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The Whaleness of the Whale: Interspecies Relationality in *Moby-Dick* and *In The Heart of the Sea*

Svetlana Seibel

It is an important and popular fact that things are not always what they seem. For instance, on the planet Earth, man had always assumed that he was more intelligent than dolphins because he had achieved so much—the wheel, New York, wars, and so on—whilst all the dolphins have ever done was muck about in the water having a good time. But conversely, the dolphins have always believed that they were far more intelligent than man—for precisely the same reasons.

Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* 160.

1. Introduction: The Whaleness of the Whale

- 1 One of the most iconic characters in American literature is a whale. As a half-fictional, half-factual enigma, *Moby Dick* has kept a hold on the popular imagination for decades: “Scarcely a scientific study of sperm whales did not, sooner or later, mention *Moby Dick*. He is the whale which forms our popular image of his species, if not all whales” (Severin 14). Tim Severin contends that “wherever there is a wish to create a romantic, tarred and creaking image of a bygone maritime age, *Moby Dick* may be invoked” (14). Through such imaginaries and the narrative output since the nineteenth century, the whale serves as a projection surface for human dreams and anxieties. But what can they tell us about our changing relationship to whales as other-than-human persons? Is there a way to reach beyond the layers of projection and “speak” to the whale who breathes underneath?
- 2 In his article “Running into Whales: The History of the North Pacific from Below the Waves,” historian Ryan Tucker Jones laments that, until recently, “Historians have written extensively about human cultures on top of the Pacific Ocean, but rarely have they considered other species as significant actors in the creation of Pacific histories” (350). When considered in the context of literary studies, the same rings true. More

often than not, in literary analysis other-than-human characters are approached from the viewpoint of their symbolic and allegorical significance for the narrative or as a projection surface for the concerns of human characters rather than from a perspective that centers their full personhood (as far as we can access it) in the field of analysis. If Jones advocates for a history “from below the waves,” we as literary scholars might consider *reading* from below the waves, thereby “[c]hallenging this tradition of reading animals in literature only ever as humans-in-animal-suits,” as Susan McHugh puts it (29). This does not mean that we will be able to grasp with any certainty what a whale thinks or feels; after all, we are dealing with human narratives, and so we are unlikely ever to be able to escape the anthropocentrism of our thinking—the kind that Lori Gruen calls “*inevitable* anthropocentrism,” in the general sense that “[w]e are humans and our perceptions are necessarily human” (24, original emphasis). But, as Gruen also points out, “[t]hat we experience the world from a human perspective doesn’t mean that we can’t work to see things from the perspectives of nonhumans” (24). Thus, perhaps we can attempt to read whales as partners in the narrative. The focus of such an analysis is relationality in its broadest sense—the way we relate to whales, and how the fluctuating dynamics of these relations are expressed through narrative. Diverse modes of eco-culturally determined relationality visible in whale narratives mirror forms of co-existence that characterize cultural and material engagement with whales—it is no surprise that how we relate, as well as how we read relations, is culturally constituted. In his famous *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville speaks of “the whiteness of the whale” as an allegorical—and horrific—epitome of absolute otherness, and so allegorical, metaphorical, and symbolic readings of the figure of Moby Dick abound. But what if we shift the focus and consider instead the whaleness of the whale?

- 3 Interspecies relationality is one of the enduring debates of our time, one which receives increasing attention not only in philosophy and ethics, but also within the field of inquiry of environmental humanities. Robert S. Emmett and David E. Nye draw attention to ways in which “animal studies scholars are opening up mental categories, environmental ethics, and politics as projects of selves and societies by giving priority to relationality” (152).¹ The scholarly field of human-animal studies is itself both an agent and a reflection of changing currents of thought on interspecies relations and relationships. When it comes to epistemologies of human-animal relations, as Margo DeMello notes, “[a]nimals have long served as objects of study—in biology, zoology, medical science, anthropology, and the like—but were rarely considered to be more than that, and were even more rarely considered to be ‘subjects of a life’ rather than objects of study” (5-6). The aim of the readings offered in this essay is to consider fictional whales—who often enough intersect with factual whales—precisely as “subjects of a life.” This line of inquiry can be pursued both by giving classic whale narratives such as Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851) a whale-centered reading and by considering changing narrative strategies that reflect societal debates over interspecies relationality evident in more recent texts, such as the feature film *In the Heart of the Sea* (2015), directed by Ron Howard. Interspecies relationality is thereby both a narrative theme and a reading methodology.
- 4 The primary texts for this analysis have been selected on the grounds of the close intertextual relationship that they share not only between themselves, but also with the story of the whaling ship *Essex*. The story of the *Essex*, a historical Nantucket whaling ship sunk by a large sperm whale in the South Pacific on November 20, 1820, is recounted in various historical documents and narratives, most significantly in

Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex, of Nantucket; Which Was Attacked and Finally Destroyed by a Large Spermaceti-Whale, in the Pacific Ocean; With an Account of the Unparalleled Sufferings of the Captain and Crew During Space of Ninety-Three Days at Sea, in Open Boats in the Years of 1819 and 1820 (hereafter the *Narrative*). The *Narrative* was written by Owen Chase, the ill-fated ship's first mate, and published in 1821, very soon after the survivors' return to Nantucket the same year, which makes it the only available "fresh eye-witness account" (Heffernan 11). Taken together, Melville's novel, Howard's film, and the story of the *Essex* form a narrative matrix that is enlightening to explore in its interconnections. In this story-matrix, two figures form the connective tissue. One is Owen Chase. The other is the whale.

2. Lost in Whiteness: *Moby-Dick* (1851)

- 5 Whale encounters ran in Herman Melville's family. His biography is strewn with whales, not only, famously, through his own dabbling in the whaling industry, but also through some of his relatives. Philip Hoare writes:

The sea was in the family blood, too. One uncle, Captain John D'Wolf II, had sailed from the Kamchatka Peninsula and onto the back of a whale. 'It was like striking a rock, and brought us to a complete standstill,' he recorded. 'The monster soon showed himself, gave a spout, 'kicked' his flukes and went down. He did not appear to be hurt, nor were we hurt, but most confoundedly frightened.' A fine, handsome man with white hair and a florid face, D'Wolf was the first captain young Herman had ever met. He was later lost at sea. (43-44)

- 6 Later in life, when trying to pitch his future novel to publishers, Melville was unsurprisingly banking on his personal experience in whaling as a compelling selling point (Severin 7).
- 7 *Moby-Dick* has often been analyzed in terms of its allegorical force within which the whale becomes a grandiose symbol and a global metaphor. This reading at times interprets Melville's use of symbolism as a stage in the process by which the author builds his peculiar artistic vision: "Melville, through Hawthorne's tales, was discovering a way of expanding the frame of conventional storytelling by deepening and darkening it; in a word, he had discovered the power of allegory" (Blaise 280). This darkened, allegorical vision is perhaps what prompts Melville to consider *Moby-Dick* "a wicked book" ("To Nathaniel Hawthorne" 573). In his afterlives in reception, the white whale is made to stand in associatively for any number of referents, from primordial evil to General Robert E. Lee to the twenty-first century itself (Marcus 283, 284). But, as Dean Flower asks, "[w]hat of Moby Dick himself? Can the actual animal be seen apart from all the allegory and demonizing, the meanings that human emotions... project upon him?... Each person projects his own understanding, and there can be no unprejudiced truth. Still, what can be known of the animal himself?" (145). Similarly, what if we read the encounters between Moby Dick, Ahab, and the crew of the *Pequod* as instances of interpersonal relationality, bounded less by metaphysics than by an enactment of ethics? After all, it seems that in Melville's own mind the darkly allegorical and the empirically factual have merged when he heard about the whaling ship *Ann Alexander* having been attacked and destroyed by a whale in 1851, shortly after the publication of *Moby-Dick*. Melville's reaction to that news is recorded in a letter to Evert A. Duyckinck: "Ye Gods! What a Commentator is this *Ann Alexander* whale. What he has to say is

short & pithy & very much to the point. I wonder if my evil art has raised this monster” (572).

8 It is commonly agreed that the titular character of *Moby-Dick* is an amalgam of two real whale individuals whose stories were circulating in the decades prior to the novel’s publication: the white whale who terrorized whalers off the coast of Chile, known as Mocha Dick, and a very large unnamed whale who sank the *Essex* in 1820. The first story (possibly embellished and/or fictionalized) was brought to the public’s attention by Jeremiah N. Reynolds by way of his account “Mocha Dick: Or the White Whale of the Pacific,” published in the magazine *The Knickerbocker* in 1839; the principal written account of the story of the *Essex* was published in 1821 by its first mate, Owen Chase. As these stories pass into *Moby-Dick*, the tension between cultural attitudes and empirical experience arguably causes Melville’s novel to grapple with questions as to whether the whale is, in Ahabian terms, “agent” or “principal” (MD 133).

9 In some respects, the whaleness of Moby Dick—his specific sperm whaleness, even—is omnipresent in the novel, in particular through the cetological chapters that have generated much controversy among scholars and readers alike. Betsy Hilbert summarizes:

So mixed is the form of *Moby-Dick* that a number of textual scholars have suggested that there were actually two books: the first, nearly completed in 1850, which was essentially about whaling; and the second, a romance incorporating most of the material from the first book but extending the fiction, written in the Berkshires under the influence of Hawthorne. (827)²

10 Hilbert herself wonders: “What is the genre *Moby-Dick* created, somewhere between a preaching, teaching novel and a fictionalized natural history?” (828). This tension between form and content is maintained in the novel by the presence of the whale as a physical and, in fact, individual being whose behavior must be interpreted and attempted to be understood in those terms, outside of the realm of allegory. The profound materiality of the whale’s presence in *Moby-Dick* is quite striking; it includes minutia of whale anatomy, interpretations of their natural history, and opinions on the plausibility of arguments that prophesize extinction as a result of intense targeting by the whaling industry—the latter reflecting emerging debates on conservation that, as Jones explains, have culminated in the Fur Seal Treaty of 1911, the first international conservation treaty (373). In short, in *Moby-Dick*, whale flesh and whale being, from most recent encounters to fossilized remains reaching back into deep time, play a key role on several levels, and it is that intensely material, physiological presence that causes the novel to hover on the edge between fiction and nonfiction. For some readers, this makes for a challenging reading experience. In fact, J. A. Ward notes that “[o]ne of the major factors in retarding the reputation of Melville’s *Moby-Dick* was the unpopularity of the chapters that methodically describe the appearance and activity of the whale and the various processes involved in whaling” (164); one anonymous reviewer in London’s *Athenaeum* calls the novel “an ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter-of-fact,” and an inconsistent one at that (“*Athenaeum*” 7). Put plainly, in order to truly enjoy the novel *Moby-Dick* you *have* to be interested in whales, it seems.

11 Apart from pure physicality, however, the personhood of the whale is an issue that the novel raises time and time again. *Moby-Dick*, after all, is not just a treatise on whales in general: it is about a particular whale. Descriptions of Moby Dick as an individual whale

oscillate between awe and monstrosity. His monstrosity is encoded in the perceived grotesqueness of his distinctive features: the white skin, scars and embedded harpoons, the dislocated jaw. Purportedly more monstrous than these physical features, however, are his attitude and behavior, characterized by “that unexampled, intelligent malignity which, according to specific accounts, he had over and over again evinced in his assaults” (147); “in most instances, such seemed the White Whale’s infernal aforethought ferocity, that every dismembering or death that he caused was not wholly regarded as having been inflicted by an unintelligent agent,” Ishmael reports (148). All of these features, physical and behavioral, establish the white whale as a very specific, intelligent and fully self-aware animal subject who evidences a personality, a distinctiveness of character that marks him as an individual and a person. But it is precisely this notion of the personhood of the whale that makes him seem monstrous within one episteme operational in the novel—as an animal, he is not supposed to be a person or behave like one; when he does, he upturns the established order of the hierarchy of species inherent in discourses of human exceptionalism, both scientific and religious (DeMello 37-41). In short, *Moby Dick* is violating “the human-animal border” (DeMello 36).

- 12 It is on the basis of this reasoning, too, that Captain Ahab’s desire for vengeance on a whale is considered madness and an affront to the Christian God, as shown by the first mate Starbuck’s reaction to Ahab’s revelations: “‘Vengeance on a dumb brute!’ cried Starbuck, ‘that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb brute thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous’” (133). As is so often the case with *Moby-Dick*, different interpretations of the last statement are possible.³ In my reading, Ahab’s revenge on the whale “seems blasphemous” because Ahab concedes a personality to a creature of nature that God has intended to be “a dumb brute,” thus going against the dominant Christian model of the relational matrix on which the coexistence between animals and humans is based—a coexistence where humans are masters and superiors by way of their exceptionalist claim to exclusive intelligence, which animals, having no soul, do not possess.⁴ For Starbuck, therefore, the sheer intensity with which Ahab relates to the whale is incomprehensible and offensive to God. Paradoxically, by developing his destructive “monomania,” Ahab implicitly acknowledges the whale’s individuality. In the words of Robert Zoellner, “Ahab’s pursuit of the whale... is as narrowly personal, as visceral, as the clenching fist” (148). Flower notes that the whale “affronts [Ahab] with his awesome intelligence and utter undecipherability” (147). To be affronted here means to accept the intelligence and agency of the whale as a fact, even if it leads to a deeply negative relationality. This is what Starbuck is responding to, demonstrating as he does so “one of the commonly used reasons for thinking that humans are separate from and superior to other animals—the idea that we are norm-governed and that other animals just act on their immediate desires” (Gruen 25-26).
- 13 Starbuck’s understanding of Ahab’s attitude as blasphemous is based on his own worldview, not necessarily shared by other characters in the novel, and may be an echo of Owen Chase’s voice in his *Narrative*, expressing both a traditional religious piety and a bewilderment at the whale’s manifested ability for premeditation. In fact, Heffernan surmises that, as a character, Starbuck may well have been inspired by Chase, for:
- some characteristics of Owen Chase are so suited to a picture of Starbuck and so engagingly expressed in the *Narrative* that Melville can easily be thought to have his image of Starbuck concretize around them. Above all, Owen Chase combines the

probity, religious devotion, courage, and industry that radiate from Starbuck, the virtues that simultaneously awe and sadden the author of the novel. (166)

- 14 If we accept this interpretation, it establishes a relational link between Starbuck and Chase and their respective reactions to the whale. In any case, Chase's *Narrative* provides a documented example of whale strategizing that serves as one of the sources of *Moby-Dick*, namely the story of the Nantucket whaleship *Essex*, sunk by a sperm whale who rammed the ship twice with his head. In his *Narrative*, Chase ruminates on the meaning of that occurrence:

After several hours of idle sorrow and repining I began to reflect upon the accident, and endeavored to realize by what uncontrollable destiny or design, (which I could not at first determine), this sudden and most deadly attack had been made upon us: by an animal, too, never before suspected of premeditated violence, and proverbial for its insensibility and inoffensiveness. Every fact seemed to warrant me in concluding that it was any thing but chance which directed his operations; he made two several attacks upon the ship, at a short interval between them, both of which, according to their direction, were calculated to do us the most injury, by being made ahead, and thereby combining the speed of the two objects for the shock; to effect which, the exact maneuvers that he made were necessary. His aspect was most horrible, and such as indicated resentment and fury. He came directly from the shoal which we had just before entered, and in which we had struck three of his companions, as if fired with revenge for their sufferings. (29-30)

- 15 Chase is most astonished by the fact that a whale had exhibited forethought, premeditation, strategic thinking, and apparent emotion in his attack on the ship, which he interprets as “decided, calculating mischief on the part of the whale” (30). The incomprehensibility of this kind of behavior coming from an animal, more so than the whale's awe-inspiring size, creates an aura of monstrosity around him for Chase. In Melville's novel, this monstrosity becomes the distinguishing characteristic of a whale who acts with premeditation rather than instinct—what sometimes has been called “a fighting whale” (Philbrick 224)—and is encoded physically in the whale's whiteness owing to the perceived “supernaturalism of this hue” (*MD* 154). Famously, Chapter 42 of *Moby-Dick*, “The Whiteness of the Whale,” is devoted wholly to deliberations about the horrors of whiteness and the whale's symbolism within such an interpretative framework:

Aside from those more obvious considerations touching Moby Dick, which could not but occasionally awaken in any man's soul some alarm, there was another thought, or rather vague, nameless horror concerning him, which at times by its intensity completely overpowered all the rest; and yet so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. (151)

- 16 The whale's whiteness here is a symbol of otherness so strong, so fundamental that it expels the whale from nature and hurtles him into the realm of supernatural horror, one that is ungodly and unnatural, essentially demonic. This troublesome ontology is what motivates the whale to destroy the *Pequod*—“[r]etribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice” are the forces that drive Moby Dick by this calculation (408). The whale serves as an agent of the inherent “demonism of the world,” and so the animal as an other-than-human subject disappears under the patina of symbolism, forced to retreat into allegory (156). In this iteration, the whiteness of the whale subdues his whaleness, however much this whaleness is foregrounded in cetological chapters.

- 17 Considering the impact of the nineteenth-century whale fishery on the sperm whale population, Nathaniel Philbrick writes:

As late as 1845, whalers were confident that the sperm whale stocks were in no danger of diminishing. They did comment, however, on how the behavior of the whales had changed. ‘They have indeed become wilder,’ one observer wrote, ‘or as some whalers express it, “more scary,” and, in consequence, not so easy to capture.’ Like the whale that had attacked the *Essex*, an increasing number of sperm whales were fighting back. (224)

- 18 It therefore stands to reason that it is not the whiteness of Melville’s whale, his allegorical devilishness, unknowable and inexplicable, expressed in physical otherness of the white coloring, but his whaleness—his membership in a species that was being excessively hunted by humans during this historical period of an insatiable whale oil market—that determines his contrarian behavior, as it does the behavior of such whales as the one who sank the *Essex* or the *Ann Alexander*, the latter sank by a sperm whale “on the coast of Peru, in 1851, under like circumstances to those of the *Essex*” (Scammon 78-9). The literariness of Melville’s work partly overwrites these material conditions on which the whale’s perspective is hinged, but at the same time the text draws attention to them, not least through the literarily controversial cetological chapters.
- 19 This tension continues throughout the novel, expressed in no small part through Ishmael, whose narrative engagement with whales remains contradictory. As the narrator of the story, he is the one who provides all the cetological material that stresses the living substantiality of the whale species and graphically portrays the suffering caused to it by the whaling industry. However, as much as he pays close attention to the natural history and anatomy of the whale, in the next step he tends to overwrite the whaleness of the whale with allegorical and cosmological readings, indicative of what Gruen terms “projection” of human “mediated desires” (56, original emphasis). Robert Zoellner argues that it is paramount that “the reader distinguishes Ahab’s *transcendental* whale from Ishmael’s *naturalistic* whale” (146, original emphasis). Through a thorough textual analysis, Zoellner shows how Ishmael’s engagement with the physical being and behavioral patterns of the whale species leads him to reconsider his demonic view of the whiteness of Moby Dick, which he inherited from Ahab, in favor of what Zoellner calls “*philosophical chromaticity*” apparent in the rainbow imagery that surrounds the whale later in the book (189-90, original emphasis; *MD* 280, 405). This, following Zoellner’s argument, effectively turns a negative relationality into a positive one, which is achieved by virtue of the cetological chapters.
- 20 It can indeed be observed that Ishmael’s “naturalistic” whale does take the animal itself more seriously, is more invested in getting to know the whaleness of the whale and is conducive to the establishment of a positive relational perspective. Yet it has to be noted that, ultimately, Ishmael always returns to the symbolic and the allegorical instead of letting the whale be the whale—a “subject of a life” in his own right (DeMello 6): “The tail of the whale helps Ishmael come to terms with cosmic *power*. The eye and ear of the whale help him to meet the issue of comic *size*” (Zoellner 164, original emphasis); “[a]nd if Ishmael can learn to love the whale, he can learn to love the immense cosmos of which the whale is symbol” (Zoellner 173). The content of Ishmael’s interpretation of the whale changes; the method and the principle do not. The whale means differently by the end of the novel; yet its meaning is still subsumed by human concerns. It can therefore be argued that Ishmael’s “naturalistic” whale is just as

allegorical, as metaphorical, as “transcendental” and as affected by Emersonian thought as Ahab’s is.⁵ Ultimately, Ishmael’s whale remains a book in which he writes his story as a man—a process that is expressed metaphorically through his bibliographical taxonomy that classifies whales into “BOOKS” and “CHAPTERS” (MD 111).

- 21 When it comes to modes of relating to whales, therefore, *Moby-Dick* is polyvocal, and the tension between cetology and allegory, understanding and projection persists throughout the book. Nowhere are the switches in tone and argument attendant to this tension more evident than in the companion chapters “Moby Dick” and “The Whiteness of the Whale,” in which the narrator indicts whalers for superstitious exaggerations that endow Moby Dick with “supernatural agencies” only to develop a convoluted theory of Moby Dick as a symbol of the cosmic “demonism in the world” (MD 145, 156; King 64). It is a rich and productive tension to be sure; however, where human-whale relationality is concerned, it pulls the book in different, sometimes contradictory directions. When approaching the question of whether the white whale is “agent” or “principal,” the novel remains perpetually at odds with itself. But these contradictions are generative of meaning and, perhaps most importantly, discussion. The cetological chapters do much to invite the whale to be a partner in the narrative, even if the intention is not always followed through to its last consequence. Many scholars have noted the novel’s value in the context of environmental and conservationist discourses.

⁶ King writes:

Though *Moby-Dick* is a gloriously messy book filled with contradictions, mistakes, and digressions, Melville was surprisingly careful with his marine biology, oceanography, geology, meteorology, and navigation to what seems to be the best of his ability as a self-taught naturalist. He crafted a presciently varied viewpoint of marine life, which included an awareness of human impact on ocean animals, both as species and as individuals[.] (337-38)

- 22 These conversations continue in further incarnations of Moby Dick’s story—one of which is *In the Heart of the Sea*.

3. The Eye of the Whale: *In the Heart of the Sea* (2015)

- 23 “Story of the *Essex* is the story of two men. Captain George Pollard and his first mate. Owen Chase” (00:07:16-00:07:29). With these words Thomas Nickerson, one of the few survivors of the *Essex*, begins the telling of this story to Herman Melville in Ron Howard’s feature film *In the Heart of the Sea*. The movie, released in 2015, is marketed as a screen adaptation of Nathaniel Philbrick’s nonfiction account of the story of the *Essex*, *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* (2000), but it is in fact an amalgam of Philbrick’s book and Melville’s *Moby-Dick* where Melville himself appears as a character. The film turns Herman Melville and the writing process of his novel into a metanarrative that frames the story of the *Essex* and its crew. However, it also stages this story in ways that foreground the negative relational dynamic between the crew and the attacking whale as the main reason for the human tragedy that followed. Unlike the sinking of the *Pequod*, a disaster that is attributed primarily to the madness of one man, in the hands of the filmmakers the story of the *Essex* becomes a cautionary tale of human hubris as the narrative slants the historical events on which it is based into ecocritical and eco-social directions. As the narrative of the film unfolds, it belies Nickerson’s opening statement, for, in this telling, the story of the *Essex* is much more the story of one man and one whale: the first mate Owen Chase and the white whale—

here nameless, or, rather, in the process of being named. The story of their progressive entanglement is framed as a story of personal growth for Chase, in the course of which he develops what Evelyn Fox Keller terms “dynamic objectivity” in how he views and relates to the white whale and, by extension, the entire nonhuman world:

Dynamic objectivity aims at a form of knowledge that grants to the world around us its independent integrity but does so in a way that remains cognizant of, indeed relies on, our connectivity with that world. In this, dynamic objectivity is not unlike empathy, a form of knowledge of other persons that draws explicitly on the commonality of feelings and experience in order to enrich one’s understanding of another in his or her own right. (117)

24 Nathaniel Philbrick’s book, which serves as the source text for the film, recounts the story of the sinking of the *Essex* and its aftermath. The crew, stranded in three light whaleboats with very limited provisions, spent over ninety days in the open ocean, with a short respite on Henderson Island, before some of them were saved. Only a handful of the crew members survived the ordeal, among them the ship’s captain, George Pollard Jr., and the first mate Owen Chase. The story of the whaleship *Essex* became one of the sensational stories of abject horror, complete with cannibalism, resulting from extreme exposure to the elements. Whereas Philbrick’s nonfiction narrative gives details and interpretations of the circumstances the crew of the *Essex* found themselves in, the movie based on his book is first and foremost a fictional narrative that blends elements of the historical narrative of the *Essex* with its fictional afterlives, most notably Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. As such, the script writers treat the historical material quite liberally, and the changes made are meaningful in terms of cultural attitudes they reflect and debates they aim to foster. From this vantage point, the film interprets historical circumstances surrounding the American whaling industry of the nineteenth century and its thriving center, Nantucket, in its own way.

25 The course of the critique that the film will take is foreshadowed in the scene of the *Essex*’s departure on its whaling voyage. As the ship leaves the harbor and steers toward the open sea, a voiceover by a Quaker prayer leader overlays the scene, and the words of the prayer being spoken are most suggestive:

O Father, grant that your glorious light shine on these men. Ensure them a prosperous voyage. That they may return safely and with a full ship, so that the white flames of Nantucket whale oil may continue to keep light in our homes, city streets safe from sin in the night, and fill the machines of industry that drive our great nation forward as our noble species evolves. In your name, we pray. (00:15:12-00:16:16)

26 The prayer expresses that peculiar mixture of piety and mercantilism for which nineteenth-century Nantucket became so famous: the pursuit of whale oil is staged here both as an instrument of God-given prosperity for the community and as a means of keeping away darkness and sin by kindling the light, where the physical properties that turn whale oil into a material flame are also understood as bringing forth spiritual enlightenment. Additionally, what is evident in the prayer is the deep-seated anthropocentrism—the kind that Gruen terms “arrogant anthropocentrism” (24, original emphasis)—that underpins both this worldview and this commercial enterprise. The culture that lies at the base of Nantucket whale oil industry is revealed as an example of what Val Plumwood calls “human-centred culture,” which cultivates the ideology of “hyperseparation,” one that sees all nature in instrumental and

utilitarian ways as a domain at the service of the extractive practices of humankind who stand apart and above it (444).

- 27 This ideology saturates the entire whaling industry, and so it is also what motivates the protagonists of *In the Heart of the Sea*, Captain George Pollard and Owen Chase. But if Pollard remains just as much, if not more, set in his views by the end of the narrative, Chase's viewpoint and character undergo a fundamental transformation. The sense of entitlement with which Chase starts the journey gives way to a humbler and more relational worldview—which includes seeing the whale with dynamic objectivity—by the end of the film. This change is surely affected by the ordeal after the sinking of the *Essex*; but arguably more than this, it is affected by Chase's personal interactions with the white whale who does the sinking. Throughout the film's narrative, Chase and the whale are linked through plot, but also through the visual language that the film develops. The cornerstone of this intersection is the non-verbal communication passing between Chase and the whale whenever their eyes meet.
- 28 When the whale first turns his attention to the *Essex*, Owen Chase has just returned to the ship in order to mend a leak in his whaleboat caused by a stroke of the flukes of the whale he was pursuing at the time. Anxious to continue the hunt, Chase judges that it would be faster to provisionally mend the hole in his boat by covering it with a piece of heavy canvas than to attempt to lower a spare whaleboat. Accordingly, he begins hastily nailing the canvas in place. This sequence of events corresponds to the historical story of the *Essex*. In his book, Philbrick ventures a following explanation for what happened next:
- Whalemen often heard sperm whales through the hulls of their ships. The sound—steady clicks at roughly half-second intervals—bore such a startling similarity to the tapping of a hammer that the whalemen dubbed the sperm whale 'the carpenter fish.' On the morning of November 20, 1820, sperm whales were not the only creatures filling the ocean with clicking sounds; there was also Owen Chase, busily nailing a piece of canvas to the bottom of an upturned whaleboat. With every blow of his hammer against the side of the damaged boat, Chase was unwittingly transmitting sounds down through the wooden skin of the whaleship out into the ocean. Whether or not the bull perceived these sounds as coming from another whale, Chase's hammering appears to have attracted the creature's attention. (87)
- 29 Whether or not this is what happened historically speaking, the film seizes upon this explanation and stages Chase's hammering and the whale's turn towards the *Essex* as causally linked. Thus, given the presumed similarities between the sounds of the sperm whale coda of clicks and the sounds of the hammer, the first meeting between Chase and the whale is dramatized as an unwitting act of communication, an experiential entanglement turned linguistic exchange.
- 30 Unlike *Moby-Dick*, the whales in the film are no "dumb brutes." Melville's novel often portrays whales as mute, "incapable of speech" (Flower 146): "But the bird has a voice, and with plaintive cries will make known her fear; but the fear of this vast dumb brute of the seas was chained up and enchanted in him; he had no voice" (*MD* 267). In light of more recent scientific theories that surmise that the spermaceti organ in the head of sperm whales is "involved in the production of echolocation clicks" (Whitehead 9), Ahab's lament in his soliloquy to a dead whale's head—"not one syllable is thine"—though true in technical linguistic terms, conceived more broadly misses the mark (*MD* 238). Research by marine biologists such as Hal Whitehead and Luke Rendell posits a deep significance to sperm whale clicking, postulating it as an essential part of their

social life and evidence of cetacean culture (Rothenberg 177). On a wider discursive level, this questions notions of culture as an exclusively human phenomenon and undermines the nature-culture dualism. *In the Heart of the Sea* takes great pains to portray whale soundscapes through its soundtrack, which incorporates whale clicks that are clearly employed socially, showing whales as relational beings. This becomes part of the film's vision. Somewhat parallel to Melville's cetological chapters, the production team deferred to whale science as they worked on the story. Director Ron Howard describes the process: "And when we began to lay out the action scenes in the movie... the first thing that I requested was that we show all of it to our whale specialists, because I didn't want to fall in love with some behavior that didn't have anything to do with reality" ("Commanding the Heart of the Sea"). Moreover, as Jody Johnson, visual effects supervisor, asserts, the movie team " [didn't] want to create a monster" ("Commanding the Heart of the Sea"). The result is a film absent of the supernatural monstrosity of Moby Dick and more substantially invested in the whale's whaleness.

- 31 From the moment the whale hears Chase's hammering, the two of them are linked. When the whale attacks the *Essex*, the attack is staged as essentially a duel between them. In this scene, they lock eyes for the first time as the whale speeds up in order to ram the ship, and Chase stands poised with a bundle of harpoons raised in anticipation of striking the whale. The camera switches from Chase's furious face and concentrated eyes to the angry eye of the whale in a fast-paced shot-reverse shot sequence (00:57:46-00:57:54). Through the edited eye contact, they are brought face to face. Significantly, when the whale rams the ship and Chase lets go of the harpoon, the iron strikes the whale just above the eye. This particular placement of the wound is symbolic of the fundamentally broken lines of communication predicated on violence. Ahistorically, the whale then uses the harpoon line that fastens him to the ship as an additional weapon of destruction, which allows him to completely devastate the ship's deck before breaking off the iron and swimming away. But a piece of Chase's iron remains launched just above the whale's eye.
- 32 In a significant departure from the historical course of events, the whale in the film does not disappear into the unknown after his attack on the *Essex* but pursues the crew's whaleboats at a distance. Chase is the only one who notices him even when he is barely visible, as if he is able to feel the whale's presence on account of a special bond between them, or else because the whale deliberately shows himself only to Chase, only emerging briefly, tauntingly, when he is looking. The rest of the crew, including Captain Pollard, never notice him until the whale mounts another attack, this time on the three boats, upturns them and kills some of the men. It does not appear accidental that the whale saves Chase's boat for last, as if wanting to deal with him undisturbed by others. When he finally attacks the third boat, Chase strikes the whale with an axe, but in his weakened state cannot do any significant damage. As the men and their boats are washed ashore an island, Chase notices that he has lost the amulet his pregnant wife had given him before he left on the voyage, and, for the first time, loses his composure and breaks down in tears. This moment is important, as it marks the turning point in Chase's understanding and his relationship with the whale.
- 33 The change is revealed in a conversation between Captain Pollard and his first mate that takes place on the night before their departure from the island, which has proven not to have enough resources to sustain a crew of starving men:

CHASE. What do we do, do you think, George? And what offence did we give God to upset him so?

POLLARD. The only creature to have offended God here is the whale.

CHASE. Not us? In our arrogance, our greed, look where we find ourselves.

POLLARD. We are supreme creatures made in God's own likeness. Earthly kings whose business it is to circumnavigate the planet bestowed to us. To bend nature to our will.

CHASE. You really feel like an earthly king after everything that we've been through? We're nothing. We're... we're specks. And dust.

POLLARD. We sail into the sun at dawn. If we are to die, then with God's grace, let us die as men. (01:22:25-01:23:17)

- 34 The sentiment expressed by Chase reveals him a changed man. This is the first time he calls the captain by his first name, as a sign of transcending inherited hierarchies and the strict social code with which he set out. Not only has he abandoned the animosity he harbored towards Pollard on account of his being made captain over Chase's head, he has also realized that their conduct so far essentially amounts to hubris. Greed led them to the Offshore Grounds, a stretch of the Pacific abundant with whales but vast, uninhabited by humans, and little known, he realizes. With this realization, the blame for the *Essex's* destruction and the desperate situation of its crew has shifted in Chase's mind. Pollard, on the other hand, continues to preach the doctrine of human exceptionalism, feeling unconditionally entitled to all that exists in nature, including the whale's life. Pollard's urge to "die as men," although it may sound as an expression of courage, in this context denotes anthropocentric pride, the kind that Chase had just shed. But Pollard continues to cling to it; the scene makes it clear through the symbolism of Pollard's occupation at the time of this conversation—throughout it, he is forging a makeshift three-pronged lance for the white whale. At the end of the exchange, having uttered his intention to "die as men," he continues hammering away at the gnarly weapon. As Chase begins to earnestly rethink his prior conduct and the fruits of greed and arrogance, Pollard demonstrates what Val Plumwood calls "rethink deficit": "Rethink deficit strategies do not encourage us to question the big framework narratives that underpin our extravagant demands or the associated commodity cult of economic growth. Or to question our right, as masters of the universe, to lay waste to the earth to maintain this cult's extreme lifestyle" (441). By holding on to rigid master narratives of both religion and capitalism, Pollard upholds the state of hyperseparation from other-than-human life that, in this situation, threatens to destroy him and his men for whom he has accepted responsibility. Like Ahab, he remains trapped in negative, hierarchically constituted relationality.
- 35 But Chase, having, at least for his own part, reconciled with Pollard, is ready for the ultimate reconciliation. It comes the next time he meets the white whale eye to eye. When this occurs, the third boat has been lost, the men are almost completely out of food and water and exceedingly weak. This appearance of the whale is different from the aggressive encounters up to this point: he first breaches spectacularly, then rolls quietly in the water without attacking, as if waiting to see what the men will do. Seeing him, Pollard throws the lance he had forged to the first mate: "Mr. Chase, you have the best position," he calls out (01:34:59-01:35:02). Only when Chase hesitantly takes aim does the whale make for the boat. Uncharacteristically, given their earlier encounters, having approached he clicks and swims past Chase with one side of his head out of the water, his eye turned on Chase, looking at him tiredly, a wound from Chase's iron clearly visible above the eye, a piece of metal still stuck in it. In this slow, drawn-out

moment, Chase and the whale lock eyes intensely once more and, in apparent silent agreement, make peace. Chase lowers the lance; the whale sounds slowly, raises his huge flukes—not to attack, but as if in a last goodbye—and lowers them quietly, with barely a disturbance, into the water. Chase and the whale turn away from one another and each goes his own way. “You are a damn fool,” pronounces Pollard, and collapses (01:35:53-01:36:55).

- 36 What are we to make of this eye contact? As Jonathan Burt points out in his discussion of animals and humans looking at each other in film, “identification between human and animal [expressed through the look] does not automatically imply anthropomorphism, or even its opposite, the bestialization of man” (69). In fact, this scene between Chase and the whale can be understood as a quotation that connects the film to John Huston’s 1956 adaptation of *Moby-Dick*, which includes a much shorter eye contact between Ahab and the whale right before the latter drags the former to his death. In Burt’s interpretation, this eye contact is also expressive of interspecies relationality: “This relation could be anthropomorphized through a sharing of traits of, say, love, hatred, vengeance, or even madness, yet, because the relations between Ahab and the whale are also articulated through the field of vision, the significance of these interior states is balanced by a constant sense of their limits” (69). In other words, the human-animal eye contact always also implies incommensurability and draws attention to fault lines of communication and understanding (Burt 71-72). This in equal measure applies to the scene between Chase and the whale (and the fact that the outcome of the scene is very different from Huston’s film makes the quotation all the more meaningful). Is the whale trying to teach Chase a lesson? Probably not, but we do not know. Could the whale have some other, perhaps thoroughly pragmatic reasons determined by his whaleness to seek or cease confrontation with Chase? Likely, but we do not know. Their understanding, as ours, is forever incomplete. But howsoever it may be, the fact that Chase is changed remains. We do know that.
- 37 This final scene between man and whale completes the transformation of Owen Chase as he learns to see the whale through different eyes. In the whale’s tired voice, his wound, and his seemingly sorrowful eye, Chase recognizes kinship and forms a positive relationship to his former adversary. Chase is now fully able to see the whale with Keller’s “dynamic objectivity” (117). One of the central tenets of dynamic objectivity in epistemologically and emotionally engaging with the world is the fact that “it recognizes difference between self and other as an opportunity for a deeper and more articulated kinship. The struggle to disentangle self from other is itself a source of insight—potentially into the nature of both self and other” (Keller 117). This is arguably the process that Chase—and perhaps also the whale—has undergone in this encounter. The fact that this process has been positively resolved and the sense of kinship established is the reason why Chase and those of the *Essex* crew who did not die of starvation and exposure remain alive. In that moment of climax and resolution, Chase accepts the whale not as a commodity, a means of social advancement, or a symbol of primordial evil, but as a whale, a person in all his whaleness.
- 38 Here the possibilities of film as a medium for the dramatization of interspecies encounters are revealed as particularly potent. Pointing to the problem of the narrative in the context of such encounters, Timothy Clark rightly asks: “The question is, what kinds of worlds do non-human animals possess? And how might non-human subjectivity be represented in language? Such inter-species translation forms a

challenge for language and semantics[.]” (81). *In the Heart of the Sea* resolves this problem that continues to hound purely text-based media by using visual and cinematic means available to film, bypassing the challenge of translating interspecies communication into syntactic codes. The fact of the matter is that Chase and the whale do not speak each other’s “language”; the film maintains this as a given, without attempting to force syntax and an alien semantic system onto a species that does not communicate syntactically but uses other means (Whitehead and Rendell 289). Instead, it makes the communication between Chase and the whale non-verbal, and this tactic proves effective in conveying the kind of two-way meaning that can be so elusive when it comes to narrating interspecies communication, frequently leading to narrative anthropomorphism. It maintains a degree of incommensurability inherent to interspecies communication, where meaning can never be finitely fixed or definitively interpreted.

39 The personal peace Chase makes with the whale in the film proves a lasting one. In order to make this point, the film once more has to revise history. Rather than show Owen Chase become a successful and respected whaling captain, as was the case for his historical counterpart, the film has him abandon the whaling business altogether and become a merchant captain. For reasons of poetics and politics, it must be so, for if the film would include historical Chase’s longstanding successful career as a whaling captain, the reconciliation with the whale would lose its power. Here, adaptation asserts itself over history in order to make a statement.

40 Historically, the whale oil industry on Nantucket and elsewhere would slowly begin to wind down in the second half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, after peace is made with the whale at the end of the film, Nickerson casually mentions a new discovery: “I heard a man from Pennsylvania drilled a hole in the ground recently and found oil. That can’t be true” (01:51:38-01:51:48). Marking the beginning of another cycle of oil extraction, the film extrapolates into these words all the conflicts and environmental degradation that will follow in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Yet, for Nickerson, innocent of the current climate crisis, oil in the ground is a marvelous discovery—something to replace whale oil. This link between the whale oil and the crude oil industries that the film establishes in its closing dialogue points towards extractive continuities in the exploitation of natural resources, albeit in different guises. It suggests that the lessons learned by Chase in 1820 are no less relevant two hundred years on. In his commentary on the movie, Nathaniel Philbrick stresses the pertinence of historical connections thus drawn:

What we find so disturbing, the killing of whales, for them was not what they were focusing on. This is the only way on Nantucket they had of making a living. They grew up, they were literally raised in the nursery to be whalers. And so it was not a lot of soul-searching going on. Except in a few people, and we see that in Thomas Nickerson and also we see that in Owen Chase, who were deeply troubled, both of them, late in life with what they had done. And I think, you know, that’s the thing about history, it’s very personal. People lived this, people were changed by this. And the value of these stories is that, hopefully, they will change us today. (“The Hard Life of a Whaler”)

4. Conclusion

- 41 A careful dialogic and diachronic glance at representative examples in the archive of whale narratives, such as has been attempted in this essay, helps trace negotiations of ideas pertaining to interspecies relations and changing attitudes towards human positionality vis-à-vis other-than-human life. These attitudes are necessarily situated and culture-specific, and respond to more general currents of cosmology, worldview, and cultural understanding, which means they are subject to change as cultural attitudes undergo various transformative processes.
- 42 The readings presented here reveal changing conceptualizations of relationality with whales, and by extension all other-than-human life, from the mid-nineteenth-century Euro-American attitudes that prevailed at a time when large segments of American industry were devoted to “transforming whales into money” to attempts at rethinking human exceptionalism and interspecies relationality from the ground up in the twenty-first century (Philbrick 237). Changing strategies of representing and reading whales in narratives reflect the emergence of relational and social paradigms in the perception of human-whale relationships, as insights from the research into animal societies and cetacean cultural lives in marine biology, paired with environmental philosophy and related fields, begin not only to make an impact on the stories we tell, but also on literary studies and the questions they ask of their material. Hal Whitehead, one of the most prominent biologists to focus on cetaceans and whale societies, uses the quote from Douglas Adams’s novel *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, which also serves as the epigraph to this article, at the closing of his TED talk on whale culture, stating that it “is about dolphins, but could easily refer to whales.” By choosing a literary text in order to drive home his argument about the existence of culture in cetacean societies, Whitehead demonstrates the fruitfulness of the exchange between empirical facts and imaginative stories, as well as natural sciences and humanities, when it comes to understanding and thinking through interspecies relationality. Douglas’s quote, according to Whitehead and Rendell, also highlights “the fundamental problem” inherent in human-cetacean information exchange and our attempts to make sense of them, or perhaps of each other: “what is important to their culture may not be important to us, and vice versa” (288).
- 43 In the wake of studies such as Whitehead’s work on whale societies and cetacean cultures and documentaries such as *Blackfish* (2013), fictional whale narratives offer a platform where different models of interspecies relationality involving humans and whales can be speculatively explored, where writers, filmmakers, and other creative minds can let them play out and run their course in imaginative scenarios that frequently interrogate the ethics and modes of interspecies engagement. Citing Alison Baird’s retelling of *Moby-Dick*, *White as the Waves* (1999), Whitehead speaks of “novels [that] use what we know of the biology and social lives of their subject species to build pictures of elaborate societies, cultures and cognitive abilities” (371). He continues: “A reductionist might class these portraits with *Winnie-the-Pooh* as fantasies on the lives of animals. But for me they ring true, and may well come closer to the natures of these animals than the coarse numerical abstractions that come from my own scientific observations” (371). Narratives thus play a vital role in debates over human-animal relationships and the search for models of how to live better together. The differences and continuities that become visible when *Moby-Dick* and *In the Heart of the Sea*—two

narratives that “use what [they] know” in their engagement with whales—are brought into a dialogue are instructive and relevant in this context, and beyond.

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NOTES

1. As a concept, relationality is characterized by epistemic diversity, and much of it is grounded in Indigenous thought, as Emmett and Nye acknowledge (152, 154). For instance, Deborah Bird Rose, in her article "Death and Grief in a World of Kin," seeks to bring Indigenous Australian conceptions of multispecies kinship networks "into dialogue with Western philosophy" (137). Val Plumwood, "one of the founders of environmental humanities," too, draws on "philosophical

ecology of Aboriginal Australians,” an epistemological framework within which “all animal life [is] sentient” (Emmett and Nye 154).

2. See George R. Stewart’s “The Two *Moby-Dicks*.” However, as Nina Baym notes, “the theory of ‘two *Moby-Dicks*’ no longer seems biographically defensible” (923, n. 19).

3. For example, Hershel Parker, the editor of the Norton Critical Edition of the novel, in his note to this passage explains that Ahab’s wish for revenge on a whale is “Blasphemous because Ahab is usurping a privilege of God” (*MD* 133, n. 5).

4. DeMello summarizes what she calls “the dominant Christian view toward animals” as follows: “In this view, because only humans were created in God’s image, only humans have an immortal soul, and because God became a human being (in the body of Jesus), animals and humans belong on different *ontological* levels—in other words, they are radically different beings that do not deserve the same consideration as humans” (302, original emphasis). At the same time, she points out that the Christian beliefs on this matter are not homogenous and there are other currents that evaluate the human-animal relationality in different and more integrative ways (303). For a detailed discussion of Christian anthropocentrism, see Rosenberger.

5. Nina Baym draws attention to the significance of Emerson for Melville in general and for *Moby-Dick* in particular, arguing that “the contact with Emerson’s thought was the single most significant influence on the shape of *Moby-Dick*” (915). Richard J. King also points to Emerson as a significant influence when he notes that “Melville wrote *Moby-Dick* in 1851 from his own version of natural theology, applied to the sea” (63).

6. See Elizabeth Schultz, Dean Flower, Michael Jonik, and Richard J. King.

ABSTRACTS

Herman Melville’s enigmatic white whale *Moby Dick* is undoubtedly one of the most famous characters of American literature. His symbolic and allegorical potential, especially as manifested in his “whiteness,” has been given extensive scholarly attention; much less frequently is the personhood of the whale—what I call his whaleness—accorded a sustained discussion. Yet, Melville’s novel raises the question of the personhood of the whale time and time again, and this issue comes into even starker relief when considered as part of the narrative matrix formed by Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Owen Chase’s narrative of the sinking of the whaleship *Essex* in 1820, and Ron Howard’s 2015 feature film *In the Heart of the Sea*. All these texts are concerned with questions of human-whale relationality and reflect changing debates on human-animal relations by grappling with the whaleness of the whale, each in its own, particular way. This article explores the significance of the theme of human-whale relationality in this narrative matrix, as well as the ways in which its manifestations reflect socio-cultural debates on interspecies relationality.

INDEX

Keywords: interspecies relationality, whale narratives, *Moby-Dick*, Owen Chase’s Narrative, *In the Heart of the Sea*

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