



## **Skin Deep: Racial Categorization in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick***

Devasha Solomon

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Advised by: Professor Bethany Schneider

Bryn Mawr College — Department of Literatures in English

Precis: This thesis engages skin as a site of racialization and changeability in Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby-Dick*. Throughout the novel, Ishmael close reads the skins of those around him to fit his vision of the narrative. Lots of skins are sewn together to create a single white skin. He classifies characters into neat categories in an attempt to destroy their ambiguity, but Ishmael himself contains and develops racial ambiguities that he fears. Melville's narrator fails to force all of his characters into his story because of the counterstories fundamentally engrained in the skins he attempts to violate.

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The narrator of Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael, characterizes himself as a scientist, classifying whales and humans alike. Ishmael describes the outermost layer of the dead whale. He ruminates, "True, from the unmarred dead body of the whale, you may scrape off with your hand an infinitely thin, transparent substance" (Melville 234). Ishmael, Melville's narrator, takes agency over the whale's corpse with the phrase "you may scrape off with your hand". He puts himself in a position to say that the whale has given consent to the scraping, as if Ishmael has authority over how the whale is touched. Throughout the novel, Ishmael continually uses first person narration. It is a surprise to read the word "you" when it appears, and one surmises that this "you" refers to oneself, the reader. Ishmael invites the reader to touch the whale's body and remove a layer of skin. Melville's narrator takes the reader by the hand to enact violence. The action of "scraping" the whale is a declaration of Ishmael's sovereignty over the whale's body. He also removes the reader's agency over their own body by doing this violence using the reader's hand. Ishmael's interactions with the reader are entirely one-sided. As the reader and Ishmael remove a layer of the whale's skin, they take advantage of the whale's vulnerability and further strip away its protection from the outside world. Ishmael removes the reader's skin, too, insofar as skin functions as a border between beings. He brings the reader into himself as he violates the whale carcass.

By peeling back the layers of Melville's novel, the scraping of the whale's skin is a similar exercise to the one that this thesis engages. Small words and phrases are scraped off in an attempt to make sense of the whole. Skin is a helpful motif to engage because of its ubiquity in the novel. Every person and animal (and most of the objects) in *Moby-Dick* has a skin. Skin is surface level. In the larger world, it is used as a tool to racialize bodies, which is reflected in Melville's novel. Examining skin as a proxy for racialization illuminates the nature of this

racialization as fluid, changeable, permeable, and vulnerable. Ishmael weaves his narrative from the skins of the bodies around him, so it follows that deconstructing this narrative requires picking apart its skin. When he skins the players in the story, Ishmael leaves behind all other aspects of their characters. Melville's narrator removes these skins to compose his tragedy and expects them to act according to his will, despite their inherent individuality.

*Moby-Dick* is written from the perspective and in the distinctive voice of this pedantic and subjective narrator. Ishmael attempts, for himself and for the reader, to make sense of the world and the narrative. Both slip out of his grasp. The reader is not allowed to remain separate from the events of the novel. Ishmael drags the reader in by calling out to us. He puts us in contact with whales, with Queequeg, with the *Pequod*, with the crew, and all other bodies that Ishmael splices together in his story. In fact, the reader's body is among those that is cut up and sewn together with other bodies to create the narrative.

These bodies, including the reader, are all actors in Melville's novel that physically affect one another. Skin is the first place of contact between bodies and delineates their borders and limits. Skin is a body's protection from the outside world. A person's skin may display their history through scarring, skin can be altered with tattoos, skin color changes depending on environment, and a person's skin can be removed. Ishmael uses skin as a vulnerable site of permeability that he can cut through and graft on to different bodies. He breaks people and animals apart for himself and the reader to enjoy. Then, he joins them into other bodies and covers them in whiteness. However, the skins he forms and cuts open have their own histories and individualities than cannot fully be erased. This thesis will investigate skin as a site of permeability between beings and the way that Ishmael makes failed attempts to leverage this permeability to his own ends.

By forcing the reader into one way of relating to the whale, Ishmael places an obstacle to the understanding of counterstories within his novel. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic define counterstories in their work *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (2001) as narratives created by marginalized groups that oppose the typical white supremacist narratives (Delgado and Stefancic 44). Because Melville's narrator takes over and melts others into his story, counterstories must be actively sought out and (re)constructed. To read for counterstories in *Moby-Dick* is to attempt to differentiate between the skins that Ishmael is suturing together and to pull back apart the mixtures he insists on creating. Reading for counterstories recognizes individual people, whales, and objects as worthy of mention in their own right. While trying to craft his unified narrative, Melville's narrator consistently destroys the possibility for marginalized bodies to take agency and write their own stories. When he sews skins together, he inadvertently leaves scars where the reader can see that the narrative is an aggregate of separate elements. Because we can tell where Ishmael has forced everything into one skin, we can then make our own distinctions between these skins. The reader must pick apart the skin of the novel to see the multiplicity it contains, even as Ishmael is working to squeeze all of it— including the reader— together.

While Ishmael works to mutilate the whale's skin through endless analysis, the reader must watch him closely so as not to lose sight of the whale he is deconstructing. Ishmael continues with his meditations on whale skin, "At any rate, it is pleasant to read about whales through their own spectacles, as you may say" (Melville 234-235). Ishmael draws the reader into his activity with the phrase "as you may say". He speaks directly to "you" without any concern as to whether "you" feel any camaraderie with him or interest in his behavior. Melville's narrator imagines that he knows precisely what the reader "may say" in the same breath as he imagines

that he can “read about whales through their own spectacles”. Ishmael is positioning both the whale and the reader as being fundamentally similar to himself with this sentence. He does not provide room for agency or difference. Spectacles are fitted to individuals’ own eyesight. So, to look through someone else’s glasses is actually to see a distorted version of the world. In fact, to look through one’s own spectacles is also to see the world through a distortion. Because the eye does not focus, it requires correction to bring clarity to one’s surroundings. “Spectacles” are a human invention that are being grafted onto a cetacean subject. Whales don’t wear glasses. Ishmael has stolen their skin to make into a distinctly human object that he claims comes from the whales in the first place. Similarly, he writes about slaughtering whales even as he assumes his friendship with them. His writing of whale parts butchers the whale again after the whale has already been butchered in real life. Then, the reader reads about this killing and imagines it in their head, further reconstructing the scene. With his neurotic attention to detail, Ishmael creates more whale spectacles for the reader to look through without allowing for the potential of the whale’s own living story. The clarity afforded by looking through spectacles allows one to pick out every feature, which is Ishmael’s preferred method of reading. Ishmael’s very action of writing, coupled with the reader’s action of reading, strips skin from the whale to remake it in Ishmael’s image.

To understand the skin, Ishmael flays it from the whale. By taking the skin off of the whale, he can inspect it more closely. In the act of removing the skin, the organ changes. The assault continues in this description of the dead whale’s skin texture: “it is almost as flexible and soft as satin; that is, previous to being dried, when it not only contracts and thickens, but becomes rather hard and brittle” (Melville 234). In the process of “scraping”, followed by “being dried”, the skin becomes unrecognizable. The violence of separation and forcibly crossing

boundaries alters the nature of the skin. After being “scraped” off the whale by Ishmael and the reader, this layer of skin becomes impermeable. Ishmael, the reader, and the whale’s bodies are all engaged in a skinning that fundamentally changes this outermost layer of the whale. A metaphysical interaction between the reader, Ishmael, and the whale physically transforms the whale’s skin. Ishmael makes the reader into a physical player in the novel, inseparable from the other characters. Each body is made to interact with other bodies, and their skin is both the barrier to and the means by which individuals are fused together.

Ishmael’s obsession with his lover, Queequeg the Pacific Islander harpooneer, mirrors that of his obsession with whales, and these obsessions are both mediated through skin. Queequeg’s skin is a particular point of interest for Ishmael, and he analyzes it in his attempts to make sense of Queequeg as a person. Both Queequeg and whales are illustrated for the reader in minute detail. The reader is forced to gaze upon and be entertained (or bored) by the pulling-apart of Queequeg’s skin and of the whales’ skin. The sexualizing effect of Ishmael’s gaze on the whale is explored in Jennifer Doyle’s “*Moby-Dick’s Boring Parts*” (2006) and can be applied to Queequeg. Doyle explains, “It is perhaps impossible to describe without generating desire”, referring to similarities between cetological passages in Melville’s novel and hardcore pornography (Doyle 9). Just as hardcore pornography dismembers and fixates on particular body parts, Ishmael takes whales apart to examine their bodies in greater detail. Specifically, he is fascinated by skin. The “magnifying influence” of the skin facilitates Ishmael’s gaze. Breaking the whale apart into its constituent elements is an attempt to comprehend the whole whale, even though Ishmael himself notes that there is no way to accurately separate the parts of the whale (Melville 234). Like he tries to read the whale, Ishmael reads Queequeg’s skin in an attempt to understand him. Ishmael says, “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” (Melville 351) and describes Queequeg’s skin as a “living parchment” (Melville 351). He makes Queequeg’s skin into a text, superimposed with tattoo ink. Queequeg is characterized as “a riddle to unfold”, and Ishmael sees it as his role to do the unfolding. Queequeg is not actually a riddle. He is a person. Ishmael sees something he interprets as confusing or mysterious and takes it upon himself to interpret and analyze and parse until there is no life or nuance left in Queequeg’s skin. In the end, the only thing left of Queequeg is his coffin (Melville 410). All that’s left of these dead whales is the oil and material objects harvested from their corpses. Ishmael exhibits the same behavior towards the hunted whales as he does towards his beloved Queequeg. Regardless of his intentions, Ishmael flays that which he does not understand for his and the reader’s benefit.

Ishmael can make his dissections because of the permeable, undefinable characteristics of skin. If skin had obvious boundaries and definitions, Ishmael would have nothing to analyze. The very organ that so fascinates Ishmael also causes him distress, a reaction he has both to skin on the whole and to the more particular aspects of these skins. He uses tattoos as a vehicle to engage with others’ skin because they are a physically apparent example of skin’s penetrability. In her book *Identifying Marks* (2006), Jennifer Putzi writes that tattoos “raise the possibility that identity boundaries are ultimately permeable and unreliable” (Putzi 31). In other words, the physical permeability of skin and its changeability threatens the notion of distinct racialization. A person’s racialization often depends on their skin tone, among other phenotypic qualities. However, skin can be changed. How can a society that depends on distinct racial categorizations function when the elements used for categorization are dynamic? Putzi emphasizes that tattoos demonstrate the fluidity of racial categories. The scholar notes that in Melville’s 1846 novel



*Typee* “to be tattooed is to risk objectification, representation, and feminization” (Putzi 18). Applied to *Moby-Dick*, tattooed skin would therefore be a sexual object. After all, it exposes the penetrability of skin and its ability to function as a spectacle in itself. Ishmael’s removal of the whale’s outermost layer of skin to create whale spectacles serves a similar purpose in that the skin becomes an object to be looked at and through. Ishmael routinely dismembers skin for his own gaze. Leaving bodies and skin whole allows for too much agency and exposes the absence of clear delineations between parts of a being. Ishmael must take the whale apart because a living whale contradicts the hierarchy that requires the individual to be clearly defined. Similarly, Queequeg’s very existence challenges Ishmael’s entire worldview. His reaction to the whale and to Queequeg is to gaze at them and take them apart to make them fit his understanding of the world however he can. Tattooing demonstrates the permeability of skin. Permeability ignites in Ishmael the desire to analyze. Tattoos and skin are not inherently sexual. Rather, Ishmael’s reaction of lust is part of his way of pulling apart that which he cannot comprehend. Tattoos themselves so interest and frighten Ishmael because they demonstrate the qualities required for his analysis.

Much as Ishmael assumes that he and the reader can together “read about whales through their own spectacles”, he also assumes that he can read Queequeg’s tattoos despite lacking the relevant knowledge. While he primarily uses the whale’s skin as spectacles through which to read, Queequeg’s skin is used by Ishmael as a text in itself. Birgit Brander Rasmussen’s “Indigenous Literacies, *Moby-Dick*, and the Promise of Queequeg’s Coffin” (2012) argues that there are thematic connections between the narrative content of Queequeg’s tattoos and Melville’s novel (Rasmussen 120). Rasmussen’s scholarship directly contradicts Ishmael’s assertion that Queequeg cannot understand his own tattoos, and thus they must “be unsolved to

the last” (Melville 351). Plainly, Ishmael is incorrect. It is Ishmael himself for whom the tattoos are meaningless. Although Ishmael presents Queequeg’s tattoos as fundamentally unknowable, Queequeg’s tattoos contain meaning that is entirely comprehensible to someone familiar with Marquesan tattooing traditions. For all that Ishmael takes apart Queequeg’s tattoos, he will never know the meaning they hold because he is focused on his own perspective. Ishmael may put on another’s spectacles, but he does not ask anyone else what they are reading. The reader’s understanding of Ishmael’s world suffers because the narrator refuses to consider others’ positions. Ishmael will not give up his voice of authority to allow another to contribute knowledge regarding what they see through their spectacles. Melville’s narrator fails over and over again at making sense of his own narrative in part because he insists on one way of seeing and being. Nevertheless, Ishmael continues to cut up and analyze others’ skin.

Categorization itself, in line with Doyle’s thinking, is what Ishmael desires. Much of Ishmael’s analysis is an attempt to neatly classify that which evades classification. When considering the whale’s skin in “The Blanket” Ishmael immediately runs into the issue of labeling precisely what the skin is, where it begins, and where it ends. The very problem of distinct definitions is another chance for Ishmael to analyze. Were he to focus on a more easily definable topic, he would not be able to dismember the aspects of that topic for the reader to take pleasure in. One aspect of whale skin is the blubber. Ishmael describes, “That blubber is something of the consistence of firm, close-grained beef, but tougher, more elastic and compact, and ranges from eight or ten to twelve and fifteen inches in thickness” (Melville 234). His definition of the blubber slips out of his grasp. It’s “eight” then “ten” then “twelve” then “fifteen” inches thick. He doubles the thickness of the whale’s blubber within a matter of words. Ishmael has begun to explain the layered nature of the whale. It is impossible for Ishmael to say

specifically the thickness of blubber because it is an aspect of many individual whale skins. Not every whale's blubber is of the same thickness. Blubber is not simply "eight inches" because it is also "ten to twelve and fifteen inches thick". Ishmael's attempts to understand blubber run into the issue that blubber is not a singular, definable entity.

"Elastic and compact" are meant to characterize the "consistence" of the blubber. There are a number of relevant entries in the Oxford English Dictionary for the word "consistence", a word which Melville's narrator uses liberally in this chapter. Consistence means "continuance, endurance; continuing state", "a settled condition of affairs", "material coherence and permanence of form", "coherence in one body, union, combination", and "coexistence as compatible facts", among other definitions ("consistence, n."). What does each of these definitions connote thematically with relation to whale blubber and/or skin? Using the definition "continuance, endurance; continuing state" associates the whale's skin with stasis. The concept (though not the reality) of whale skin as continual and unchanging is textually supported, especially by the chapter "Does the Whale's Magnitude Diminish? — Will He Perish?". Melville's narrator finishes that powerful, if hubristic, chapter thusly:

Wherefore, all these things, we account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality. He swam the seas before the continents broke water; he once swam over the site of the Tuileries, and Windsor Castle, and the Kremlin. In Noah's flood he despised Noah's Ark; and if ever the world is to be again flooded, like the Netherlands, to kill off its rats, then the eternal whale will still survive, and rearing upon the topmost crest of the equatorial flood, spout his frothed defiance to the skies. (Melville 339)

There is a juxtaposition in the above paragraph between the professed singularity of the whale and its ubiquity. The whale becomes a collective body in this passage. His "individuality" does not matter so much as his being "immortal". Blubber is "eight or ten to twelve and fifteen inches in thickness" for the same reason. Ishmael cannot distill multiple bodies into one definition of

skin because skin is individual to each body. The singular whale here referenced is the culmination of millions of whales across time and space. He encompasses “the Tuileries, and Windsor Castle, and the Kremlin” as well as the equator. Ishmael names the whale’s relationship to Noah, a Middle Eastern man (*The Contemporary Torah*, Genesis 8:4)<sup>1</sup>. How can such an animal be related to all of these locations and maintain its singularity and a sense of “consistence”?

Peter Coviello’s “Bowels and Fear: Nationalism, Sodomy, and Whiteness in *Moby-Dick*” (2005) illuminates these examples of contradictory oneness and multiplicity. Coviello investigates the use of allusions in *Moby-Dick* as a way of explaining Melville’s construction of whiteness within the novel. Coviello asks, “What kind of nationalism is it, whose prerequisite of radical originality is satisfied through so vast an absorption of terrifically heterogeneous sources?” (Covellio 93). One could also ask “What kind of *whale* is it, whose prerequisite of radical consistence is satisfied through so vast an absorption of terrifically heterogeneous sources?” Coviello answers his question, “Repeatedly calling on these sources in this way, Melville in effect suspends or dismisses their accumulated authoritativeness” (Covellio 100). He provides one answer to the seeming contradictory nature of the novel’s construction of race, place, and bodies. However, there is another possibility. Why must these varying aspects fade into white? Can they not all exist in a messy togetherness? Are the definitions of “consistence” “coherence in one body, union, combination” and “coexistence as compatible facts” in conflict with one another? Melville’s narrator both melts together and picks apart constituent aspects of the whole skin in order to look at them and engage the reader in this looking as well. In the very action of breaking apart all of the skins in the novel, Ishmael allows undefinable elements to

escape his gaze. The engine of the narrative runs on the ambiguity that Ishmael attempts to wipe out with his dissections.

The *Pequod* herself, the ship upon which the events of the novel occur, is one of these bodies with ambiguously racialized skin. The ship's skin mirrors the whale's skin in its complex complexion and consistent inconsistency. Melville's narrator writes, "Long seasoned and weather-stained in the typhoons and calms of all four oceans, her old hull's complexion was darkened like a French grenadier's, who has alike fought in Egypt and Siberia" (Melville 64). The *Pequod*'s physical being is a product of "all four oceans". She has no specifically located origin. Each of these locations has altered the coloration of her skin. Furthermore, the "darkening" of her hull and the comparison to French soldiers in Egypt and Siberia implies that, although the ship was once racialized as white, this is no longer exactly true. Just as the French grenadiers are no longer so pale— or so white— because of their time spent in Egypt and Siberia, so too does the *Pequod* possess some kind of multiraciality because of all her time spent traveling the globe. Skin color is a mutable characteristic, affected by the environment and by proximity to racial others. Skin is not unique to the individual. Instead, the appearance of one's skin (including that of the *Pequod*) has a narrative with specific origins. While the whale's skin cannot be defined because of its relationship to other whales and the whale's pervasiveness, the *Pequod*'s skin is difficult to define because she has changed according to time and place. French colonization is positioned as analogous to the violence done by American whaling through the comparison between the French grenadiers and the whaling ship. Becoming less white is partially a result of the violent economy in which the *Pequod* is engaged. Changing skins comes as part of doing violence to the other. Moreover, the varying "complexion" of the hull is an example of Melville doing what Samuel Otter describes in "Getting inside Heads in *Moby-Dick*"

(1999) as “questioning the very idea of color as a stable characteristic” (Otter 138). The word choice of “complexion” itself, besides its anthropomorphizing effect on the *Pequod*, demonstrates the inconstancy of race. The term “complexion” comes from the Latin for “combination” (“complexion, n.”). The ship’s complexion is a literal combination of different sources. Ishmael exposes the illogic of his categorizations within his attempts to neatly organize the *Pequod* into a clear definition.

The *Pequod*’s changing skin comes as a result of violence that sutures different skins into one another. Through similar means, Ishmael becomes part of a unified skin with his fellow crewmembers. When he is not defining himself by separation from others, he actually seems far more pleased than when he analyzes those around him. Joining of skins into one another to create an ambiguous mass is part of the nature of whiteness. Returning to Coviello’s scholarship, *Moby-Dick* is a conglomeration of allusions, “virtually all of which have been pilfered from a vast array of inherited sources” (Coviello 93). Combining multiple individuals into a single body by covering them in the same skin is seen on a physical level, not just with whales and the *Pequod* but also with the crew. Melville’s chapter “A Squeeze of the Hand” illustrates this “pilfering” as it is connected to whiteness. In this chapter, Ishmael describes how the crew processes spermaceti from a recently slaughtered whale. The spermaceti coats the hands of the crew, blanketing them all in whiteness.

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all

round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness.

Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fireside, the country; now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally. In thoughts of the visions of the night, I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti.

(Melville 306)

He begins “mistaking [his co-laborers’] hands for the gentle globules”. In other words, Ishmael himself, the rest of the crew, and the spermaceti have become indistinguishable from one another. Once they have been covered with the spermaceti, their skins all appear to be the same color. The crew has become part of the product it violently creates. Ishmael’s feelings towards this exercise are not bitter, however. Instead, squeezing the sperm gives him an “abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling”. These adjectives are reminiscent of Ishmael’s feelings towards Queequeg following their marriage when he describes them as “a cosy, loving pair” (Melville 53). Much as uniting in marriage promotes amorous feelings between Queequeg and Ishmael, uniting in industry and processing material goods promotes an amorous feeling among the crew. There is a sexual aspect to this oneness. Besides sperm, which has obviously sexual overtones, Ishmael advocates “let us all squeeze ourselves into each other”. Sexual implications in this passage emphasize the reproductive element of this work. If the crew “squeeze[s] [themselves] universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness”, they are engaging in a procreative act. In a book oversaturated with death, this moment of spermaceti production highlights the life cycle and birth. “Milk” and “sperm” are both white liquids involved in reproductive processes. Ishmael and his crewmates, in processing this life-giving material, become one with each other and with their product. Ishmael presents this activity in opposition to domesticity with his statement that the concept of “attainable felicity” must be “lowered” to “the

wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fireside, the country”. Ishmael’s happiness and insanity come from participation in the violent whaling industry. Indeed, he raises this activity to a level of holiness and perfection in his rapturous declaration, “In thoughts of the visions of the night, I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti”. And all of this, every last bit of Ishmael’s reverie, is a byproduct of the white spermaceti that covers the skins of all of the shipmates, rendering them inseparable from one another. The oneness, the ecstasy, the holiness, and the product all emerge from a violent, white, capitalist effort. No individual’s skin is separate from any other’s. Squeezing spermaceti is not an action of “kindness” but one of white supremacist brutality. Every man is coated in the whiteness that he himself creates. Ishmael has only stopped his categorizations because of the larger success of whiteness at obliterating difference.

All of the skins of the crew are also stitched together beneath this white liquid. Once they have finished squeezing under all that whiteness, their skins have become one. The singular skin is also knitted together with the *Pequod*. She is as much a part of the crew as its human members. In the final moments of the novel, when the crew of the *Pequod* is chasing down Moby Dick, Melville’s narrator describes,

They were one man, not thirty. For as the one ship that held them all; though it was put together of all contrasting things— oak, and maple, and pine wood; iron, and pitch, and hemp— yet all these ran into each other in the one concrete hull, which shot on its way, both balanced and directed by the long central keel; even so, all the individualities of the crew, this man’s valor, that man’s fear; guilt and guiltiness, all varieties were welded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to.

(Melville 398)

They are all united by “that unseen agency which so enslaved them to the race” (Melville 398).

Indeed, the “oak, and maple, and pine wood; iron, and pitch, and hemp” are all unified into “the



one concrete hull”, which might be said to be the skin of the ship. Ahab, “their one lord and keel”, fuses all these different men together into one singular machine bent on destruction. Perhaps race is fluid, but it is forced into certain molds to serve whiteness. As C.L.R. James writes in “The Captain and the Crew” (1985), “You cannot distinguish between man and Nature and technology” (James 30). James is referencing the industrialization of whaling and the unity of the crew with their ship and with the whale. Ishmael describes the crew as “welded into oneness”. “Welding” has connotations of technology as well as a somewhat violent, fiery imagery. The material being welded is not taking action itself. Welding relies on an external actor. In other words, the crew does not have agency in becoming a singular skin. They are forced into it. Forced “oneness” with one another and with technology is further emphasized by the phrase “were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to”. “Were all directed” is passive. The crew is not directing themselves. Instead, there is an external force pushing them to behave or exist in a certain way. The “one man, not thirty” that the crew becomes is also connected to the *Pequod* herself. The crew is “as” the ship. Each of the men’s “individualities” are mixed together to form the “oak, and maple, and pine wood; iron, and pitch, and hemp” skin of the hull.

Within the collectivity presented by the melting of skins aboard the *Pequod*, there is also intimacy. “All varieties [being] welded into oneness” necessitates direct physical contact between skins. Becoming a being in one skin generates intimacy, as seen with the example of “A Squeeze of the Hand”. Intimacy and vulnerability are required, though not always consensual, between individuals whose skins are sewn together. The skin of the whale’s penis presents one such site of permeability. Once a member of the crew who fulfills the role of “mincer” is finished with the dissecting and processing of the whale, he

cut[s] two slits for arm-holes at the other end, he lengthwise slips himself bodily into it. The mincer now stands before you invested in the full canonicals of his calling. Immemorial to all his order, this investiture alone will adequately protect him, while employed in the peculiar functions of his office.

(Melville 311)

The mincer puts himself inside the skin of the whale's penis. Of course, he must do further violence to the whale's penis by "cutting two slits" into it. The sailor now becomes the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing. Because the mincer cannot further butcher the whale without putting himself in danger, he encases himself in the whale's skin. Forcing himself into the whale's penis allows the mincer more flexibility. He can interact with the whale's body in a more intimate way because he has put on the whale's skin. The blurring of boundaries between the mincer and the meat is a protective force for the mincer. Whale skin changes the mincer's appearance to allow him intimacy with the whale carcass. The mincer makes himself into a religious figure using the whale skin in order to peel apart the whale's corpse. Putting oneself into another skin, whether consensually or as a violation, allows a level of intimacy not available to individuals inhabiting separate skins. Once more, Ishmael pulls the reader into the scene. He writes, "the mincer now stands before you". Unlike with the scraping of whale skin, the reader is not physically touching any of the players in the situation. Instead, the reader is an audience member. The mincer is presenting himself as if to a theatrical audience. "The mincer now stands before you" makes it clear that this crewmember is not going about his business for its own sake. Rather, the mincer presents himself to the gaze of the reader, as if conscious of our presence. We watch this intimate interaction between the skin of the whale's penis and the mincer. It is not enough simply for the whale to be butchered alone, there is an infinite audience ready to closely examine each minute detail of the undignified slaughter. "You" watch as the mincer "slips

himself bodily into” the skin of the whale’s penis. The reader is dragged into the intimate act of the mincer’s violation of the whale’s body.

Like the mincer slips into the skin of the whale's penis, Ishmael slips into Queequeg’s skin. Queequeg’s and Ishmael’s joining is more mutual, though Ishmael’s voice still pervades and washes out Queequeg. Through his interaction with Queequeg, the permeability and changeability of Ishmael’s skin is exposed. Melville’s narrator breaks Queequeg down into parts, brings those parts inside of him, and then sees that he has changed. When donning Queequeg’s clothing before he meets the harpooneer, Ishmael likens the “hole or slit in the middle” of one of Queequeg’s garments to “the same you see in South American ponchos” (Melville 30). Distinct definitions of racial groups, in this case Pacific Islanders and indigenous South Americans, already break down just within the poncho. To create a logic for himself, Ishmael references categories he knows. In doing so, he actually generates illogical and confusing networks of origin for everything he touches. He puts on the clothing and then, disturbed, he says of his reflection, “I never saw such a sight in my life” (Melville 30). Instead of looking through the whale’s spectacles, Ishmael puts on Queequeg’s clothes. Clothing becomes another type of skin. Ishmael does not put on Queequeg’s clothes in order to look at Queequeg in the same way that he puts on the whale skin to read the whale. He also does not put on Queequeg’s poncho (which seems almost vaginal in its “dampness” with its “hole or slit in the middle” (Melville 30)) in order to present himself to the reader, like the mincer does with the skin of the whale’s penis. In contrast to the previously discussed pairings, Ishmael puts on Queequeg’s clothing and then looks at himself. He cannot bear the sight of his own capacity for ambiguity. Later, the whale’s skin is compared to a poncho and a blanket in one breath: “For the whale is indeed wrapt up in his blubber as in a real blanket or counterpane; or, still better, an Indian poncho slipt over his

head” (Melville 235). The poncho is the same as a blanket, which is the same as skin. Covering his own skin with another layer of skin has the potential to fundamentally change the individual. Although Ishmael dedicates most of his narrative to covering all skins in whiteness, his wearing the poncho reverses the situation. Ishmael’s skin is covered by non-whiteness.

Why is Ishmael threatened by racial difference? It is vital to remember that race and racism are illogical societal constructs, as Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic write in *Critical Race Theory* (2001) (Delgado and Stefancic 8). Categorizing human beings into distinct races is necessarily generalizing and inaccurate. In other words, Ishmael’s attempts to sort people neatly into racial categories is doomed from the outset. Edward Said asserts in *Orientalism* (1978) that categorization is also an aspect of white supremacist culture (Said 119). Ishmael’s flaying of the other to define their skin reproduces his own whiteness. Ishmael sees the irrationality of racial categories once he puts on Queequeg’s poncho (read: skin). Melville’s narrator is already an ambiguously racialized figure. In Fred Bernard’s “The Question of Race in *Moby-Dick*” (2002), the author posits that Ishmael may have some African ancestry because of his name and his fear of whiteness, among other reasons (Bernard 385-7). The potential for Ishmael to be non-white highlights Ishmael’s anxiety about his own race. If he himself can change skins, then skin cannot be a static, reliable, and visible source of information about an individual. Instead, it is a way to intimacy with Queequeg, a racial other.

As he grows closer to Queequeg, it can be said that Ishmael and Queequeg become two people existing in singularity beneath one skin. When Ishmael is initially told he will have to share a bed with Queequeg at an inn, he explains sleeping arrangements on whale ships: “To be sure they all sleep together in one apartment, but you have your own hammock, and cover yourself with your own blanket, and sleep in your own skin” (Melville 27). As Ishmael

transitions from the third person – “they all sleep together” – to the second person– “sleep in your own skin” – at some point between “hammock”, “blanket”, and “skin”, he constructs singular identity from the collective. Sleeping in one’s “own blanket” is analogous to sleeping in one’s “own skin”. Togetherness beneath a blanket connotes togetherness beneath or within one’s skin. The reader, too, is told to expect privacy in “your own hammock”, “your own blanket”, and “your own skin”. Of course, you see later that Ishmael is not content to let anyone’s skin remain separate from any other. For Melville’s narrator, shared blankets threaten the privacy and singularity provided by a personal blanket. Such intimate contact with Queequeg crosses a racialized boundary and will bring Ishmael further away from easily-defined whiteness. In her work, *Our Faith in Exposure* (2022), Justine S. Murison highlights a connection between privacy and the concept of secularism in nineteenth century literature (Murison 3). She argues for “privacy’s sacredness as a result of the secularization of the spiritual, its conflation with the domestic sphere and, most importantly, the self” (Murison 22). It must be noted that religion is a racializing aspect of one’s identity, particularly relevant here since Queequeg is strange to Ishmael because of his religious practices as well as his race (Melville 74). In accordance with Murison’s assertion regarding privacy’s “conflation” with “the self”, Ishmael’s anxiety about sharing a blanket with Queequeg is shown to be an anxiety about a changing sense of self. How can he fit back into a society of rigid racial categorizations after crossing these boundaries? How can he understand himself when he cannot fit into the divisions that he holds so dear? Ishmael’s intimacy with Queequeg in sharing his clothing and his blanket demonstrates the penetrability of Ishmael’s own skin and, therefore, variable racialization.

The intimacy between Ishmael and Queequeg goes further with their marriage. After their shared night together, Ishmael and Queequeg have a marriage of sorts. Ishmael narrates, “he

pressed his forehead against mine, clasped me round the waist, and said that henceforth we were married” (Melville 52). Queequeg proceeds to give gifts to Ishmael analogous to a dowry or bride price, and the two pray together to Queequeg’s idol (Melville 52). Their prayer is also a consummation of the marriage, given the phallic nature of the “black wood” idol (Melville 52). Afterwards, they lay down in bed together (“Man and wife, they say, there open the very bottom of their souls to each other” (Melville 53)), and Ishmael describes it as their “hearts’ honeymoon” (Melville 53). A marriage between Queequeg and Ishmael unites them into one person, given the concept of coverture within marriage. As Tim Stretton and Krista J. Kesselring write in *Married Women and the Law* (2013), “Coverture held, most basically, that a husband’s legal identity covered that of the woman he married”, and spouses become, in a legal sense, a single person when they marry (Stretton and Kesselring 7). Queequeg and Ishmael are constructed as one body after their marriage. Melville’s narrator writes that the two sit in bed “leaning against the head-board with our four knees drawn up close together, and our two noses bending over them” (Melville 53). The blanket is “well tucked around” them in this moment (Melville 53). As has been previously explained by Ishmael, the blanket is a skin. The phrases “our four knees” and “our two noses” fuse Queequeg’s and Ishmael’s body into a single being that cannot be parted from itself. Emotions, too, are all described in the first person plural in this section, such as “we became very wakeful” and “we felt very nice and snug” (Melville 53). After first sleeping under the same blanket and then unifying themselves through marriage, Ishmael and Queequeg occupy one body, one skin together.

Ishmael immediately follows this unification with meditations on contrast. He remarks, “there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself” (Melville 53). Said posits in *Orientalism* that “confront[ing] the Orient’s peculiarities with some

detachment ... help[s] a European to know himself better” (Said 117). Once Ishmael has married Queequeg, it is no longer possible to gaze at his “peculiarities” with “detachment” because they are one person. Toni Morrison writes in her book *Playing in the Dark* (1992) that studies of the ways that Black characters are used to define white characters “will reveal the process by which it is made possible to explore and penetrate one’s own body in the guise of the sexuality, vulnerability, and anarchy of the other” (Morrison 53). Applied to Ishmael’s relationship with Queequeg, this interpretation makes sense until they are married and unified into one body. At the point they become a single physical, spiritual, and emotional being, Ishmael no longer defines himself against Queequeg but against the outside world. Said and Morrison, when taken together, point out a general trend that whiteness is invested in constructing itself through opposition to racialized others. By becoming one with Queequeg, Ishmael’s racial identity changes. He cannot use contrast to see himself. Were he to look at himself in the mirror once more, there would be no poncho to take off again. Melville’s narrator has been stitched together with Queequeg.

While they lay together, Ishmael contemplates that he prefers to close his eyes when in bed “Because no man can ever feel his own identity aright except his eyes being closed; as if darkness were indeed the proper element of our essences, though light be more congenial to our clayey part” (Melville 54). Here, Ishmael engages a Cartesian notion of separation between body and mind, or “our clayey part” and our “essences” (Watson). Now, Queequeg and Ishmael exist within the same “clayey part”, but they also have come to share their “identity” and “essences”. Ishmael goes on to illustrate the “unilluminated” night, which Queequeg attempts to combat by lighting his tomahawk (Melville 54). Before this pipe is lit, Queequeg and Ishmael live in the same darkness together, and they experience emotion together. As has been understood with

Ishmael donning Queequeg's poncho, putting on another's skin presents the fact of the instability of racial identity. When Ishmael shares a blanket with Queequeg, he attains a level of unity not possible when the two are separate. To briefly leave the "condensed confidential comfortableness of sharing a pipe and a blanket with a real friend" (Melville 54), it must be noted that joining into one body is not solely an effect of love. Whiteness thrives on the eating of non-whiteness. Ishmael's marriage and then covering of Queequeg is a mirror of this violence. The mincer repeats this behavior with the skin of the whale's penis to violent ends. Ishmael and Queequeg worship Queequeg's idol together, and the mincer becomes an "archbishoprick" through his butchering of the whale (Melville 311). Even while Ishmael finds love with Queequeg, he is engaging in the same process of melting skins that becomes so violent later on. Perhaps the suturing together of skins begins with love, but it surely ends in a violation.

Unlike Queequeg's skin, Moby Dick's skin is not penetrated. He evades capture perpetually. Captain Ahab experiences a level of intimacy with Moby Dick, given that the whale ate the captain's leg (Melville 132). Ahab and Moby Dick also bear a physical resemblance to one another. Although they may not share a skin or a blanket like the mincer and the dead whale or like Ishmael and Queequeg, Ahab and Moby Dick share a skin in a visual sense. Moby Dick has marks and scars on his skin (Melville 131), and so does Ahab (Melville 103). Ishmael describes a "lividly whitish" mark on Ahab's skin that traces "right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck" (Melville 103). Ahab's "tawny" skin is offset by this white scar or birthmark. Ishmael's describes Moby Dick's skin:

The rest of his body was so streaked, and spotted, and marbled with the same shrouded hue, that, in the end, he had gained his distinctive appellation of the White Whale; a name, indeed, literally justified by his vivid aspect, when seen gliding at high noon through a dark blue sea, leaving a milky-way wake of creamy foam, all spangled with golden gleamings.



(Melville 147)

Moby Dick is not the overwhelmingly white whale that is often pictured. Parts of his body are white, but most of his skin is “streaked, and spotted, and marbled”, just like Ahab. There is no purity of color to speak of. Moby Dick’s whiteness is his defining trait, and Ahab describes Moby Dick to the crew as “a white-headed whale” (Melville 131). Certainly, popular depictions of Moby Dick portray him as wholly white. Moby Dick’s whiteness also comes from the “milky-way wake of creamy foam”. It is not the whale’s skin itself that is white. The effect he has on the world around him is the whiteness. Notably, the whale’s wake is ephemeral and is caused by active disturbance. Moby Dick’s interaction with the outside world is part of what makes him white. Ishmael declares that the name of “White Whale” is “literally justified by his vivid aspect”. Christopher Freeburg in his work “Knowing the ‘Bottomless Deep’” (2012) points out Melville’s conception of Blackness as aligned with death (Melville 29). Using this thinking, it figures that Moby Dick’s whiteness should be a “vivid aspect”. In other words, his liveliness is his whiteness. Besides Ishmael, Moby Dick is the only player that survives the events of Melville’s novel. Ishmael’s use of the word “literally” highlights the textual representation of the whale as being the whale himself. Simply put, the reality of the White Whale is the words that construct the White Whale. Ishmael’s narration becomes a skin for this fictional cetacean.

Melville’s narrator tries to exert power over the novel by crafting textual skins for his characters. Moby Dick’s skin is made of text, and so is the skin of every other character. As much as he attempts to convince the reader otherwise, Ishmael is a subjective narrator who is far from omniscient. Other agents within his story break through Ishmael’s narration, despite Ishmael’s attempts to quell them. Queequeg’s story in particular is still conveyed through the narrative, resisting the confines of Ishmael’s understanding. *Moby-Dick*’s text is an avenue for

counterstorytelling, not just narration for Ishmael's personal pleasure. Wyn Kelley in her work "Writ in Water: The Books of Melville's *Moby-Dick*" (2012) argues for the existence of separate books within *Moby-Dick* written by Moby Dick, Ahab, Ishmael, and Queequeg. Although she does recognize Queequeg's alternative and numerical form of literacy (Kelley 397), Kelley calls Queequeg's speech "his debased dialect" (Kelley 397) and defines Queequeg strictly as a copyist without creative power of his own (Kelley 399). Even without knowledge of Rasmussen's writing on the meaning of Queequeg's tattoos in Marquesan tradition, characterizing Queequeg as merely a copyist diminishes the possibilities for his counterstory. There is meaning to be found in Queequeg's speech and the ways that Ishmael restricts him by translating his words for the reader. To truly embrace the whole of Melville's novel, it is necessary to go beyond recognized forms of literacy and agency. The concept of counterstories also relates to Edward Said's characterization of Silvestre de Sacy in *Orientalism* (1978). Said writes of Sacy, "What texts [Sacy] isolated, he then brought back; he doctored them; then he annotated, codified, arranged, and commented on them. In time, the Orient as such became less important than what the Orientalist made of it" (Said 127). Said describes Sacy as "ransacking" texts, which is reminiscent of Coviello's use of the word "pilfer" in all its connotations (Coviello 93). Ishmael and Melville play a similar role to Sacy in their "doctoring", "annotating", "codifying", "arranging", and "commenting" the references in *Moby-Dick*. As Ishmael creates his Frankenstein's monster of allusions, he attempts to paper over others' knowledge in favor of his own. Ishmael takes others' skin, sews it all together, whitewashes it with his own ink, and then claims the entire conglomeration as his narrative.

Given that *Moby-Dick* is in written form, text is the only manner through which Ishmael's narrative is conveyed. Language and text are the skin of *Moby-Dick*. If the story of the

book is its body, this body is covered by text. Text is as a border for the novel. Reading the text animates the events of the narrative. Just as skin is used to read a body, text is used to read a book. Tattoos are one explicit example of how skin can be made into a text. Ink is injected into the skin to form letters and shapes that to be interpreted. Skin is read by Ishmael both through tattoos but also via dissection. He takes apart the constituent aspects of the skin in order to define them, like close reading. The pages of the book are a layer that contains and envelops the narrative. In Jonathan Senchyne's "Bottles of Ink and Reams of Paper" (2012), he discusses the use of white paper and black ink. Senchyne argues, "Print legibility does indeed require contrast, but the adoption of whiteness as a central metaphor makes paper inextricable from the processes by which blackness becomes difference and whiteness the unmarked center" (Senchyne 145). Reading *Moby-Dick* in the conventional format of black text on a white page requires accepting white as a default, while that which is black is a spectacle superimposed on the background. The very narrative itself is told on tattooed white skin, insofar as the black ink is that tattoo and the white pages are the white skin. To successfully make meaning of the book, one must see the dark ink as remarkable and gaze upon it. Were one to read the white page itself, there would be no narrative. Meaning is confined to the injected black ink.

Queequeg is removed from his own story with his signature (black ink on white paper) to join the crew of the *Pequod*. The contract that records all of the crewmembers' names and signatures gets Queequeg's name wrong. Melville's narrator records the signature as, "Quohog. His ✕ mark" (Melville 80). "Quohog" is what Captain Peleg has written upon mishearing Queequeg's name. To paper over Queequeg's name with a more familiar, American word is to erase him from the official documentation and, therefore, membership of the crew. With the renaming of Queequeg for Quohog, Queequeg's skin is removed and then replaced with Peleg's

paper and ink version. Queequeg's misspelled name is very like the hypocrisy of the *Pequod's* name itself. All of Ishmael's players, including the reader, spend the majority of their time aboard this ship which is tattooed with the name of an indigenous North American people. Ishmael writes that *Pequod*, "you will no doubt remember, was the name of a celebrated tribe of Massachusetts Indians, now extinct" (Melville 64). According to the footnotes in the Third Norton Critical Edition, Melville would have read about the Pequot in Benjamin Trumbull's *A Complete History of Connecticut* (Melville 64, footnote 4). At the end of his chapter on the Pequot War, Trumbull writes, "It was also covenanted, that the Pequots should never more inhabit their native country, nor be called Pequots, but Narragansets and Moheagans" (Trumbull 87). In other words, the term "Pequot" legally meant nothing. Melville is using the name of a people who were no longer allowed to use it for themselves. As with the whale, it is far easier to flay a body when you have already murdered it. Death is the end to agency, and one cannot protect oneself without agency. The invented death of the Pequot allows Melville to take their name and tattoo it onto his ship. Pequot skin has been grafted onto the ship and then denied any origin.

Queequeg's signature, like his name, is also murdered on this contract and is incorrectly transcribed as the cross quoted above: "Quohog. His ✕ mark" (Melville 80). According to Ishmael, Queequeg "copied upon the paper, in the proper place, an exact counterpart of the queer round figure which was tattooed upon his arm" (Melville 80). Rather than a cross, Queequeg records the tattoo on his arm as his signature, which has a meaning Ishmael cannot parse. The Third Norton Critical Edition explains the inconsistency: "The cross printed in the English and American editions in 1851 (and imitated here) is not 'a queer round figure', and was probably supplied by the original typesetter in place of the figure in the manuscript, the words of which

were most likely in Melville's sister Augusta's hand" (Melville 80, footnote 7). The cross printed is a Christian interpretation of Queequeg's cultural symbol. It reflects Queequeg's position as a Christ figure, as it is Queequeg's empty coffin that rescues Ishmael from the sinking *Pequod* (Melville 410). The cross symbol contains the residue of all the hands that have passed over this work. Melville's sister's handwriting could not be translated into type, and somewhere along the way Queequeg started to sign his name with a cross. A technological limit on the types of characters that could be printed in mid-nineteenth century England and America resulted in this literal erasure. It was physically impossible to tattoo Queequeg's symbol onto the skin of the book. In this case, translation wipes out meanings, and the non-English tattoo on the skin of the book is written so as to become nonsensical. Ishmael may experience unity or comprehension of Queequeg, but cultural limits and differences do not allow the reader this level of intimacy.

Melville's narrator uses the visual of the tattooed text as another skin to indicate racial difference. Ishmael tattoos his own words onto the page with standard spelling. The tattoos of text that make up his words are easily comprehensible to the reader. However, the English spoken by racial others in the novel is often written phonetically, though English is not a phonetically written language. What Kelley calls Queequeg's "debased dialect" (Kelley 397) is written thusly: "Speak-ee! tell-ee me who-ee be, or dam-me, I kill-e!" (Melville 33). This sentence is one of the few examples of Queequeg speaking. It is far more common that Ishmael explains Queequeg's meaning without the reader knowing the particular words that Queequeg is supposed to have spoken. Before narrating Queequeg's life story to the reader, Ishmael explains his choice not to write in Queequeg's own words, "Though at the time I but ill comprehended not a few of his words, yet subsequent disclosures, when I had become more familiar with his broken phraseology, now enable me to present the whole story such as it may prove in the mere skeleton

I give” (Melville 54). Ishmael himself admits an inability to “present the whole story”, but he somehow finds his own translation to be superior to Queequeg’s “broken phraseology”. By removing Queequeg’s words from the narration, Ishmael has removed the story’s skin, leaving only “the mere skeleton”. In Eve Tuck’s open letter, “Suspending Damage” (2009), she writes of the damage caused by researching Native American communities when the researcher creates a narrative of deficit among that community (Tuck 414). Despite his deep connection to and unity with Queequeg, Ishmael uses his intimacy with Queequeg to emphasize his own voice, erasing Queequeg’s words. He flays Queequeg’s narrative and leaves only the skeleton.

There are several points at which Ishmael invites the reader into the intimacy and to speak aloud the dialogue in *Moby-Dick*. In order to comprehend these written tattoos, the reader must lift them off the page to perform them. As with the mincer in his performance of slaughter, the reader becomes the performer to exhibit the spoken intimacy Ishmael has recorded. Taking on a character’s speech animates their textual skin. When the *Pequod*’s African American cook, Fleece, speaks to sharks eating the whale carcass, his speech looks like this: “Your voraciousness, fellow-critters, I don’t blame ye so much for; dat is natur, and can’t be helped; but to govern dat wicked natur, dat is de pint” (Melville 227-228). Readers can best understand what Fleece is saying when his dialogue is read aloud because it is written out phonetically. Thus, Ishmael insists that the reader speak for Fleece, to mock him, and to impersonate him. Melville’s narrator records “natur” when Fleece means “nature”. One would be hard-pressed to find anyone that speaks English who pronounces the silent “e” at the end of this word. By excluding the superfluous letter, Fleece is further alienated from legitimate English speaking. Text conveying Fleece’s dialogue becomes a skin for his character. By writing Fleece’s words in this way, Melville’s narrator attempts to communicate Fleece’s race to the reader. Just as a

person's skin color may indicate their race, so is this racialized spelling and grammar pattern a shortcut for racial difference. The reader's race is affected by the non-standard spelling, too.

Melville's narrator imagines that the reader has a certain accent, which is different from Fleece's and Queequeg's accents. If Ishmael thought he was communicating with someone like Fleece or Queequeg, he would tattoo the entire book in the style of their dialogue. By differentiating the text used when Fleece and Queequeg speak, Ishmael assumes the reader must speak like him rather than like these two men of color. Fleece's and Queequeg's words are skins that demonstrate their status as an other from Melville's narrator and from the audience.

Ishmael makes Queequeg's dialogue part of the skin upon which the reader can gaze. Queequeg's words are as much a part of his skin as his tattoos, and Ishmael regards these aspects with the same disdainful neuroses. The Pacific Islander harpooneer is figured as alien to the reader. Ishmael's description of Queequeg seems to increase the strangeness of Queequeg's skin intentionally. When Ishmael first sees Queequeg, he writes of the harpooneer's skin: "It was of a dark, purplish, yellow color, here and there stuck over with large, blackish looking squares" (Melville 31). Purple and yellow are on opposite sides of the color wheel, and they produce brown when combined. But Ishmael does not say that Queequeg's skin is brown. That would be too simple and would make Queequeg too comprehensible. Doyle notes that Melville uses ten words where one will do when he speaks about taboo subjects (Doyle 5). The reader is assumed to have a skin color different from Queequeg's. If Ishmael was writing for a reader who looks like Queequeg, far fewer words would be used to explain and write around the apparent facts of Queequeg's body. Putzi's concept that tattoos "raise the possibility that identity boundaries are ultimately permeable and unreliable" (Putzi 31) can be applied to this description of Queequeg's "dark, purplish, yellow" skin. By breaking down Queequeg's skin, Ishmael attempts to force that

which he does not understand into paradigms that make sense to him. Doyle theorizes, “The encounter with racial otherness is aligned with inscrutability and with the provocation of the desire to read” (Doyle 12). Describing his skin as “a dark, purplish, yellow color” is Ishmael’s close reading of Queequeg’s skin. Were Ishmael to describe Queequeg’s skin as brown, Ishmael would limit his own pleasure by disallowing the possibility of taking Queequeg apart. Spotlighting Queequeg’s racial ambiguity increases the potential for fear and discomfort regarding “the possibility that identity boundaries are ultimately permeable and unreliable” (Putzi 31). Ishmael’s fear and desire come hand in hand. Additionally, the use of “-ish”, as in “purplish” and “blackish”, adds to Queequeg’s ambiguity. It is simply impossible to know exactly what Queequeg’s face looks like from this description. To use Doyle’s term, Queequeg’s skin is “inscrutable”, but it is also unwriteable.

Ishmael proceeds to wonder if Queequeg is a white man who has been tattooed by cannibals he encountered while lost at sea. Melville’s narrator posits that Queequeg’s skin is brown because he is a white man with a tan from his time on the ocean (Melville 31). Ishmael’s hypothesis regarding Queequeg’s whiteness is a further example of Putzi’s explanation of tattoos being threatening because they present the possibility of racial ambiguity (Putzi 31). Ishmael sees the tattoos as residue of time spent among non-white peoples. If Queequeg is indeed a white man who has been tattooed by Pacific Islanders, that would make him far harder for Ishmael to accurately categorize. Ishmael’s fear regarding ambiguity is the precursor to his pleasure at defining the ambiguity until it is gone. When Ishmael awakes from his first night in Queequeg’s company and finds Queequeg’s arm embracing him, Ishmael remarks on the physical similarity of Queequeg’s arm with their blanket. Melville’s narrator writes, “no two parts of [his arm] were of one precise shade — owing I suppose to his keeping his arm at sea unmethodically in the sun



and shade, his shirt sleeves irregularly rolled up at various times” (Melville 34). Queequeg’s arm blends completely into the quilt. His complexion looks like the multicolored counterpane, and his tattoos resemble its patterns. All the different shades of his arm further contribute to Queequeg’s ambiguous racial categorization, which is what Ishmael initially finds so frightening and fascinating. Besides, Ishmael never does anything “unmethodically”. Fear and interest (sexual or otherwise) are never far removed for Ishmael. The quote describing Queequeg’s skin colors is also an example of Ishmael’s efforts to close read Queequeg. He does not take Queequeg’s skin at surface level. Rather, he insists on “supposing” how this skin color came about. Even while he is beneath the same blanket and skin as Queequeg, Ishmael finds ways to peer beyond the blanket to peel apart Queequeg’s skin.

Queequeg’s fluid identity and skin is later converted into a rigid, wooden coffin. His impending death is preceded by the death of his individuality. This coffin is what saves Ishmael’s life (Melville 410). Queequeg grows sick due to the strains of the whaling voyage, and he has a coffin made for himself (Melville 349). Ishmael notes that Queequeg grows ill “till there seemed but little left of him but his frame and tattooing” (Melville 348). In other words, his skeleton and his skin remain. The coffin physically resembles Queequeg. Ishmael details how Queequeg gets the idea for his coffin to be made: “while in Nantucket he had chanced to see certain little canoes of dark wood, like the rich war-wood of his native isle” (Melville 349). The “dark wood” resembles Queequeg’s skin. The wood itself is identified as indigenous to Nantucket and is reminiscent of the South Pacific. To create the physical structure of the coffin itself, the carpenter “took Queequeg’s measure with great accuracy, regularly chalking Queequeg’s person as he shifted the rule” (Melville 349). Queequeg’s being is converted into quantitative measures “with great accuracy”. These measurements make his body into a text,

much like the extensive measurements of the whale's body (Melville 333). Notably, Ishmael has the whale's measurements tattooed onto his arm (Melville 332), which is analogous to Queequeg's measurements being tattooed onto the coffin wood. Queequeg copies his own tattoos onto the coffin (Melville 351). Ishmael's tattoos of the whale measurements are a translation of the whale's body into the limiting terms by which Ishmael can understand it. Queequeg's coffin is partially created by himself and contains meaning beyond what Ishmael can know. Ishmael narrates,

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, and so be unsolved to the last.

(Melville 351)

Here there are several examples of skin being made into a material object or product.

Queequeg's "body" is being "copied" onto the "lid". Because of his tattoos, Queequeg is called "a wondrous work in one volume". Tattoos make Queequeg into a text. Queequeg is also described as "living parchment" against which "his own live heart beat[s]". Unlike the black ink on white paper of *Moby-Dick*, Queequeg's tattoos are not reliant on opposition and contrast for legibility. Queequeg's skin and the tattoos inscribed upon him will one day "moulder away", though. The inevitability for decay of skin means that skin is not eternal or unchanging. Skin is, instead, placed squarely in the category of the living and of the organic. Skin continually changes, and Ishmael cannot control it. Except for the novel, All that survives of Queequeg is the wooden facsimile of his skin. Queequeg's skin becomes something of a "Noah Webster's ark" for Ishmael (Melville 189). Ishmael's narrative is another coffin for Queequeg, relegating him to a paper and ink existence.

Throughout *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael uses skin to cross linguistic and physical boundaries. He dismembers and dissects the other, whether it be Queequeg or the whale or the *Pequod*, in order to pleasure himself with categorization. The reader is forced to take part. Whiteness tears into non-whiteness in order to strengthen itself for further eating. And yet, these non-white subjects are never entirely erased. Because of Ishmael's inability to define everything he sees around him as well as the scars and tattoos that all skin bears, ambiguity slips out of his grasp. That which he cannot understand escapes from the neverending, cyclical slaughter. Resisting categorization means resisting death. For all that Melville's narrator measures and depicts and explains his lover, his crew, his ship, his captain, and his whale, he will never reach any full understanding because of his belief that "there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself" (Melville 53). He constructs contrasts within skin so that he can break them down to prove his power, tugging the reader along with him. Again, the subjects which he tries to define resist this rigidity. The White Whale (who is not really white) evades capture. His escape from other hunters is already scarred into his skin. Queequeg, in coffin form, evades death. Ishmael, who cannot be certain as to his identity, survives. Melville's narrator may try to close read the world's skin in order to consume it, but he must fail because the world is not a text and is, therefore, undefinable. He is himself a character in his world with abounding ambiguities. Precisely defining himself is impossible. The violence of categorization would inevitably lead to Ishmael consuming himself. If Ishmael were to succeed in breaking apart everything around him to force it to become part of his body, he himself would perish.

**Notes**

1. Although it is unconventional to cite a non-Christian Bible, I have chosen to do so anyway both to center the origins of the Christian Bible and to reference my own positionality to *Moby-Dick* as an American Jew.

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