

Where the Skin Meets: Queerness and Disavowal in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

Alex Blais

Department of English and Film Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta
Corresponding author: ablais@ualberta.ca

ABSTRACT

Over the last half century, the analysis of homoerotic themes present in the author's novels has been a particularly generative subset of Melville studies. Among this body of research, the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby-Dick* has proven to be a compelling avenue of research regarding modes of queer representation in an historical period wherein the open discussion of homosexuality was viewed as anywhere from taboo to illegal. This paper builds on the work of other Melville scholars, such as Caleb Crain and Kellen Bolt, in examining the ways in which 19th century ideas of race intersect with the representation of an eroticized male relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg. I suggest that the particular lens of racialized eroticism through which 19th century white observers viewed Polynesian men inherently denies the potential for disavowal of same-gender attraction to the non-White subject. This denial necessarily reifies racial hierarchy by giving a White male participant in a homoerotic relationship the ability to dictate its boundaries. I argue that even if, as Bolt suggests, Ishmael's relationship with Queequeg represents a rejection of 19th century American nativist sentiment, Ishmael retains the ability to distance himself from accusations of homoeroticism in a way that is not possible for Queequeg and his exoticized body. I conclude with an exploration of how the Victorian freak-show archetype of the tattooed man connects with Ishmael's decision to tattoo himself and thus voluntary take on racializing signifiers within his contemporary context.

In recent decades, the study of homoerotic content in Herman Melville's body of writing has inspired much scholarship. Of particular interest to scholars is the relationship between Ishmael, the poetic narrator of *Moby-Dick*, and his harpooner companion, Queequeg. The progression of their relationship and the way in which they navigate early linguistic, cultural, and racial barriers cuts to the heart of the novel's themes regarding race, inter-cultural exchange, and the nature of shipboard relationships between men. The potential homoeroticism of this relationship has

been inter-tied with questions of race in the works of scholars such as Caleb Crain and Kellen Bolt. Bolt in particular explores how, in the two men's relationship, "foreignness and queerness materialize as social and symbolic alternatives to antebellum nativist narratives about American democracy's futures" (294). It would be wrong, however, to assume that this interracial relationship is empty of connotations of racial hierarchy. While the two men do share a mutual affection, Ishmael's whiteness affords him a degree of mobility in the relationship; he is able to

engage in pleasure with his same-gendered shipmate while also maintaining a distance and potential for disavowal. This is made possible due to the attitudes and narratives that characterized the thought of 19th century white Americans in regards to Pacific Islanders and their cultural practices. The eroticized meeting of white man and “cannibal” in *Moby-Dick* is defined by an interplay of intimacy and distance, where Ishmael, the white subject, can set the terms of their homoerotic relationship according to his own desire and comfort.

Hermann Melville’s *Moby-Dick* follows the exploits of the crew of the *Pequod*, a whaling ship under the command of the half-mad captain, Ahab, as they undertake a months-long sea journey in pursuit of a white sperm whale that had devoured the captain’s leg on a previous voyage—the titular *Moby Dick*. The novel’s action, as well as its many philosophical asides, are narrated by the young sailor, Ishmael, whose wanderlust impels him to take up a position aboard the *Pequod*. However, even before he sets foot on the vessel, a chance meeting at the Spouter Inn in New Bedford leads him to form a fast friendship with Queequeg, a South Pacific Islander and expert harpooner. Despite the cultural divide between the American and the Pacific Islander, their relationship deepens, resulting in an emotional and physical intimacy that persists throughout the novel. It is this intimacy that has led Melville scholars to read queerness in the dynamic between the two men.

Before we can begin analysis in earnest, it is worth acknowledging that the project of reading homosexual intimacy in 19th century American literature is an exercise in teasing out the subtext of a subject that was then considered heavily taboo. Caleb Crain, in his essay “Lovers of Human Flesh,” points out the challenge that faces contemporary scholars of queerness, observing that: “the nineteenth-century reader read with a system of connotations and assumptions that is lost on us” (26). His observation is especially true in regarding representations of same-gender relationships, and

he goes on to argue that the specific language that was used to describe homosexual acts was limited to words such as “friendship” and “sodomy” until the introduction of the word “homosexuality” in 1892 (26). We can see ingrained in these terms a wide gap between the euphemistic (and thus subtextual) and legalistic (sodomy being an official crime), but it is mostly the former that we will be concerning ourselves with in this essay.

Crain argues that, because of these highly limited modes of expression, artists in the 19th century, when they engaged with the subject of homosexuality, had to use symbolic substitutions to represent the unrepresentable. Crain’s essay, “Lovers of Human Flesh” argues that Melville mobilizes the idea of cannibalism in his novels as a tool to explore the homoerotic, mixing feelings of “attraction and revulsion” (Crain 34) that characterizes both homoerotic and cannibalistic acts upon the body.

Crain observes that, by Melville’s time, the racialized trope of South Pacific cannibalism and sexuality were already intertwined in the minds of Americans and Europeans; “[t]he public already associated the South Seas with cannibalism and a peculiar voluptuousness” (32). He demonstrates these associations (and points to the specifically homoerotic nature of them) in an audit of the writings of several white sailors who encountered native Pacific Islanders during their travels in the South Pacific:

In accounts of the Marquesas, for example, the first observation of many visitors is the beauty of the men. Captain David Porter wrote that, “the men of this island are remarkably handsome; of large stature and well-proportioned”...The missionary William Ellis (also identified as a Melville source) agreed: “Physically considered, the Marquesans are described as among the most perfect of the human species. The men are said to be tall, strong-built, and many of them exhibit the finest symmetry

of form" ... But the praise of Porter and Ellis pales beside the wild claims of Georg H. von Langsdorff. "Many of [the Marquesan men]," records Langsdorff, "might very well have been placed by the side of the most celebrated chef-d'oeuvres of antiquity, and they would have lost nothing by the comparison." Upon measuring a young Marquesan named Mufau Taputakava, Langsdorff discovered that his proportions exactly matched those of "the Apollo of Belvedere" ... (Crain 29)

A detail of note in these accounts is the methodical nature with which the white observers view and segment the physical aspects of the Marquesans' bodies. Porter's proportions, Ellis' "symmetry of form", and Langsdorff's measurements all make use of empirical criteria that serve to obfuscate the homoerotic suggestion of their observation. By mobilizing this language, these sailors transform the Marquesans from objects of desire to objects of study.

Besides cementing the case for a particular homoerotic gaze that typified the imaginations of 19th century white observers of South Pacific bodies, these descriptions of Marquesan men bear a special connection to our reading of Ishmael and Queequeg's relationship in *Moby-Dick*. Specifically, they illustrate a particular mode of voyeuristic observation: a mode of observation defined by a white-male gaze centered on the body of a non-white object(s) of desire, while also submerging any homoerotic potential via an affect of clinical empirical consideration. An example of this mechanism occurs in the chapter "The Spouter Inn," when Ishmael, laying in the dark, derives a mix of "attraction and revulsion" (Crain 34) through his appraisal of Queequeg's tattooed body as the islander conducts his "business of undressing" (Melville 32). While there are components of revulsion in his description (for instance, describing Queequeg's head as a "mildewed skull"), his rapt attention and roving gaze betrays his desire to take in the entirety of his bedfellow's body. His anticipation is fully evidenced

when Queequeg "at last show[s] his chest and arms" (32, emphasis mine). The phrase "at last" betrays the anticipation that Ishmael feels as he acts as a hidden observer of the harpooner's physique. Moreover, while taking in every part of Queequeg's body, he makes special note of a particular marker of Otherness: the South Islander's tattoos. From his torso to his arms, face, and back— "all over the same dark squares"— Ishmael ensures he does not miss a single line of ink. He pays special attention to Queequeg's legs, "marked, as if a parcel of dark green frogs were running up the trunks of young palms" (32), an arboreal metaphor brimming with exotic and phallic signification. His thorough segmentation of Queequeg's body is akin to Langsdorff's measuring of Mufau, marking every aspect of the man in the course of his study. In doing so, Ishmael's obsessive gaze can be sublimated as intellectual curiosity.

Besides the taboo nature of same-gender attraction and its potential social consequences, why else might Ishmael be looking for strategies of disavowal for his homoerotic desires? Caleb Crain points to a possible answer when he invokes Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick's ideas regarding "homosexual panic," a manifestation of internalized homophobia that occurs "[w]hen a man becomes aware, however liminally, of attraction to another man... [resorting] to paranoia and projection... It is a desperate defense. The attraction becomes revulsion, horror, and even violence" (Crain 33). What is described here is ultimately a state of tension between desire and fear. Ishmael finds pleasure in Queequeg's companionship and physicality while simultaneously being paralyzed by it. This can be seen in the chapter "The Counterpane" after Ishmael awakes in the embrace of Queequeg's arm. While he does give voice to a more obvious homophobic reaction at the "unbecomingness of his hugging a fellow male in that matrimonial sort of style" (Melville 35), Ishmael also experiences a more ephemeral feeling:

I felt a shock running through all my frame; nothing was to be seen, and nothing was to be heard; but a supernatural hand seemed placed 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 bed-side... I lay there, frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand; yet ever thinking that if I could but stir it one single inch, the horrid spell would be broken. I knew not how this consciousness at last glided away from me; but waking in the morning, I shudderingly remembered it all, and for days and weeks and months afterwards I lost myself in confounding attempts to explain the mystery. (34-35)

Ishmael then connects this phantasmagorical vision directly to his physical intimacy with Queequeg, telling the reader that: “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 thrown round me” (35). One could argue that Ishmael’s state of anxiety in these paragraphs can be attributed a state of “homosexual panic.” The lack of available language in Ishmael’s era (this is certainly not “sodomy” and it is too early for “friendship”) renders him unable to give name to his ambivalent feelings of attraction and revulsion, leaving him in a state of confusion. The young sailor’s feelings of same-gender attraction are thus displaced into the invasive touch of a “silent form or phantom” that holds him in an unnatural and “horrid spell” (34). In mobilizing this supernatural imagery to qualify his ambivalent feelings toward his bedmate, Ishmael attempts to mitigate the intensity of his own mixed feelings of panic and homoerotic attraction. As a defence mechanism he maintains a distance between his conscious self and his subconscious feelings of arousal at Queequeg’s embrace, and attributes his confusion to an invisible, outside force, a “supernatural hand.”

It is also worth noting the choice of the word “shuddering” in the above quotation. In his essay “American Shudders,” David Greven identifies a

recurring motif of “shudders” in 19th century literature, arguing that: “in the writings of Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne, ‘to shudder’ emerges as a verb that expresses one’s responses to beholding another man and having a powerful reaction to him” (18). The return of this phrase here—and in several other instances of Ishmael’s interactions with Queequeg such as during their first meeting in “The Spouter Inn (Melville 32)—belies Ishmael’s homoerotic longing that manifests as a tremor when it is unable to be satisfactorily expressed. The inherent ambivalence of shuddering as a physiological phenomenon, occurring, as it does, in the presence of both pleasurable (sexual arousal) and unpleasurable (fear) stimuli, neatly encapsulates Ishmael’s own conflicting impulses of revulsion and attraction in response to Queequeg’s intimate touch.

Despite Ishmael’s shudders, we must acknowledge that the relationship between the two men does not only produce feelings of anxiety in Ishmael, but many moments of rapture as well. In the essay “Squeezing Sperm,” Bolt argues that the shift from visual interaction (like that exhibited by Ishmael’s voyeuristic observation in “The Spouter Inn”) to physical intimacy acts to alleviate Ishmael’s trepidation at his newfound relationship with Queequeg:

During their day together, Ishmael’s optic-centric racism diminishes as he begins “to be sensible of strange feelings” ... The displacement of sight by touch radically refashions Ishmael. Queequeg’s touch alleviates his pessimistic inclinations, violent outbursts, and suicidal thoughts. (Bolt 311)

The day that they spend together, in bed and out, is characterized by an increasing comfort in physical intimacy and produces a calming effect in the depressed young man. In this context, the “supernatural hand” of Ishmael’s awakening (both literally and homoerotically) produces panic only because Queequeg’s embrace is the first such instance in which the young sailor has been touched sensually by another man. Ultimately, as Bolt argues, “[q]ueer contact feminizes white men in democratically

productive ways... In pairing Ishmael as wife and Queequeg as husband, Melville reverses racist nativist narratives insofar as a white man subordinates himself to a nonwhite one" (312). Ishmael thus derives a paradoxical pleasure in voluntarily accepting a submissive role. Within the climate of 19th century American Nativism, a populist movement asserting the supremacy of "native" born, white, protestant descendants of the country's original colonists, Bolt's analysis identifies Ishmael and Queequeg's relationship as uniquely subversive to America's established racial order.

However, I believe that Bolt's analysis leaves certain 19th century hierarchical racial connotations unaddressed. While Bolt argues that Ishmael may assume a subservient role in his relationship with Queequeg, I would contend that his whiteness affords him the potential to disavow homosexual desire in a way that his companion cannot. The crux of this difference can be found in the distinction that Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick makes between "the voluntary stigma [of acknowledging one's queerness publicly] and the non-discretionary stigma of skin colour—that is, of skin colour other than white" (30). We can see this in action when Ishmael deflects Queequeg's attempts at concretely stating the romantic nature of their relationship: "when our smoke was over, he pressed his forehead against mine, clasped me round the waist, and said that henceforth we were married; meaning, in his country's phrase, that we were bosom friends" (Melville 52). By drawing attention to Queequeg's foreignness with the formulation "in his country's phrase" Ishmael mobilizes presumptions of cultural difference and linguistic ignorance to undermine Queequeg's profession of love. Of course, the word "marriage" in this interaction is presumably spoken in English, broken English, perhaps, but still obviously understandable to Ishmael. Even if it is a mistake on the harpooner's part, why does Ishmael still feel the need to translate (or "correct") a rather straightforward

meaning? We can conclude that despite Ishmael's progression in acceptance of his homoerotic desires, the full acknowledgement of those desires is still not in the cards for him.

Queequeg, on the other hand, cannot divest himself of the "non-discretionary stigma" (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 30) of his racial categorization. As has been outlined above, the bodies of Pacific Islanders in the 19th century western psyche were inherently objectified and eroticized. This included an eroticized contextualization of the common Polynesian practice of tattooing. Bolt observes that "Ishmael's body increasingly resembles Queequeg's: tattooed," a process that serves to "signal Ishmael's dissociation from Americanness" (294). But this effect is only achievable because of Ishmael's presumed racial purity. Ishmael's white skin possesses a metaphorical blankness within a 19th century racial context, meaning that his body begins as a white canvas on which racial signifiers, like his tattoos, can be imprinted. Though permanent, in this context his tattooing becomes a process of addition, an act of assuming "voluntary-stigma" by appropriating markers of Otherness. Queequeg has no such option. He cannot make his body meaningfully resemble Ishmael's because, within the racially segmented America of the 19th century, non-white skin colour remains a deviation from an unblemished white base, regardless of his tattoos.

Even if Ishmael were to continue tattooing himself until "any remaining white skin will be blackened with ink" (Bolt 294), avenues still exist for him to ultimately disavow the racialized and queer signification of his tattooed body. One such possibility for Ishmael lies in a common archetype of the 19th century circus—that of the "Tattooed Man." Relegated to the freakshow tent, performers such as John Rutherford and James F. O'Connell would regale gawkers with stories of how they came to be covered with tattoos (Cassuto 238). These stories, largely or wholly fabricated, shared several common elements. The tattooed man was invariably a sailor—O'Connell, like Ishmael, was a whaler (O'Connell 9)—shipwrecked in the South Pacific

where they were taken by a local tribe before being forcibly tattooed and subsequently married to one of the native women (often a chief's daughter), with the "tattooing being part of the marriage ceremony" (O'Connell 14). O'Connell's story is particularly notable. First ghostwritten in book form in 1836, and later condensed into a pamphlet (Cassuto 238), its most memorable episode describes the process of being tattooed by a group of young native women in lurid detail:

The third beauty then produced a small flat piece of wood with thorns pierced through one end; this she dipped in the black liquid, then rested the 13 points of the thorns on the mark on my hand, and with a sudden blow from a stick, drove the thorns into my flesh. One needs must when the devil drives; so I summoned all my fortitude, set my teeth, and bore it like a martyr. (O'Connell 12-13)

O'Connell's narrative bears an implication of gendered reversal (being penetrated by women via the tattoo needle acting as a "figurative form of rape" (Cassuto 239)) and dabbles in sexual impropriety (the chief's daughter he is forced to marry is "about fourteen years of age" (O'Connell 14)). Most significantly, the racial and erotic implications of the tattoos are: distanced from the white narrator through their framing as a non-white cultural practice forced upon the hapless sailor; and, gendered reversal aside, aggressively heterosexual in nature. This has the effect of locating the transgressiveness of the tattooing solely in the domain of the Other, allowing "the victim" to maintain innocence and their white racial categorization.

We know that Ishmael is aware of these narratives. When he first sees Queequeg's tattoos he remembers "a story of a white man—a whaleman too—who, falling among the cannibals, had been tattooed by them. I concluded that this harpooneer [sic], in the course of his distant voyages, must have met with a similar adventure"

(Melville 31). This illustrates that Ishmael's choice to tattoo himself is done with full knowledge of the common narrative of forced tattooing typified by O'Connell's pamphlet. Thus, even fully tattooed, there always remains a possible avenue of disavowal. As Cassuto argues, tattooing allowed an otherwise non-marginalized individual to "voluntarily become a freak" while the context of the freakshow "made this decision appear involuntary" (239). Should he ever wish to reclaim a degree of whiteness (though tempered by the voluntary stigma of tattooing), he needs simply spin a yarn of shipwreck, forced tattooing and heterosexual marriage among the cannibals. The circus tent awaits.

Many paths remain for Ishmael to disavow his homosexual relationship with Queequeg, even as he derives pleasure from it. The inherently racialized nature of Queequeg's body and tattoos within the context of 19th century American society denies him the mobility to define their relationship in the same way as Ishmael. In the end, even as Moby-Dick destabilizes 19th century conceptions of interracial and homosexual relationships, its characters cannot escape dynamics of racialized power.

Works Cited

- Bolt, Kellen. "Squeezing Sperm: Nativism, Queer Contact, and the Futures of Democratic Intimacy in *Moby-Dick*." *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*, vol. 65 no. 2, 2019, pp. 293-329. Project MUSE, <https://doi.org/10.1353/esq.2019.0007>.
- Cassuto, Leonard. "'What an Object He Would Have Made of Me!': Tattooing and the Racial Freak in Melville's Typee." *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, edited by Rosemarie Garland Thomson. New York University Press, 1996, pp. 234-247.
- Crain, Caleb. "Lovers of Human Flesh: Homosexuality and Cannibalism in Melville's Novels." *American Literature*, vol. 66, no. 1, 1994, pp. 25-53. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2927432>. Accessed 20 Nov. 2020.
- Greven, David. "American Shudders: Race, Representation, and Sodomy in *Redburn*." *Leviathan*, vol. 16 no. 2, 2014, pp. 1-22. Project MUSE, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lvn.2014.0025>.
- Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Eve. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity (Series Q)*, Kindle Ed. Duke University Press. 2003.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick Norton Critical Edition*. 3rd ed., edited by Hershel Parker. Norton & Company, 2018.
- O'Connell, James F. *The Life and Adventures of James F. O'Connell, the Tattooed Man*. Internet Archive, 2011, <https://ia800703.us.archive.org/19/items/lifeadventuresof01ocon/lifeadventuresof01ocon.pdf>.