

Surface Impressions:  
Materiality, Affect, and Bodily Reading Methods in Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851)

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*By reading different surfaces of Moby-Dick (1851), from the figurative to the material to the embodied, I examine how surface is a relational state. This essay tracks Ishmael's textual participation with surfaces—or, in other words, how he comes to read, know, and feel—across relational and sensual modes of affect, form, and materiality. Drawing on material text studies, affect studies, New Materialism, and queer studies, I argue that imagined and actual embodied contact enables a kind of sensory, intimate reading method. I engage bodily textual inscription through “impressibility,” following the sensed impressions occurring at the skin. More broadly, I explicate how the inscrutability of embodied, felt texts reveals Queequeg's “unfeeling” within a structure of sentimental feeling.*

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“Know ye, now, Bulkington?” Thus reads the textual tombstone for the drowned sailor Bulkington in Herman Melville’s 1851 novel, *Moby-Dick*. It is through this question, addressed to the dead, that I read the novel’s recurring problem. *Moby-Dick* is a vast attempt to know the whale and the ocean, where the whale can dive to incredible depths, and surface, dive, and surface. Humans cannot endure such depths alive: they can only fall dead, as corpses, never to return. But in that depth, they can, perhaps, “know now.” Thus, plunging to oceanic depth through death offers epistemological relief, whereas remaining on the surface alive is to tread water, in infinite possibility, without the fulfillment of knowledge itself. In the novel, I understand depth as encompassing both the literal, physical experience of falling into and dying in the ocean, and the figurative search for “deep” intellectual and interior knowledges. If the narrator, who asks us to call him Ishmael, is to know the whale and know himself, he must drown and die. As he does not seek or at least achieve death itself, Ishmael’s desire for depth continually returns him back to the surface, at which his quest for “knowledge” instead produces definitional proliferation; he is never able to answer for himself the question posed to Bulkington.

When sailors die in the sea, they are described as “lost,” but for Ishmael, who survives, the affective meaning of being lost changes. Throughout his voyage, Ishmael is lost, as in confused, by the amount of knowledge that, on the one hand, accumulates, but the meaning of which, on the other—the capacity to say of his knowledge “Yes, I know now”—is veiled to him because he remains alive and on the surface. At the novel’s end, his epistemic anxieties converge with new grief over the loss of his crewmates, in the final image of Ishmael being rejected by the whirlpool that drew everyone else down but spit him out, held up on the sea by the illegible coffin of his lover. Recognizing Ishmael’s affective overwhelm changes the connotation of “lost”

from being dead and knowing in the depths, to feeling disoriented, without alleviation, at the surface. We, as readers of *Moby-Dick*, might also feel lost—confused, disoriented, frustrated, bored—about being kept at the surface by the novel’s unwillingness to arrive at a point. In this way, the text invites us to share in Ishmael’s affectedness and affects.

I begin what will be a spiralizing journey through modes of engaging the surfaces of the novel, by asking if, rather than diving into this book as something over which we must gain mastery, we might instead simply—perhaps driftingly—let ourselves be affected, as Ishmael is and does? As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it, “surrender” (146)? The feeling of bobbing aimlessly on the surface means that we must throw off the paranoia that reaching for depth, or “knowledge in the form of exposure,” involves (138). I am drawn to Sedgwick’s reparative mode, from which I formulate my own method for reading *Moby-Dick*. Reparative reading suggests an encounter with the surface that focuses on amelioration and generosity, rather than extraction from the text. Following Sedgwick, as readers, does not mean that we assume an anti-critical stance, but that we read away from habituated critical postures (suspicion being only one example). I argue that Melville’s rapidly ebbing, digressive prose is best experienced with an openness to read the text experimentally, even bodily. Therefore, we must yield to Ishmael’s not necessarily “productive” (in the sense of moving us forward in narrative time and plot) narratorial expansions and consequent minor affects. “Reparative” is not to say that reading in this way always feels “good” or “better”; even Ishmael’s own anxiety seeps into his transient moments of self-understanding. Instead, I take repair as the dispersal of experience of living away from teleology and toward recursiveness and detail. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael’s feeling adrift

(and literal flotation) exemplifies quotidian survival despite existing in a cruelly optimistic<sup>1</sup> state of unknowing. Ishmael's method, like an ocean current, attains information useful for some direction then recedes or goes elsewhere, an exasperating moving from and back into place that eschews fidelity to one narrative, identity, or answer.

Sedgwick asks, "what does knowledge *do*," and I rely on her scholarship to propose a method for how it *feels* to know, to not know, to want to know, when remaining on the surface of a text (124; her emphasis). Instead of attempting to decode every compacted allusion for its inner truth, I suggest that we read the novel more holistically in order to understand how it acts on us affectively and bodily. Therefore, I forward a reading of *Moby-Dick* in which sensation and affect are ways of knowing a fact, a figure, a character. I assess feeling broadly, from imagining intimacy with a material metaphor to touching a quilt. This essay tracks Ishmael's textual participation with surfaces—or, in other words, how he comes to read, know, and feel—across relational and sensual modes of affect, form, and materiality. In so doing, I enter the fray over reparative, paranoid, surface, and deep readings, not to offer an answer but to move between literal and figurative surfaces (of the sea, of bodies, of skins and blankets).

### Surface Reading and Relationality

Think, for example, about Ishmael's cetological catalog of whale species. We might see this project as Ishmael's attempt to cope with the ocean's boundless knowledges—coping with the ocean's epistemic immensity differs from an attempt to contain it, because cataloguing as a

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren Berlant's term "cruel optimism" refers to a type of attachment in which "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). Their use of "optimism" does not necessarily connote hopeful feeling. They write, "Whatever the *experience* of optimism in in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (2; their emphasis).

process overwhelms Ishmael. He knows he will never finish yet he pursues it, nevertheless, in a mode of remaining adrift. In Chapter 32, “Cetology,” he organizes species of whale in a taxonomy, a type of scientific hierarchy that represents organismal breadth and depth. Unlike in a traditional taxonomy, Ishmael’s scheme uses bibliography to classify whales according to size of printed codex, and each entry contains his “special leviathanic revelations and allusions” (Melville 109). Since allusions introduce new knowledge, Ishmael’s work does not intend to pin down a singular meaning, length, or quality of the whale. His classification in this chapter is strictly organized, yet he imagines his “unshored and harborless” engagement with language as lacking denotative certainty (108). The meanings of words proliferate and outnumber the concrete definitions. Ishmael’s long-winded style of recording enables not only an unbridled expansion but a connective quality to his allusions. This compounding referentiality, rather than reaching any scientific conclusion—the supposed depth—keeps diverting him always toward more stories, more whales, more surfaces.

Scholars of surface reading offer insight into how we might read a novel that proposes depth while actually constantly redirecting us to textual surfaces. For symptomatic readers, surface is “a layer that conceals” meaning and serves as a barrier to reach and restore what lies underneath (Best and Marcus 9). Surface comprises the literal and the denotative, the obvious, whereas depth is the connoted meaning. A surface/depth binary makes surface and depth discrete, with depth being the desired and “better” counterpart. But Anne Anlin Cheng suggests “we can never separate surface from depth” (8-9). Against the common conception of surface as reliant on the existence and revelation of an inner depth, Cheng reverses this paradigm to rework depth in terms of surface. Rather than reading to restore essence, she offers “a constellation of multiple surfaces understood as concealing nothing” (9). When bringing surfaces to the act of

interpretation, I posit that surface and depth cannot be separated in the first place, in part because the project of seeking depth will always have you rise at the surface. Although making sense of meanings commonly implies a need to get “deeper” into a text, the act of interpretation actually brings meanings to the surface. Even if you go looking for depth, interpretation renders the deeper meaning obvious and laid bare. The “deeper” meaning usually is an abstraction, and interpretation seeks to make the abstract more literal, tangible, and thus, surface-level again.

Ishmael performs surface reading when he catalogues, through which I see an emerging relationality between surfaces. Thinking about surfaces relationally clarifies Cheng’s insistence that “underneath surface there is only more surface” (9). Thus, I suggest that in *Moby-Dick*, surface is a relational state, a contingency, because surface and depth co-define each other. Ishmael reads the ocean’s surface and when writing whale entries, merely skims the surface of related whale information. A scientific catalogue would focus on what is observed and filed, yet he takes his time recounting the witnessing itself, how he comes to a conclusion about the whale. Ishmael classifies according to a “nonce taxonomy,” Sedgwick’s method that refers to “projects . . . of the making and unmaking and *remaking* and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world” (23; her emphasis). In this mode, Ishmael reshapes his terminology when it no longer describes the observed phenomena. He often tells protracted anecdotes, and his knowledge circulates outside of institutionalized epistemology in a marginal way, like Sedgwick’s queer gossip (23). Ishmael’s writing about things outside himself is reflexive—he is concerned with *how* he apprehends the history of an object or place, thus indulging in anecdotes and description that are superfluous to evidential data. He produces relation, through detail and recursion, not only

between whale facts but between himself and the text. Throughout the novel, Ishmael—the narrator and taxonomer—relates to his objects of desire, whether figure, material, or character.

Reading *Moby-Dick* requires that I extend Cheng's argument for looking at and not through surfaces, because whalers cutting the surface is a different kind of engagement than merely looking. During the scene of blubber removal in Chapter 67, "Cutting In," Melville describes the whalers, who cut their kill with peeling and cutting motions. He notices that the whalers' technique is particular: "as the blubber envelopes the whale precisely as the rind does an orange, so is it stripped off from the body precisely as an orange is sometimes stripped by spiralizing it" (Melville 234). Melville expresses peeling through the verbs, "strip" and "spiralize," thus calling attention to the skin, or the surface. Whereas the other whalers are eager to encounter the flesh itself, Ishmael's passive narration stays trained at the surface-level of the peel, rather than immediately removing it to assess the interior. The suspicious reader, attempting to peer under the blubber, would find only "the whale" and "the body" (234). The lack of specificity in these terms renders the whale opaque, rather than elaborated upon through additional figuration—the metaphor stops at the surface of the whale, at the rind of the orange.

Surface reading engages the capacity to ignore difference and flatten meaning. In physical terms, peeling offers a way to think about cutting a surface to make it flat. Melville's narrative attention, usually verbose, turns delicate to convey differently the novel's obsession with surface (skin). The orange peeling is mentioned in passing, a relatively neutral moment amid the chaotic, bloody cutting-in. But note, there is still a violence here: although the peeling does not penetrate the depths exactly, I locate a compulsion in the text to disrupt the surface. Melville aestheticizes the gore, by displaying an image of a perfectly pared peel instead of a flayed body: he uses the orange peel metaphor to depict indirectly the whale's skin as a flat



surface detached from flesh. The surface of a whale body is not flat, but spiralized skin can be laid flat. When flat, a cleaned skin might more closely resemble a line of print or a broadsheet of paper—by flattening a whale, it becomes easier to read as a text, thus forcing legibility through naturalized violence.

## Touching Figures of Speech

To read metaphors in *Moby-Dick*, we must, as Ishmael does, touch them. While Ishmael cannot hold a live whale in his hand, the recurrent whale/book metaphor allows him to grasp “whales bodily . . . in their entire liberal volume” (114). In “Cetology,” Ishmael’s taxonomy organizes whales in descending order of bibliographic size, from folio to octavo to duodecimo<sup>2</sup>. Within each category, he includes chapters, or individual whale breeds. The library context compels us to think of Ishmael turning over embodied volumes, feeling the bulk in his palm, imagining their true size. Through metaphor, Melville renders the whale a body as well as the book a body—and these bodies are one and the same. Ishmael’s touch of the book, passing and opening it between hands, conducts his touch of the whale.

I draw on material text studies to follow material trace evidence in figures of speech and interpret Ishmael’s bodily engagement with bibliographic metaphor via textual and bodily surfaces. I expand on Jonathan Senchyne’s claim<sup>3</sup> that literary figuration is material to track Melville’s metaphor usage and effects at the textual and sensed levels. Metaphor contains a

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<sup>2</sup> “Folio,” “octavo,” and “duodecimo” are the technical terms by which printers classify the sizes of books and their pages.

<sup>3</sup> Senchyne brings together material text studies, cultural studies, and critical bibliography to articulate, “Material textuality means that the material presence of something is itself figurative and demands close reading too” (6). He suggests that the recent development of critical bibliography means that we might throw off the boundaries between “theory” in cultural studies and “materiality” in the archive (7). Senchyne’s work elucidates how a text’s physical form is literary and how figures of speech involving the material appear in literature, such as in his discussion of women rag paper factory workers who resemble the paper they produce.

figure of speech (“vehicle”) and an abstracted, prioritized meaning (“tenor”). In this movement toward a destination, the abstraction, the vehicle only serves to take you to the tenor. But I see material metaphor operating through the sensory or associative qualities of the vehicle in such a way that the tenor itself is transformed by the vehicle. If this is true, then the materiality of how metaphors move us becomes very important. In this essay, I aim to attend to both the vehicle and the tenor, given that they are often both material objects. In Melville’s prose, rather than homogenize the vehicle into abstracted meaning, he offers two tangible things. This is most obvious in the whale/book figure. The vehicle (whale) and tenor (book) are both material and both equally significant. Not only does Melville make the comparison over and over again, but the actual book readers hold in their hands is named for a whale. A book is a completely different object from a whale, but still, the tenor retains its materiality. I will bring this understanding of material textuality to other, less obvious physicalized, tactile, and bodily effects of Melville’s figures. Along the way, I will consider corsets, corpses, quilts, tattoos, carvings, and human bodies and arrive at theorizations of impressibility, reading method, and feeling.

In contrast to the closed books labeled in his catalogue, in Chapter 102, “A Bower in the Arsacides,” Ishmael tears open a “young cub” of a whale’s textual body, and in reading his actions, I reveal the accretion of metaphor that composes such violence. Despite insisting that Jonah’s consumption by the whale was a more effective method of penetration, Ishmael elaborates on his own dissection: “Think you I let that chance go, without using my boat-hatchet and jack-knife, and breaking the seal and reading all the contents of that young cub?” (330). Melville describes gore in bibliographic terms: the “young cub” is a letter or text, whose seal Ishmael must break to go about “reading all the contents” (330). To break the seal with a survivalist’s tools, the boat-hatchet and the jack-knife, rather than a letter opener, would create a

mess, but we do not see the “contents,” the guts (330). The bibliographic metaphor substitutes an image of a crumpled letter for the whale’s eviscerated body, ungrounding violence from its object. Instead of displaying the whale’s “contents,” or his innards, Melville extends a letter and substitutes the live animal with paper. Consequently, Ishmael does not get closer to revealing the whale’s guts but remains assessing the exterior.

When Ishmael alleges that he will uncover and comprehend the sperm whale’s inner workings in “A Bower in the Arsacides,” he, first, gives us a figurative woman in a whalebone corset. Ishmael reads the figure as if undressing the woman, “unbutton[ing] him still further, and untrussing the points of his hose, unbuckling his garters, and casting loose the hooks and the eyes of the joints of his innermost bones, set him before you in his ultimatum; that is to say, in his unconditional skeleton<sup>4</sup>” (329). Although Melville’s gesture does not explicitly connect the whale to book here, I interpret the ribs of the whalebone corset as lines of text. “Bones” implies that the whale’s ribcage<sup>5</sup>, dis- and reassembled into corset boning and busk, fits snugly around the woman’s<sup>6</sup> own ribcage (329). With the introduction of this woman<sup>7</sup>, Ishmael portrays his desire to know the whale as sexual intimacy. He expresses attraction by “unbutton[ing],” “untrussing,” and “unbuckling” the “hooks and the eyes” of the corset (329). He seeks “comprehension” through intimate touch, close to the whale’s textual body, as “untrussing” and “unbuckling” metaphorically model his reading (329). This tactile reading process assumes a

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<sup>4</sup> Hershel Parker’s footnote reads “untrussing” as “dropping trousers,” a probable allusion to Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. I read against this “trousers” interpretation to locate a gendered shift in the way Melville characterizes the clothing. “Untrussing the points of his hose” might plausibly refer to pants (although “hose” could easily be hosiery). But at “casting loose the hooks and eyes,” the unbuttoned trousers turn *into* a corset. “Hooks and eyes” marks a trans moment in which I see a woman in a corset emerging from the left-behind trousers. Importantly, the gendered change functions via commodity objects, specifically garments.

<sup>5</sup> “Whalebone” is not actually a whale’s bone, but baleen, the tough yet flexible filter-feeding system in the mouth.

<sup>6</sup> Men, too, wore corsets and stays, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. A prominent example of male corset-wearing habits is the English dandy in the Regency and Victorian eras. The dandy used a corset to accentuate their broad shoulders and chest, while emphasizing a slender waist.

<sup>7</sup> The whale is gendered male, even as the action is undressing a presumptively female human body.

temporal quality, as we are to imagine Ishmael fussing with a column of eyelets would take a long time, heightening tension. In another sense, as he reads, removing a word and a meaning from the “hooks and eyes,” his desire to finish reading the corset and expose the body only increases (329). He reads for the stripped body of the woman, but instead, finds the “unconditional skeleton,” the text’s meaning (329).

Ishmael’s capacity to undress and touch the whale intimately places him in the role of lover, or looked at another way, maidservant. Although having sex with the disrobed woman is ostensibly his motivation, his narration lingers, on the corset’s ribs and his touch of the whale instead of the human. If he represents the reader, then ultimately, readership requires both pleasurable intimacy and (possibly also pleasurable) subservience. Distinguishing between Ishmael’s positions as maidservant and lover is, therefore, a question about method and affect. Kathryn Bond Stockton’s reframing of surface reading as a “kiss with the text” helps me think about touch and intimacy in Ishmael’s experience of the figured woman. She writes, about where surface reading and kissing happen: “Is ‘surface reading’ somehow like ‘surfacing’ from a location not ‘below’ a text (at least, not exactly) but from a place where the text isn’t being felt as its specific skin?” (8). A kiss allows for penetration without losing touch of the surface—while not exactly getting beyond the surface, it is a deepening action. I intimate that a kiss presupposes a desire to feel another person’s skin as your own; kissing someone makes you feel like someone else’s skin is your own. It excites, like Ishmael’s readerly affect, a pleasure in bodily closeness and some amount of submissiveness. With this sense of surface-level tactility and embodiment, I want to pry apart the kiss that a maidservant envisions between the corset and the wearing body, the corset and the pieced whale.

If we stay even closer to the text, to the bodice, then I can trace the way in which the corset<sup>8</sup> acts on the body, to remind us of the whale's material residue. I take Stockton's suggestion that kissing a text means that it gets under your skin to pursue my own maidservantly orientation toward the corset. So, like a maidservant<sup>9</sup>, look at and feel how the pressure of a corset, against soft flesh, shapes a woman's body—the combination of tightened laces, busk, and boning, shapes and drops the body's natural waist into a smaller and lower silhouette with a rounded bust and slightly reclined posture. The corset, sitting flush to skin, shapes, but also *is shaped* by the body. Cotton and linen fabrics absorb sweat, fragrances, skin matter into the cording itself. And, while the busk pressures the flesh to redistribute differently, we can assume just as easily that the body presses back against the piece. From this mutual pressure, the hooks, metal eyelets, and boning leave an impression on the skin after the corset is removed. The feeling of whalebone on the skin—busk against chest or spine, boning against ribs—prompts us to realize that to become an adornment, the whale had to be disemboweled. While the corset's waist-narrowing properties reshape a body, by placing pressure on the lungs and organs, the whale was reshaped and remade into another object entirely.

Ishmael's change in readerly position is actually about transforming the meaning of a figure affectively rather than ontologically. As a maidservant, he cares for the clothing, whereas as a lover, he desires and lays bare the body. Unlike the way in which meaning moves across

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<sup>8</sup> By the mid-century, the extreme waist of the 1830s softened, while a small waist and hourglass figure remained fashionable. The abundance of harvested whalebone, the development of metal eyelets, and Joseph Cooper's invention of the front-fastening busk (a stiff piece that keeps the bodice upright at the front closure) contributed to changes in corsetry (De Young and Legion of Honor Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco).

<sup>9</sup> In Carol Ann Duffy's poem "Warming her Pearls" (1987), the speaker, a lady's maid, wears her mistress' pearl necklace to keep them warm at body-temperature. She expresses lesbian attraction for her mistress, imagining the other woman in repose. The speaker places the pearls, which are at her own body temperature, on her mistress' neck: "Next to my own skin, her pearls. My mistress / bids me wear them, warm them, until evening / when I'll brush her hair / . . . / She fans herself / whilst I work willingly, my slow heat entering / each pearl. Slack on my neck, her rope." Queerness surfaces in Ishmael's undressing of his woman, specifically through a similar physical proximity to the desired *and* her material possessions.

temporality and material for the whale-letter metaphor, here it stalls on the surface of the corset-wearing woman. A whale corset and a carcass are not proximate at all in how Ishmael, or the reader, might feel emotionally about them. He approaches the corset with care, while the carcass, a dead thing, might elicit disgust. Although materially, a connection exists in the skeletal shape of a corset and a carcass, affectively there is a difference. Furthermore, the tenors overlap and do not lead to any one specific second meaning. Melville's figures, by textually transferring the whale as a live object, a fleshly body, to a new tenor, refuse to let the reader access the whale itself. The proliferating tenors, from whale to woman to whalebone corset to bones to slaughtered animal to letter, do not allow the reader to read the whale's depth, but rather, to only access the surface. Melville insists on the object and its limits, rather than rely on its abstraction to a sexualized woman. Whereas metaphor compares two bodies, some whales<sup>10</sup> *do* become corsets, so the figure of speech, here, is not quite a metaphor. This figure produces two versions of the same dead whale, so reading the figure for vehicle and tenor does not work. Whale bone comprises the corset and the skeleton; they share a vestigial resemblance in visual form and function, as the corset is a device meant to be worn around the ribcage, but the skeleton *is* the ribs. Unlike a metaphor that prioritizes vehicle to elucidate the tenor, the corset/carcass transforms meaning across time and affect. In his turn to the "unconditional skeleton," Ishmael has lost the now-spectral woman to both abstraction and excessive cross-species, cross-animate materiality: whereas Melville concretizes the carcass, by making Ishmael enter and physically engage with the skeleton, the woman in the corset vanishes (329).

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<sup>10</sup> But not sperm whales, which are hunted for spermaceti oil located in the case.

The corset is flush to the figured woman's body, so to touch the animate woman, he must first go through the inanimate<sup>11</sup> whale. Ishmael must get to the figured human by going *through* the object. But Melville's doubling of corset and carcass make it so that Ishmael must remove not only the finished whale product but the bloody corpse. With the removal of the corset, the previously erotic language turns cold, to the "unconditional," and reveals a dead, vulnerable, whale (329). We learn, by untrussing the figure, that the woman has never been in the corset, and rather, skeletal corset covers dead skeleton. When he reaches the skeleton, Ishmael must confront the material truth behind taking off a corset, that death and industrial production have turned a whale into a readable commodity. The woman, once undressed, disappears into her clothing's hooks and eyes that become the emptied eyes in a skeletal skull. Ishmael has described the whale as a commodity in romantic terms but at the end of the paragraph, he refuses the intimacy of reading and forces himself—and the reader—to look at the consequence of production, the carcass itself.

Ishmael's process of reading the corseted woman through touch imitates commodification. The whalebone corset substitutes the actual joints and bones of a whale with a commodified version, and Ishmael must surpass the corset's reconstructed bones to discover the ribcage. "Joints" confuses the distinction between what is manufactured and worn and what is flesh (329). When Ishmael considers these industrialized and skeletal iterations, he imagines haptically feeling the whale and its surfaces varied in texture, the fibrous joints and porous bones. Commodification depends on both the physical transformation of a primary object into

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<sup>11</sup> Mel Y. Chen examines affective relation through an "animacy hierarchy," a linguistics framework that "conceptually arranges human life, disabled life, animal life, plant life, and forms of nonliving material in orders of value and priority" (13). Although Chen suggests it does not matter whether an object is inanimate or animate, Melville does care about the distinction between object and person, life and death. Chen takes me to a capacious understanding of object and person through co-relation, yet to read Melville, I need to retain physical and affective differences between things.

something and a metaphorical or societal transformation into something of value. Like figuration, commodification involves an imaginary process. Changing the whale skeleton into a corset only becomes valuable because of a general societal consensus that a corset has value and meaning, according to Marx's labor theory of value. Figuration, for Melville, is neither a purely mental nor physical capacity and act that his narrator pursues. Furthermore, the imagination here, that reads the whale, is not solely Ishmael's: it is also collectively constructed through value and labor. The figured woman enters at the critical moment of commodification, in the gap between "untrussing" the trousers and prying apart the "hooks and eyes" of a corset (329). The whale's commodification depends on the gendered garment, the commodity object itself.

### **Textile Intimacies**

Ishmael's intimate narration of the corset figure makes us feel like he is close to a physicalized woman and able to touch her, although he cannot. In this turn from corset to counterpane, I seize passages in which Ishmael *does* touch things and other bodies. Tactility and surface provide and function as a kind of sensory, somatic intimacy throughout the novel. Ishmael has unlaced a woman's corset, and at the beginning of the novel, he puts on a feminizing outfit of his own. In Chapter 3, "The Spouter-Inn," Ishmael learns from the inn's proprietor Peter Coffin that the only available room has one bed belonging to a mysterious sailor, Queequeg. Ishmael, curious, rummages through the man's chest, in which he comes across a clothing item he calls "a mat":

I took it up, and held it close to the light, and felt it, and smelt it, and tried every way possible to arrive at some satisfactory conclusion . . . There was a hole or slit in the middle of this mat, the same as you see in South American ponchos . . . I put it on, to try it, and it weighed me down like a hamper, being uncommonly shaggy and thick, and I thought a little damp . . . I went up in it to a bit of glass



stuck against the wall, and I never saw such a sight in my life. I tore myself out of it in such a hurry that I gave myself a kink in the neck. 30

Ishmael attempts to decipher the mat through “every way possible,” engaging each of his senses discretely, but finally relies on wearing and feeling it around his whole body (30). He puts his head in the “hole or slit,” a gesture with which he sexes the mat as a vagina and racializes it vaguely, in a comparison to “South American ponchos” (30). The mat is a technology for feeling—specifically, Ishmael’s touch of the mat’s mammalian textures and weight facilitates sensed, affective contact with Queequeg before they even meet. Touch and affect brush up against each other because, as Sedgwick puts it, “a particular intimacy seems to subsist between textures and emotions. But the same double meaning, tactile plus emotional, is already there in the single word ‘touching’: equally it’s internal to the word ‘feeling’” (17). The mat has many textures—“tinkling tags . . . like porcupine quills,” “shaggy,” “thick,” “damp”—that produce corresponding affects in Ishmael’s body—fright, shock, a “kink in the neck” (Melville 30).

I am stuck on Ishmael’s kink. His touch of and hysteric response to the mat cause a bodily knot, a kink. Seen a different way, the clothing itself, which has touched Queequeg’s naked body transfers pleasure, and pain, to Ishmael’s own body, at the level of taut muscle. Ishmael’s affect, we could infer as fright or shock, but in the text, he only says, “I never saw such a sight in my life. I tore myself out of it in such a hurry that I gave myself a kink in the neck” (30). His feeling of Queequeg, a “premonitory contact” as Christopher Looby notes, through the mat, is so profound it resides within and resonates through his body (73). The act of disconnection from the mat, transgressing and tearing from the mat’s bodily boundaries, is how Ishmael works himself into a knot. His response, then, might be a repulsion at seeing himself in a racializing, yonic costume. Greta LaFleur writes, “people who lived, spoke, read, wrote, and *knew* during this period [the eighteenth century] made sense of ‘race’ and ‘sex’ as “forms of

difference”<sup>12</sup> (17; her emphasis). The kinked muscle points us to the way in which sensory and felt difference alerts Ishmael to racial and sexual difference. Or, his anxiety might be about seeing himself in another man’s feminizing clothes—and, perhaps more concerning, liking it—and then this anxiety is experienced down to the stressed muscle. In this way, sexual attraction is not an intrinsic disposition but an aesthetic inclination, a sensuality to which the body responds. Might this be queer desire<sup>13</sup>, emerging from within the musculature, the body betraying itself to want another man, and a “pagan” cannibal<sup>14</sup>, at that? And, how to work out a kink? You might fuck—or place a palm to the neck to massage the stiffness.

After his embodied contact with the mat, Ishmael soon meets Queequeg and sleeps in the same bed. In Chapter 4, “The Counterpane,” Ishmael exposes his desire<sup>15</sup> for Queequeg as an aesthetic inclination when he describes the man as akin to a decorated quilt. Materiality, in the form of metaphor and felt object, remains significant for the ways in which Ishmael expresses his feelings and the men touch each other. In the morning after their first meeting, Ishmael describes how he feels to wake up in bed with Queequeg:

I found Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife. The counterpane was of patchwork, full of odd little parti-colored squares and triangles; and this arm of

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<sup>12</sup> This quotation comes from LaFleur’s methodological explication, in which she insists that using eighteenth-century language does not significantly help us understand how people living in the period thought about race and sex. She writes, on other scholars who adhere more stringently to historically accurate terminology: “Indeed, I do not think that project is possible or, perhaps, even desirable. Furthermore, reaching toward a kind of historical purity or precision around eighteenth-century language actually veils or refuses the reality of the incredible slipperiness and polyvocality of terms like *race*, *sex*, and many others” (17). Her method acknowledges and attempts to represent the multitude of ways in which people thought and continue to think about difference.

<sup>13</sup> While kink practices do not constitute queer sex, the two converge along lines of nonnormativity and intimacy often found in queer communities and cultures.

<sup>14</sup> Ishmael, in the beginning of the novel especially, fetishizes Queequeg for his non-Christian religious practices. In Chapter 10, “The Bosom Friend,” Ishmael actually performs Queequeg’s religious ritual with him, having realized: “Now, Queequeg is my fellow man. And what do I wish that this Queequeg 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” (53). The idolatry functions as an exchange of “Presbyterian” and “pagan” qualities between Ishmael and Queequeg. The ritual doubles as a marriage rite, after which they are a “cosy loving pair.”

<sup>15</sup> Ishmael and Queequeg are lovers, and I will not belabor the arguments for and against homosexuality in this novel.

his tattooed all over with an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a figure, no two parts of which were of one precise shade—owing I suppose to his keeping his arm at sea unmethodically in sun and shade, his shirt sleeves irregularly rolled up at various times—this same arm of his, I say, looked for all the world like a strip of that same patchwork quilt. Indeed, partly lying on it as the arm did when I first awoke, I could hardly tell it from the quilt, they so blended their hues together; and it was only by the sense of weight and pressure that I could tell that Queequeg was hugging me. Melville 34

The extended metaphor, here, is Queequeg as counterpane. Ishmael identifies similarities in color and pattern between the man and the crafted quilt. While the counterpane is relatively legible, with distinct “parti-colored squares and triangles,” Queequeg’s arm tattoo is, in contrast, inscrutable, “an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a figure” (34). The patchwork has some geometric logic to it, whereas the “interminable . . . labyrinth” has no start nor end and is uneven in “shade” (34). Melville writes, across Queequeg’s skin, a classical allusion and an uneven suntan, therefore making him both mythological and racialized<sup>16</sup> in aspect. Then, with the counterpane, Melville further collapses the registers of metaphoric epidermal difference: “this same arm of his, I say, looked for all the world like a strip of that same patchwork quilt . . . partly lying on it as the arm did when I first awoke, I could hardly tell it from the quilt, they so blended their hues together” (34). The material metaphor first functions through Ishmael’s visual assessment of the arm as indistinguishable from the patchwork, thus sublimating Queequeg’s embodiment into a multicolored quilt. Queequeg, as counterpane, is the counterpart to Ishmael.

Ishmael departs from a visual focus on analogical colors to use his perception of pressure, weight, and texture, to sense Queequeg’s body and the quilt. He flits between metaphors for

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<sup>16</sup> The mention of Queequeg’s tanned skin marking him as non-white recalls eighteenth-century degeneration theory and environmental determinism. These scientific theories posited that Man was white originally, and environmental factors like sun exposure, climate, diet led to racial difference. Queequeg’s skin is an object of fascination for Ishmael, especially in the novel’s beginning. In Chapters 3 and 4, he voyeuristically marvels over the purplish-yellow tones in and tattoos on Queequeg’s skin. Melville uses non-human shades to describe Queequeg’s skin to connote illness, supernatural capacity, and foreign nationality, all of which advance a racialized portrayal.

labyrinth and quilt in an attempt to make sense of the enigmatic, ethnically ambiguous Queequeg. But material metaphor cannot quite encapsulate his understanding of the man, so he emphasizes the arm's tangibility:

This same arm of his, I say, looked for all the world like a strip of that same patchwork quilt. Indeed, partly lying on it as the arm did when I first awoke, I could hardly tell it from the quilt, they so blended their hues together; and it was only by the sense of weight and pressure that I could tell that Queequeg was hugging me. 34

Queequeg's arm is synecdochic for Queequeg himself, who apparently is lying down—so, flattened—next to Ishmael. Ishmael's realization of the textural difference between quilt and skin interrupts his visual conflation: he observes that the arm is “lying” on the “quilt,” indicating not only that Queequeg feels the cloth, but that Ishmael himself is intensely aware of the other man's physical presence (34). I draw on Chen's transcorporeal<sup>17</sup> and transobjective co-relation framework to make legible the sensed, relational closeness between in/animate objects and characters. In so doing, transcorporeality helps me elucidate Ishmael's self-consciousness of his own body, the quilt between, and Queequeg's proximate body. Beyond discrete notions of sentience, objecthood, and subjectivity, Chen's “transobjectivity releases objectivity from at least some of its epistemological strictures and allows us to think in terms of multiple objects interspersed and in exchange” (204). Here, the counterpane acts like skin by serving as the surface on which Queequeg transfers pressure to Ishmael. The quilt is not flat but a wrinkled, lumpy surface when laid across two breathing bodies. Thus, the counterpane, by clinging to both Queequeg and Ishmael's actual bodily skin, feels like skin for all the ways that it conveys haptic sensation. Their “interdependent” intimacy includes and relies on the quilt to conduct palpable feeling between their selves (204). Apprehending the quilt as a part of the way in which the two

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<sup>17</sup> Chen rearticulates Stacey Alaimo's term “transcorporeality,” a suggestion that “we think beyond the terms of the bodily unit and affirm the agencies of the matter that we live among” (204).

lovers relate to each other releases Queequeg from objectification via metaphor, and instead, renders Queequeg more than an otherized counterpart for Ishmael.

My focus thus far on a desire for touching surfaces without entering their depths locates a fetishism for certain objects over the people they reference. In “The Counterpane,” this process makes into specters the bodies of the women who made the quilt. Senchyne reminds us that women factory workers’ “bodies and labors are absorbed and present within shreds of rags, mixed in infinite combination”; just so is the trace of women’s labor evident and tangible in the stitches and fabric (122-123). As with the implied maidservant reader, who is also a laborer, I locate women’s presence<sup>18</sup> in *Moby-Dick* through the material object: women’s hands assembled and sewed the quilt’s “parti-colored squares,” leaving traces of their bodies (34). The women laborers leave their bodies on and in the quilt<sup>19</sup> through their breath, touch, skin. But in contrast to the quilters and the corseted woman, Queequeg’s felt presence *in* the blanket insists that the counterpane is a different kind of object from previous figures that *does* facilitate Ishmael’s arrival at the lover. Ishmael does not ever touch the woman in the corset; instead, she disappears in favor of the whale. He *can* touch Queequeg. Yet, in both cases, a figured woman *and* a figural comparison fall away when Ishmael attempts to touch the thing. In “The Counterpane,” the initial vehicle—counterpane—and the tenor—Queequeg—both become superfluous in light of Ishmael’s actual touch of Queequeg. The counterpane amplifies Queequeg’s touch and physical being, and the mutual pleasures from touch, whereas the corset forces an understanding of the dead whale, and commercial violence, by exposing the “unconditional skeleton” (Melville 329). The quilt touches bare skin, and lying on the bed, is a technology for sensual and sexual

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<sup>18</sup> Ishmael and Queequeg’s male-male desire rerouted, here, in the disappeared women, naturally brings us to Sedgwick’s intervention that male homosociality is expressed, in triangular relation, through a woman.

<sup>19</sup> Rag paper, a primary topic of Senchyne’s monograph, derives from worn cotton and linen fiber. I suspect that a quilt similarly collected from and comprised of fabric scraps might also contain bodily imprints.

intimacies. In touching it, Ishmael and Queequeg might gain the pleasure of feeling fabric or feeling a body. Melville writes Queequeg into an object metaphor, but a co-relational reading offers Queequeg the capacity to touch and be touched.

Crucially, Queequeg touches back. What do we know about Queequeg's experience<sup>20</sup> of Ishmael? As Ishmael narrates, Queequeg's body places "weight and pressure" on Ishmael's own body, and this hug incites "strange" sensations (Melville 34). Queequeg's exertion of pressure on Ishmael's skin, through the quilt, reminds him, and us, that Queequeg inhabits a body that is distinctive from Ishmael's own. Although the counterpane's colors are visually "blended," Melville's description of touch refuses a straightforward intermingling of interracial bodies into one (34). Michelle Ann Stephens, renegotiating Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "reflectedness," maps how "The skin, then, serves as the platform for imagining aspects of the self-other relation in more concretely epidermal terms but also reimagining the 'interior intersubjectivity' of the Black subject as modeled on materiality, the material reality, of the skin as a medium of chiasmic reversibility" (10). We touch others' skin to understand the other and define ourselves as different from the other. Chiasmic touch distinguishes Ishmael to himself from what touches him: touching something makes you focus on what you are touching, so your perception of personal embodiment recedes, yet when someone, or something, touches you, you are shocked back to awareness.

Queequeg's touch activates a strange sensation that, in turn, seemingly forces Ishmael to recall a childhood incident with his stepmother—and the blanket covering their bodies *also* makes Ishmael remember. Sensation transmits knowledge, in that it leads him to remember

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<sup>20</sup> We are only able to access Ishmael's consciousness, as an effect of point of view and first-person narration in the novel. *Moby-Dick* circles back to Ishmael and his feelings, but the touch, nevertheless, unequivocally asserts Queequeg's presence.

another moment involving touch: his stepmother once sent him to bed for sixteen hours. The punishment itself lies in the restriction of sensation; his stepmother did not hit or yell at him but retracted all sensory stimulation. When Ishmael “undressed myself as slowly as possible so as to kill time, and with a bitter sigh got between the sheets,” he lingered with his clothing and bedsheet fabrics, sensitive to and desperate for material contact (34). He “lay there broad awake” for hours, fell asleep into nightmares, then, upon waking again, Ishmael felt a “shock” when

nothing was to be seen, and nothing was to be heard; but a supernatural hand seemed in mine. My arm hung over the counterpane, and the nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom, to which the hand belonged, seemed closely seated by my bedside. For what seemed ages piled on ages, I lay there, frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand... Now take away the awful fear, and my sensations at feeling the supernatural hand in mine were very similar, in their strangeness, to those which I experienced on waking up and seeing Queequeg’s pagan arm. 34-35

The young Ishmael neither sees nor hears anything in the darkness of his bedroom, but we can hone in on his alarm at the experience of feeling, or holding, a “supernatural hand” (34-35).

When he realizes “a supernatural hand seemed in mine,” Ishmael, as in the present with Queequeg, is in bed. As a child, his “arm hung over the counterpane”; Melville places young Ishmael in the posture that Queequeg later assumes alongside him in bed (35). The adult Ishmael remembers his stepmother’s punishment partly due to Queequeg’s hand in his, but also because of feeling the counterpane. The precise feeling of lying, between worn sheets, in bed, and with an arm on the counterpane’s surface, is an emotional one, because it incites Ishmael’s memory of a resonant sensation and his consequent “frozen” affect (35). On the other hand, as Sedgwick notices, the epithet “touchy-feely” implies that “even to talk about affect virtually amounts to cutaneous contact” (17). Ishmael recounts how his “awful fears” immobilize his body, his hand—here, his description of affect is made tangible into “cutaneous contact” (Melville 35; Sedgwick 17). The spectral hand, while not belonging to the stepmother, is inescapably linked to

her threatening physical presence elsewhere in the house. The hand has a body, somewhat: “the nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom, to which the hand belonged, seemed closely seated by my bedside” (35). Ishmael attempts to give understanding and shape to the hand, but it lacks a name and cannot be imagined. His cognition falters, but the hand remains as sensed evidence of the ghost’s presence. Ishmael can feel that it is “closely seated by my bedside”: the form is “by” but not on the bed, so it does not touch the bedding—as does Queequeg—except with one hand (35). The hand, like the figured woman in the corset and the material traces of a laborer in the quilt, does not actually exist and cannot be touched. Yet, both blankets, across time and material, conduct a remembered female spectrality and a corresponding affect from the very fabric to Ishmael’s skin.

### Queequeg’s “Queer Round Figure”

Before assessing the sentimental structure of feeling emerging in the nursery, I want to illustrate the term “impressibility” by reading bodily textual inscription in Chapter 110, “Queequeg in His Coffin,” with which I will then explicate the useful inscrutability of embodied, felt texts in “The Grand Armada.” Prior to the twentieth-century study of genetics, emotion and physiology constituted each other. Impressibility, or the accretion of sensory impressions, is a term from Kyla Schuller’s work on nineteenth century affects that I use, in reading *Moby-Dick*, to connect how feelings are expressed in the body and are compelled by textual encounter. In contemporary scholarship, the usage of “affect” has absorbed “the capacities of affecting and being affected into one phenomenon” (Schuller 13). Impressibility interrupts this common definition to reveal “the state of affecting, but being unable to be affected in turn,” demonstrating that affect “depends on the notion of impaired relationality as its constitutive outside” (13). We



can observe Queequeg sensing textual impressions in Chapter 110, “Queequeg in His Coffin.”

After Queequeg falls ill and convalesces, he turns his coffin into a sea-chest and a text by carving the exterior surface with letters:

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. And this tattooing, had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body 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; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, so be unsolved to the last.  
351

Queequeg’s illiteracy does not prohibit him from writing. Instead, his inscribed body and capacity for inscription allow him to throw off the diagnosis of unimpressibility, with which the racialized were pathologized. To show this, I hone in on the sensed impressions emerging, at the minute level of text, between Queequeg’s body and the writing surface. Take notice of the verbs that characterize Queequeg’s work and call attention to how he acts upon the surface: “carving” and “copy” (351). I liken the process of woodwork to cutting-in, as I have argued earlier in this essay; on the wooden lid, he removes fibrous spirals, akin to spiralized blubber, and creates anew incisions and indentations. Copying’s focus on the shape and form of letters—“grotesque figure and drawings,” “twisted tattooing,” “hieroglyphic marks”—distinguishes Queequeg’s wood-carving (351). Queequeg’s tattoos, on his skin, are evidence of transferred knowledge, and he conveys this theory, by hand, to the wood. His actions restore the importance of working with the hands to the act of writing, through which I suggest that tactile inscription establishes Queequeg’s own authorial capacity within the novel, despite his inability to read the words themselves.

Earlier in the novel, “The Counterpane” details how a material object, the quilt, facilitates erotic touch between the two men, during which Melville releases Queequeg from *being* the counterpane metaphorically and allows him to be inside it instead physically. Carving designs into the coffin makes it resemble the visually chaotic and ornate counterpane. Now, Queequeg *is* metonymically the counterpane, an analogy through which he not only resembles but, across material and time, becomes the coffin. The prophet tattoos the figures onto Queequeg, who, in “his own proper person was a riddle to unfold” (3). The text is incredibly contingent on the body: in this chapter we are introduced first to the material artifact of the coffin, then Queequeg’s tattooed body, then the prophet’s inscribing body, then again, Queequeg’s inscribed body, with his “live heart beat against them [mysteries]” on the surface of his coffin (351). The text only exists now on Queequeg’s skin and on the wood lid. Both of these forms of “living parchment” will decay, and with them, so too the “mysteries” will “moulder away . . . unsolved to the last” (351). If sensory impressions, though ephemeral, act on the body through its interface, then a text, as an intermediary, captures impressions too. Put another way, Queequeg’s coffin compels me to ask, if a body is a text for inscription, then, can the text be a body?


I ascribe the coffin-text’s inscrutability to an embodied knottedness. The descriptors for Queequeg’s letters, “grotesque,” “twisted,” and “hieroglyphic,” all signal a knotted impression: the inscribed text is not easy to read because it must be “unfold[ed]” first (351). Queequeg is constantly producing knotted, coiled, kinked forms throughout the novel—the harpoon line, his tattoos, Ishmael’s kink in the neck—things curled into themselves and therefore determined unreadable. Queequeg is consistently unreadable to Ishmael. Throughout the novel, the question of Queequeg’s feelings is cause for speculation but then consistently redirects to Ishmael’s feelings. In this essay, I have approached surfaces mainly as flattened and curved planes, but the

foldedness of Queequeg's "riddle" convolutes and disrupts surface reading (351). Peeling away a surface to reveal another surface, as Cheng asks of readers, does not work because the surface, here, is turned in on itself. To work out this methodological knot, I speculate that textual (bodily) inscrutability is inextricable from affective inscrutability and must be read as such. Xine Yao identifies inscrutability as a kind of "unfeeling," "a range of affective modes, performances, moments, patterns, and practices that fall outside of or are not legible using dominant regimes of expression" (11). I take unfeeling to the textual level, suggesting "that which cannot be recognized as feeling" also cannot be recognized as text (Yao 5).

Rather than giving up because of the text's obscurity, Queequeg models for Ishmael, and for us, an embodied reading practice that allows the text to retain its resistance to easy legibility. It must be remembered that Ishmael is narrating the scene, so he determines Queequeg's language as inscrutable to himself, but Queequeg "not even himself could read" (Melville 351). Queequeg's copying does not attempt to straighten out the "twisted tattooing," so, to read, he places "his own live heart beat against them [mysteries]" (351). Queequeg's coffin brings into relief what Yao calls "unfeeling" a "theory in the flesh," defined here, "not as opposition to feeling but as its complement in lived experience within the affective hierarchies of biopolitics" (15). Queequeg feels the text. His posture, with chest spread over the coffin, expresses a tactile, affective engagement that deprioritizes language. Literally, Queequeg's theorizations of feeling can only be met through skin, and in practice, the ephemerality of his text indicates detachment from "hegemonic structures of feeling" (17). He demonstrates that it is not linguistic interpretation that will rescue you from the depths of epistemological search and madness—arrhythmically placing your "live heart beat" against the surface of a text is attempt enough.

Queequeg is both impressing on and is impressed-upon by the carved lid. The carvings write over Queequeg's extant tattoos, leaving reddened depressions on inked skin. It is a mutual touch, a transient kiss, between tattooed skin and wood surfaces: the raised parts impress into Queequeg's chest, and he presses into the carved-out parts of the sea-chest. To read skin-on-skin contact across temporal distances of the novel's ending, when Ishmael will ride the coffin out of the novel itself, and this preceding moment, I propose that an impression, or rather, an imprinting, occurs between the surfaces of the sea-chest and Queequeg and Ishmael's chests. Queequeg's sternum-to-coffin contact, as "his own live heart beat against them [sea-chest's 'mysteries']," prefigures Ishmael's own, when he alone survives the fatal whirlpool at the novel's end (351). Where Queequeg lays himself across the chest here, later Ishmael comes to assume this same position. Even on an actual, physical level, as I have discussed with women laborers' skin particulate embedded within textiles, Queequeg's hand, having carved into the sea-chest, leaves a queer impression on Ishmael's own body. Melville does not tell us this happens, but we realize it must be so, when in the epilogue, Ishmael floats "buoyed up by that coffin" (410). In other words, Ishmael ends up with Queequeg's "mark." Yet, the text is only legible to Ishmael impermanently, in the moment: once he lifts his body away from the coffin, once he no longer feels the text on his skin, he will not be able to read the fading impression.

This is not the first moment in which Queequeg has physically and affectively marked another man; in Chapter 18, "His Mark," Queequeg signs his name with a figure identical to his arm tattoo, while Captain Peleg's "obstinate mistake [is] touching his [Queequeg's] appellative" (80). The mark,

Quohog.  
his <sup>21</sup> mark. 80

by “touching” Peleg’s “mistake” of assuming Queequeg cannot sign, signifies against assumptions of racialized unimpressibility (80). As Schuller reminds us, the body is a writing surface for impressions that lead to a “civilized” nature, in contrast to the insensate flesh of a “savage.” A signature affirms identification, typically to authorize an existence under the law, but it also derives from music (key and time signatures) and printing (a paper sheet folded into a leaf, or an inked symbol at the foot of every sheet) (*OED*). These other signatures are also methods of discipline: in sheet-music, pitch and time are determined and kept through theoretical notation, whereas in book printing, a signature tells when to separate a group of pages. Rather than authorize, here, Queequeg authors a signature or a mark. Although represented by a cross shape in the printed novel, Melville tells us Queequeg’s tattoo is a “queer round figure,” recalling the bodily knottedness of the letters he carves into the coffin (80). Queequeg writes “Quohog,” a clam, and his written English misnaming of himself removes himself from a politics of recognition that demands legibility (80). That we have lost Queequeg’s mark through the very process of printing is ironic, but perhaps we never needed Melville’s “authentic” representation of the mark. His mark registers ambivalence, as Yao writes, to “signify the appropriate expressions of affect that are socially legible as human” (7). Queequeg’s own inscrutability as a text, in coffin and signature, is a kind of unfeeling that disallows the development of sentimental feeling through reading. His mark inflects an ambivalence toward attachments to a sentimental structure of feeling. The mark is unrepresentable, except when he himself takes a pen and inscribes it, and through this, Queequeg articulates that striving for authenticity or legibility

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<sup>21</sup> Melville’s original mark has been lost, as Parker’s footnote tells us. The typesetter for the 1851 English and American editions likely included this cross in its place.

through the printed word is a false goal. Rather, the mark's knottedness, its queerness, is the lasting impression of Queequeg. I read "His Mark" and "Queequeg in His Coffin" alongside each other to signal that Queequeg is a craftsman, a writer, and now a printer, and through these multiple roles, he reauthors his own affective capacity to write against cultural notions that determine him unimpressible.

### **Lines of Sight, Lines of Feeling**

In *Moby-Dick*, whales are metaphorized as books for display and reading. In previous chapters, Ishmael has sought epistemological relief through the collection, classification, and compilation of whale fact into volumes for a bibliographic taxonomy. In Chapter 87, "The Grand Armada," I argue that Ishmael can finally read the whale as a text, but the crucial difference is that—surrounded by women and himself figured in feminized relation to a whale—he reads in order to feel, not to know. Furthermore, in this chapter, the feeling Ishmael has while reading is instrumentalized as sentimental. Melville tells us that the whale child suckling is, "while yet drawing mortal nourishment, . . . still spiritually feasting upon some unearthly reminiscence" (289-90). The connection between "mortal nourishment" and "spiritually feasting" draws attention to the way, when consuming sentimental literature, the embodied experience of reading is meant to produce a spiritual effect (289). In the scene of reading for sentiment, the reader uses their body to hold and touch the text, receives information or a lesson that produces an embodied emotion, and through that emotion reaches toward some spiritual enlightenment. In the following chapter, I trace the sentimental fantasy of connective and transformative emotional reading through the physical cords (umbilical, drugg) that entangle the mother whales, cubs, and whalers in each others' lines of vision.

Melville invites us into the machineries of sentimentalism by way of an interspecies parallel between sensate whales and humans. It is no accident that this anthropomorphizing happens through the sentimental set-piece of motherhood: throughout the novel Ishmael has been feminized, and in “The Grand Armada,” he enters into surging circles of mothers and babies, and is himself figured as mother-or-suckling-child to a whale. Queequeg throws a drugg line to tow a panicked whale, connecting it to the boat in which he, Starbuck, and Ishmael sit. The harpooned whale attached to the boat resembles a baby connected to its mother by the umbilical cord.

Melville makes sure we understand this connection:

As when the stricken whale, that from the tub has reeled out hundreds of fathoms of rope; as, after deep sounding, he floats up again, and shows the slackened curling line buoyantly rising and spiralling towards the air; so now, Starbuck saw long coils of the umbilical cord of Madame Leviathan, by which the young cub seemed still tethered to its dam. Not seldom in the rapid vicissitudes of the chase, this natural line, with the maternal end loose, becomes entangled with the hempen one, so that the cub is thereby trapped. Some of the subtlest secrets of the seas seemed divulged to us in this enchanted pond. We saw young Leviathan amours in the deep. 290

I identify the drugg line and the umbilical cord as physical stimuli for feminized feeling and a sensational medium that indexes Ishmael and the whales’ feelings. Ishmael feels an “eternal mildness of joy” when seeing the baby who is still attached to its mother (290). The line forms and holds fast an emotional bond between Ishmael and the whales, and invests Ishmael with feminized feeling by positioning him, via the drugg line, as mother-or-baby. Sentimentalism theorizes that experiencing strong emotion while reading of another person’s peril or suffering can be personally redemptive and politically viable, for the feeling reader who is not at real, material risk. Melville displays a peaceful scene of mother and baby but tells us that the umbilical cord can be entangled with the harpoon line—this portends violence, registering that human sentimental feeling can be dangerous for the whales. And indeed, Melville shows us the

violence of sentimentality—Ishmael watches the mother and baby connected by the umbilical cord and feels placid, while he himself is attached by a drugg line to a whale he intends to kill “at leisure.”

The sentimental reading that Ishmael performs does not work in both directions: the text the whales read is not the same text the whalers read. I apprehend the whales’ reading as an immediate break from the sentimentality that saturates Ishmael’s perception of the nursery. Whereas for most of the novel, Ishmael has been reading the whales as texts, now the baby whales read, and when we follow their gaze, we find:

But far beneath this wondrous world upon the surface, another and still stranger world met our eyes as we gazed over the side. For, suspended in those watery vaults, floated the forms of the nursing mothers of the whales . . . The lake, as I have hinted, was to a considerable depth exceedingly transparent; and as human infants while suckling will calmly and fixedly gaze away from the breast, as if leading two different lives at the time; and while yet drawing mortal nourishment, be still spiritually feasting upon some unearthly reminiscence;—even so did the young of these whales seem looking up towards us, but not at us, as if we were but a bit of Gulf-weed in their new-born sight . . . the mothers also seemed quietly eyeing us. 290

Ishmael sees in the baby whale an anthropomorphized human infant nursing doubly on “nourishment” and spirituality, but the whales do not seem to care much about the humans, who are merely “a bit of Gulf-weed in their new-born sight” (290). While Ishmael’s gaze is fixed on the whales, the babies “seem looking up towards us, but *not at us*” (290; my emphasis). The whales look up at the water’s surface to read and, what they see—whether the ocean, the whalers, or some other creature—is, like Queequeg’s illegible, signed mark, occluded from our readerly view. We, readers of the novel, nor Ishmael, the narrator, are not meant to know what the whales read or feel what the whales feel. Yet, Ishmael’s development of sentimental feeling depends on the humanization of the animal, specifically through imagining that the whale feels emotions. The anthropomorphizing of whales makes the whale adopt a human-like affect:



throughout the chapter, they experience “timidity,” “panic,” “fearlessness,” and “confidence” (287, 289). Ishmael identifies an affective resonance between the whale, the “feeling animal,” and the human, and this similarity allows him to feel *for* the whales, or gain sympathy for them.

The inscrutability of the whale as text makes it difficult for Ishmael to read for knowledge, so, as an alternate strategy of affiliation, he feels. He is, again, an interruption to the whales, gazing below at a newborn baby and a mating couple:

Not seldom in the rapid vicissitudes of the chase, this natural line, with the maternal end loose, becomes entangled with the hempen one, so that the cub is thereby trapped. Some of the subtlest secrets of the seas seemed divulged to us in this enchanted pond. We saw young amours in the deep.

And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the centre freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concernments; yea, serenely revelled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy. 290

We must begin at the umbilical cord and move our own eyes, like those of Ishmael, from side to side, while following the natural line’s lateral motions: “Not seldom in the rapid vicissitudes of the chase, this natural line, with the maternal end loose, becomes entangled with the hempen one, so that the cub is thereby trapped” (290). These sentences, resembling the umbilical cord following and entrapping a swimming animal, express accumulative emotion through speed and suspension of prose. At the passage’s start, the cub, chasing itself or its mother, moves as quickly as the alternations of its foreseen life, but then becomes caught in its own line. From the excitement of a baby’s first swim, we move down the line, as it becomes tangled, until “Some of the subtlest secrets of the seas” are revealed to “us,” to Ishmael (290). In contrast to the cub’s agility that moves the line along quickly, Ishmael receives his “secrets,” the revelation of a mating couple, quite passively. Melville intimates the whales’ playful feelings: the two “serenely

revelled in dalliance and delight” (290). Despite that the water’s transparency does not allow the whales privacy, they are still “inscrutable creatures,” or at least, opaque to Ishmael the observer (290).

At other moments in the novel, Ishmael has felt frustrated with his limited capacity to read the whale, but now, he seems to give up his curiosity and obsessiveness, and “centrally disport[s] in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe in me eternal mildness of joy” (290). Ishmael, finally, has stilled. He swims, indulgent, within a pool of his spatialized emotions, treading in joy while melancholy and confusion encircle him. I see multiple ways to read this affective reaction. The mating whales are inscrutable texts, or at least unreadable to Ishmael, yet, it is this very impaired relation that lets him in on the secret of feeling calm. Crucially, the whales *first* experience calm, then the feeling, carried by the water, passes through Ishmael. I am drawn to how this liquidy, felt gesture resembles the sensory impressions that I have explicated previously. In spite of the whales’ inscrutability, they still impress upon Ishmael. As our eyes follow the sentences from side to side, from the whale’s expression to, finally, Ishmael’s feelings, we are fluidly tracing the affective impression (the line) that the whales leave on Ishmael, and perhaps, end up feeling calmer ourselves. On the other hand, rather than a loss of control, Ishmael may be persisting in his desire to be alike the whale, to understand its secret of why and how it has come to be as it is. He has attempted to mimic the whale so much so that he has reached a kind of effortless joy. I wonder, if this is to be Ishmael’s most obsessive act of epistemological zeal, then he has come out the other side to realize the “secret” is not some concealed fact or system. Ishmael’s most intense experience with the whales is an affective relief through which the question of structural knowledge falls away.

A footnote severs our attention from flowing, embodied joys and forces us to witness the killing of a whale mother:

6. The sperm whale, as with all other species of the Leviathan, but unlike most other fish, breeds indifferently at all seasons; after a gestation which may probably be set down at nine months, producing but one at a time; though in some few known instances giving birth to an Esau and Jacob:—a contingency provided for in suckling by two teats, curiously situated; one on each side of the anus; but the breasts themselves extend upwards from that. When by chance these precious parts in a nursing whale are cut by the hunter's lance, the mother's pouring milk and blood rivally discolor the sea for rods. The milk is very sweet and rich; it has been tasted by men; it might do well with strawberries. When overflowing with mutual esteem, the whales salute *more hominum*. [Melville's note.] "Esau and Jacob": see Genesis 25:29-34. "*More hominum*": the way people do. 290

The footnote returns the capacity to impress to the human, specifically the whaler who commits slaughter. Just before, Ishmael, impressed upon by the mating whales, indulged in internal serenity. But now, the whaler slashes the teat, and Ishmael and the human reader are both shocked back to the reality of industrial violence. Like the baby whales' gulfweed, here, this mere mote disrupts the pellucid text of "mute calm" and Ishmael's emotional clarity (290).

Whereas Ishmael, in the body of the chapter, is ecstatic, the footnote assumes a detached quality. I register an insensitive yet jocular temper surfacing in the footnote that is distinct from the tone expected of scientific writing. The note turns flippant, even coy. After describing how the whale mother has been mutilated, her "pouring milk and blood rivally discolor the sea for rods" (290). The transparent waters have turned red. Yet, what pierces the note is not precisely the fact of violence, but the hunter's sensory pleasure that the description of injury leaves in its wake. We learn immediately, "The milk is very sweet and rich; it has been tasted by men; it might do well with strawberries" (290). With this short footnote, Melville disenchant us, readers, of our faith in scientific method, in sentimental feeling. The note proposes clinical distance, offering a whale fact on gestation, then swiftly, displays the hunt in uncomfortably close proximity. The note,

tempting us with indulgent strawberries, reminds us of the eddy of pleasurable feeling in which we have just joined Ishmael. But the proffered breastmilk, emulsified with blood, and strawberries, compels an affective discordance. We do not want to eat the whale—or do we? If we have attempted to know the whale, deeply, through writing and empirical method, or feel the whale, through deep feeling, drifting, the novel makes us eat our words and taste the fruit of industrial killing, for leisured snacking.

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