icons—one for the whaling industry and one for the entertainment community. (SeaWorld establishments around the country have been owned by companies like Anheuser Busch, the Blackstone Group, and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.) Shamu is not de-oedipalized as Braidotti requests; rather, he is an extreme example of the whale as familiar, as fantasy, and as monster. If the sperm whales were hunted for oil, the killer whales of SeaWorld have been collected as commercial performers. And if Ahab (a successful commercial merchant captain) sought to dominate the white whale, SeaWorld trains and zoomorphizes and profits from its "killer" whales. The humpback of the white whale is the icon that drives Ahab, and it is the facsimile of Shamu (in pictures, in film, on posters, as furry stuffed animals)

that drives the fortunes of SeaWorld. So patriarchal is the structure of SeaWorld that Shamu is often—regardless of gender—portrayed as a family "man," married to "Namu," and, with his offspring, offering a strange mimicry of a nuclear human family. As the 2013 documentary *Blackfish* makes evident, SeaWorld imposes this patriarchal narrative on the whales at the cost of great suffering.[48] (Derrida refers to this as the "sacrificial structure" of symbolic economies.[49]) Just as Moby Dick exists as an iconic representation in American literature, so Shamu the Killer Whale symbolizes both the SeaWorld corporation and Americans' vexed relationship with nature.

Like Moby Dick and his fellow cetaceans, Shamu and the whales of SeaWorld are trapped within the Oedipal and commercial landscape. For purposes of capital, they are bred, perform, and "donate" their highly profitable sperm to the "desiring machine" of corporate finance. (And, indeed, it is interesting that it is the sperm whale that is highly prized by the whalers and the sperm of famous killer whales that helps keep SeaWorld afloat.) Like Moby Dick, they are trapped within the paradigm of profit.

Significant too is the similarity between the way Moby Dick reads as "monster" to Ahab and his cohorts and the implicit violent monstrosity associated with the orca. The orca is a "killer," a creation whose evil reaches beyond being merely a natural predator. Tormented by the small tanks and unnatural lives, the whales at SeaWorld sometimes "turn psychotic," according to their trainers. In particular is the story traced in *Blackfish*, the tale of the killer whale Tilikum. First owned by Sealand of the Pacific, Tilikum is associated with a long history of violence, including the famous death of trainer Dawn Brancheau at SeaWorld in 2010. Taken away from his original pod, bullied by the older whales, and given inadequate space and often erratic training, Tilikum emerges as a sea monster like Moby Dick. In an article attacking the film *Blackfish*, SeaWorld bases part of its defense on the notion that the concept of "bullying" is irrelevant to Tilikum's condition because whales are not human and that bullying is a human characteristic, and therefore that Tilikum could not be bullied by his fellow whales. At the time of *Blackfish*'s release, SeaWorld's representatives issued a strange mass mailing of its "Letter to Film Critics."[50] "Bullying is meaningless when applied to the behavior of an animal like a whale," wrote the letter's author, suggesting a distinction between the world of humans and the psychic terrain of animals. Bullying, SeaWorld implies, is a strictly human activity, requiring a particular kind of consciousness that whales cannot share.[51]

In 1999, Tilikum was accused of the death of Daniel Dukes, although the water park investigation insisted that Dukes died by drowning. Dukes's body was found "draped" over Tilikum, and his genitals had been bitten off.[52] Ahab's missing and phallic leg bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the alleged details of Dukes' unfortunate demise. SeaWorld is at present disallowed from placing trainers in the water with the whales. According to *Blackfish*, Tilikum languished in solitary confinement until his death in early 2017. Implicit in both

Ahab's and SeaWorld's position is the notion that if the whale is a monster, then any treatment is justified and that the whale's animal status necessarily means it swims outside language and thought. In 2016, the San Diego SeaWorld Park announced plans to discontinue whale performances and to display the orcas in an aquarium.[53]

The whale—be it Moby Dick himself, Tilikum, or the black whale that attacked the *Essex* and possibly inspired Melville's tale—acts as a kind of terrorist within Derrida's "symbolic economy." The whale resists the narratives humans provide. But our own mythologies make the whale into a kind of aquatic Spielberg-like diabolical dinosaur whereby any treatment can be justified. These texts—marine parks, films, the sentimentalized "Shamu" himself—all reify our bifurcated cultural view of the whale and the larger natural world the marine animal represents. We simultaneously both anthropomorphize the whale and yet read the whale as destroyer, an alien with an incoherent voice, an Other. And nowhere in these readings is the whale itself truly permitted presence.

But there is a terrible hazard in making the whale—and, by extension, nature—our enemy. If we insist that nature lives outside consciousness and that its inherent ferocity places nature even in opposition to human consciousness, we are trapped in a doomed relationship with our world. Melville reminds us that if we read this world as mere value-driven hierarchy with *Homo sapiens* at the apex, we are trapped with Ahab in a dark nexus. We must heed, counsels Melville, the warning voice of the whale.

What the Whale Said

The effects of extreme weather impact the nation—drowning the east in snow and starving the west for water, empowering storms, and hurricanes as we see photos of the glaciers melting and polar bears drowning. We can read on the Internet of the savage demise of the elephant hunted and brutalized for ivory and of lions lured and shot solely for trophies. Our troubled relationship with our natural environment is revealed. If we cannot do better, our future is perilous. Like Ahab, we are fettered to a nature we cannot control and to our own predatory desires.

Melville requires us to give presence to the whale, to accept the separate and dissimilar linguistics and mind of the whale, and to coexist and have rapport with the whale. To paraphrase Donna Haraway, as we reread Melville today, we should ask, how do I "become with" the whale? This is the post-humanist Moby Dick who is neither demon nor theosophist and who asks us to acknowledge and engage as equals with cetaceans in a universe in which humanity is not central. Moby Dick requires readers to grant the great white Other its own subjectivity. Melville's genius is to make us experience and share Ahab's tortured and doomed will to dominance and to further learn that the whale cannot be dominated by harpoon or narrative.

To define the whale is to colonize and own it. The whale exists outside hu-

man language and symbolic representation. Melville explores the tensions of competing interpretations and finally, presciently, asks us to see the whale itself, irreducible, powerful, and separate.

Melville's sea "heaved and heaved, still unrestingly heaved the black sea, as if its vast tides were a conscience; and the great mundane soul were in anguish and remorse for the long sin and suffering it had bred."[54] The ocean bears testament to Ahab and capitalism's sin. "The whale, the whale," lament the seamen of the *Pequod* on the novel's final pages, mourning their own imminent deaths, the existence of the white whale, and the sad truth of their entire expedition. The crew understands, tragically, that they have misread and misunderstood the white whale. In the novel's short epilogue, we learn that Ishmael has survived, as Melville's cites Jonah's biblical lines. Ishmael lives to warn us, "And only I am escaped alone to tell thee."[55] Ishmael's words remind us that there is a terrible cost for mastery.

In considering the post-humanist themes of *Moby-Dick*, we do far more than merely admire Melville's literary prescience. Rather, rereading the whale reminds us that our own subjects are never fixed and that there must be acknowledged life beyond the self. Melville introduces us to an "Other" who is at once less and more powerful, to an entity that is both separate from us and yet inherently part of our identity. As we read about the white whale, we find ourselves required to look forward to new forms of subjectivity and, finally, to a new ethics of discourse. This new discursive field in literature and beyond means that we look for new readings and new shades of meaning in all texts. The whale points the way. As Braidotti notes in *The Posthuman*, we approach an era with new ethical rules in which we read the world as "transversal interconnection or as an assemblage of human and non-human actors."[56] Melville provides us with a epistemological primer, a way to escape from the narrow dualities of Self and Other, Subject and Object, narrator and antagonist. We are required to see our own floating position in the wide sea of interpretation.

I end here with a literal whale's tale. As I sit today on the California coast, the water is again uncharacteristically warm, aided by the increased temperatures in the Gulf Stream and the shifts in the world's oceans. We have paid for this sunshine; a vast and prophesied El Niño brought its torrential rains and flooded the state. The coastal highway is at the present time closed and the actual coastline ravaged and reformed through mudslides. The warm water draws all kinds of creatures, including unprecedented numbers of whales that swim so close to the sand that I can see their big bodies breach and their giant tails rise up and slap the water into white foam. They are elemental, irresistible, and, perhaps, an omen.

Notes

1. Zachary Vernon, "'Being Myriad One': Melville and the Ethics of the Ecological Sublime in Faulkner's 'Go Down, Moses,'" *Studies in the Novel* 46 no. 1 (Spring 2014): 617.
2. "Whales in Mythology," https://www.whalefacts.org, accessed August 20, 2019
3. Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman Critical Theory," *Journal of Posthuman Studies* 1, no. 1

(Winter 2017): 9–25.

4. The range of Melville interpretations is touched on in the comparison of F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), and Cody Marrs, ed., *The New Melville Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. While Matthiessen writes (in 1941) as a New Critic, Marrs collects psychological, linguistic, and ecological criticism.

5. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

6. Phillip Armstrong, "Moby-Dick and Compassion," *Journal of Society and Animals* 12, no. 1 (March 2004): 26.

7. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (New York: Wordsworth Classic Publishing, 1999), 297.

8. The "Transcendentalist Club" is referenced in numerous texts regarding the relationships between Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Hawthorne, and (sometimes) Melville. Much attention is paid to this in texts by Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006); Eric Hage, *The Melville-Hawthorne Connection: A Study in Literary Friendship* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014); and Barbara Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

9. Herman Melville, *Cock-A-Doodle Doo: The Crowing of the Nobel Cock Beneventano*, https://americanliterature.com/melville, accessed August 29, 2019. Originally published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1853, this short story mocks the Transcendentalist philosophers.

10. Egbert Oliver, "'Cock-A-Doodle Doo' and Transcendentalist Hocus-Pocus," *New England Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (June 1948).

11. Sydney Moss, "'Cock-A-Doodle Doo' and Some Legends in Melville Scholarship," *American Literature* 40, no. 2 (May 1968): 194.

12. Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). See also Hage, *The Melville-Hawthorne Connection*.

13. Vernon, "'Being Myriad One,'" 64.

14. Elizabeth Schultz, "Melville's Environmental Vision in *Moby-Dick*," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 7 (2000): 100.

15. Hester Blum, "Melville and Oceanic Studies," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 25.

16. Geoffrey Sanborn, "Melville and the Nonhuman World," in Levine, *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, 13.

17. Alexander Pope, "Against Barbarity to Animals," letter to *The Guardian,* no. 61, May 21, 1713, and *The Prose Works of Alexander Pope*, vol. 1 (Oxford: B. Blackwell Press, 1936; reprint, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), lines 152–68, 515–20.

18. Pope, *The Prose Works of Alexander Pope*, 515.

19. Pope, *The Prose Works of Alexander Pope*, 517–19.

20. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003), 168.

21. Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2010), 160–61.

22. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 158.

23. Robert Zoellner, *The Salt-sea Mastodon: A Reading of Moby-Dick* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1973), 178.

24. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 107.

25. Percy Shelley, *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem with Notes* (London: Thomas Y. Rowell and Co., 1910).

26. Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 47, 12, 22.

27. Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 50.

28. Herman Melville, in *Melville's Marginalia Online*, ed. Stephen Olsen-Smith and Peter Norbert (Boise, ID: Boise State University), melvillesmarginalia.org/piazzatales accessed August 20, 2019

29. Herman Melville, "The Piazza," in *The Piazza Tales* (New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856), and online at *The Gutenberg Project*, https://gutenberg.org/piazzatales, accessed August 20, 2019.

30. Melville, M*oby-Dick*, 105.

31. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 107.

32. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 306.

33. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 309.

34. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 193.

35. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 195.

36. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.

37. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 135.

38. Carl Safina, *Beyond Words: What Animals Think and Feel* (New York: Picador, 2016), 96.

39. Safina, *Beyond Words*, 95.

40. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 136–37.
41. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 135.
42. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 138.
43. Rosi Braidotti, "Animals, Anomalies and InOrganic Others: De-Oedipalizing the Animal Other," *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (March 2009): 526.
44. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 69.
45. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4.
46. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 73.
47. Danielle Silve de Sequeira, "The Origin of the Name 'Moby Dick,'" http://melvile.org/mobyname.htm, accessed August 20, 2019, and "Moby Dick," whaling museum.org, accessed August 20, 2019.
48. *Blackfish*, dir. Gabriele Cowperthwaite, DVD (New York: Magnolia Pictures/CNN, 2013).
49. Jacques Derrida, *Given Time*, trans. Peggy Kamufi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 34–68. See also Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, "An Interview with Jacques Derrida on the Limits of Digestion," *E-Flux*, no. 2 (January 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/an-interview-with-jacques-derrida, accessed August 20, 2019.
50. Michael Cieply, "SeaWorld's Unusual Retort to a Critical Documentary," *New York Times*, July 18, 2013; Michael Cieply SeaWorld Questions Ethics of *Blackfish* Investigation," *New York Times*, February 27, 2014.
51. "SeaWorld: Letter to Film Critics," *San Diego Union Tribune*, July 19, 2013.
52. "SeaWorld Sued for Man's Death," *Washington Post*, September 20, 1999.
53. "Big Changes at SeaWorld," May 1, 2016. humanesociety.org/seaworld, accessed August 20, 2019.
54. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 195.
55. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 469.
56. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 45.