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"All of us are Ahabs": *Moby-Dick* in Contemporary Public Discourse

Jeffrey Insko

After the Indianapolis Colts' victory over the Chicago Bears in the 2007 Super Bowl, an article in *USA Today* employed what, to some readers, must have seemed a somewhat overwrought analogy, describing Colts' quarterback Peyton Manning as "Capt. Ahab, a powerful, charismatic leader, a man obsessed with capturing his big 'fish,' that elusive NFL championship." Even more surprising, perhaps, is the fact that, by the time *USA Today* got hold of it, the Manning-as-Ahab trope was already well-worn. Sportswriters across the country had made ample reference to *Moby-Dick* when describing the Colts' match-up against the New England Patriots two weeks earlier for the American Football Conference championship game. Despite gaudy statistics and an impressive winning record in ten seasons in the NFL, Manning, considered by many to be football's greatest current quarterback, had made poor showings against the rival team from New England in recent years, spoiling his chances of playing for his sport's greatest prize. So in the week before the Colts-Patriots showdown, columnists anticipated a game in which "Peyton Manning goes after his white whale once again"; wondered "what will happen when Captain Ahab's Colts play New England's Great White Whales"; and asserted that "we all know—and [Manning] knows, even if he's unwilling to admit it—that the Patriots are [his] white whale." One writer, waxing especially lyrical, reached for a bit of imaginative identification: "You are Peyton Manning and [the Patriots] have become your Great White Whale, the one thing that stands in the way, as though you've become a football Ahab, forever in search." When the Colts finally defeated the Patriots, another writer noted that during the post-game celebration "it was difficult to locate the Colts' Captain Ahab of a quarterback."¹

Of course, no one, so far as I know, remarked upon the asymmetry of an inlander from the Midwest doing battle against what would have been Ahab's hometown team. Indeed, it is in the very nature of such references that they not insist too strenuously on fidelity to their source. Previewing the Super Bowl, for instance, the *Newark Star-Ledger* focused on Devin Hester, the talented kick-return specialist for the Chicago Bears. To try and stop Hester, columnist James Izenberg wrote, "The Colts will send 11 Capt. Ahabs against him. Allegorically speaking, they know that he represents the white whale they cannot permit to get away" (39). Now, eleven

is an awful lot of Ahab's and one can't help wondering what, if anything, such a collection of them might have to do with Melville's creation. On the other hand, it might also be worth noting that the Colts' Ahab's were no more successful than Melville's singular one: Devin Hester scored a touchdown on the game's opening kickoff. But that, of course, is beside the point. Which is precisely the point here: when it comes to references of this sort—which, as we'll see, are ubiquitous in contemporary American culture—the details of Herman Melville's 1851 novel are almost always beside the point. After all, when a sports figure with a public image as homespun and benign as the Colts' Peyton Manning, with his aw-shucks grin, \$10 million-a-year contract, and countless product endorsements, is likened to the "grand, ungodly God-like man," Ahab, surely such references have been emptied of any and all association with the text from which they are ostensibly drawn.

The encyclopedic quality of *Moby-Dick*, and especially its gathering of names of and statements on whales in the "Etymology" and "Extracts," seems to invite a similar procedure on the part of its admirers. Indeed, for about a decade now, I have collected public references of all kinds to Herman Melville and *Moby-Dick*.² And I am far from alone in gathering such material. Andrew Delbanco, for instance, begins his recent biography of Melville with his own list of "Extracts"—statements on Melville and his works from figures as diverse as the literary artists Samuel Beckett and John Updike, the television character Tony Soprano, and former Bush administration official Richard Clarke—and with a brief consideration of Melville in popular culture, asking the salient question: "what does it all mean?" (10). Yet Delbanco provides little by way of an answer, suggesting only that the novel "has been powerfully reflective" and quoting from the novel's chapter called "The Doubloon." There, Ahab inspects the coin that he has offered as a reward for the raising of the white whale and sees in its engraved images—the tower, the volcano, the fowl—only himself: "[A]ll are Ahab," he says. Summing up, Delbanco simply remarks, "Melville seems to renew himself for each new generation" (13)—an echo of Lewis Mumford eight decades earlier, who predicted that "Each age . . . will find its own symbols in *Moby-Dick* (194).

Delbanco and Mumford are confirmed by the enormous body of scholarship on *Moby-Dick* as well as by the novel's abiding presence throughout contemporary culture, high and low.³ And yet, Delbanco and Mumford also take for granted a certain stability of both author and text. After all, in Delbanco's locution, it is Melville who, though long dead, nevertheless "renew[s] himself." Similarly, Mumford implies that there is always more to be discovered "in" *Moby-Dick*: an inexhaustible supply of symbolic meanings immanent in the text. In "The Doubloon" chapter, this is the view of Stubb, who, while witnessing the succession of readers of the coin,

remarks, "There's another rendering now; but still one text" (434). But the cabin boy Pip provides an alternative theory of textual interpretation. "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" (434), Pip repeats, dissolving the objective text into the act of looking (or interpretation) itself, into pure subjectivity. And yet Pip's grammatical primer, as Sharon Cameron has argued, has both private and public dimensions.⁴ Which is to say that the process of making meaning is at once an individual ("I look") and a collective ("we look") enterprise.

It is the latter of these with which the present essay is concerned. In what follows, I explore one area of the rich public life of *Moby-Dick* in contemporary culture—namely, invocations of the novel in three spheres of popular journalism: sports, business, and politics. Surprisingly, this is a largely overlooked domain of the novel's historical afterlife, especially given the volume of scholarly attention devoted to *Moby-Dick* in relation to twentieth-century American culture. Owing, perhaps, to the novel's somewhat unique path toward "classic" status—seventy or so years of relative obscurity following its initial publication and then, beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, sudden elevation to the level of American masterpiece—Melville scholars have taken a keen interest in the various sites of reading that constitute *Moby-Dick* not just as a literary monument, but as a field of discourse. These sites of reading and ideological conflict include investigations into the "Melville Revival" of the early decades of the last century; readings of adaptations and appropriations of the novel in film, on stage, in the visual arts, even in comic books; and, beginning in the 1980s, claims for the role played by Cold War ideology in canonizing the novel.⁵ Despite such diversity of interest in the afterlife of *Moby-Dick*, the ubiquity of references to Melville's masterpiece in public discourse has gone largely unexplored. Perhaps such references are simply so common—after all, most of us, I imagine have at one time or another compared someone to Captain Ahab—that they appear to have no particular coherence. Or perhaps they simply go unnoticed, no more worthy of commentary than idle chat about the weather.

Yet such references do perform a cultural function. By likening Peyton Manning and other star professional athletes to Captain Ahab, sportswriters invest these stars' on-field exploits with the grandeur of heroic narrative. And yet, I do not mean to say that by drawing on the cultural meanings of Melville's classic work of fiction—which, to be sure, itself stands as a monument of artistic achievement—sportswriters, any more than observers of world events, attempt to elevate the trivial to the status of the timeless (as with myth) or to provide, say, American football with meanings that it somehow does not possess. Rather, I mean to say that *Moby-Dick* and American sports are both complex expressions of culture; that the one is as "textual" as the other. Ahab's quest for the white whale sim-

ply serves to give utterance to the narrativity, the signifying function, with which fans and viewers already invest spectator sports—not to mention corporate culture and politics. In other words, we *already* experience professional sports, the business world, and politics textually, as narratives with dramatic shape—heroes and villains, rises and falls, subplots and leit-motifs. But whereas professional sports offers tales of heroic action, business and politics tend to offer narratives of decline, tales of lies and betrayal. So while the modern sports hero stands for the pursuit of greatness—he is an Ahab to root for, one who almost always conquers his whale—the corporate executive in search of profits or market domination, or the political figure in search of power, as we'll see, stands for the selfish, even reckless, pursuit of personal gain and power.

Moreover, beyond the particular uses of Melville's novel, I will also argue that tracing the image of the *Moby-Dick* in these three areas of public discourse is revealing both of how literary texts sometimes make their way through history and of how popular culture participates in the production of a literary text's meaning. In the case of public references to *Moby-Dick*—in particular, the metaphorical use of Ahab's quest for the white whale—this process turns out to be directly at odds with the view expressed by Delbanco, Mumford, and Stubb. That is, rather than once again promoting the polysemous quality of the novel and the doubloon alike, their capacity to invite and sustain a multiplicity of readings, a plurality of meanings, the popular image of *Moby-Dick* distills polysemy to epitome. The epitome is Ahab's quest for the white whale; in the public references I will discuss, nearly everything else in the novel is simply filtered out, so that Melville's text is boiled down to a singular meaning that circulates freely, available and apparent to all—a meaning, furthermore, that is readily grasped regardless of whether one has even read the novel. Thus, whereas the traditional literary artifact—the novel Melville published in 1851—is one in which meaning is already overdetermined, the cultural artifact—the idea of the novel as it circulates in everyday public discourse—appears to be a counterforce to overdetermination, asserting singularity over multiplicity. And yet, as I will show, whatever is lost in this process of distillation is gained in diffusion. Popular culture releases texts from their authors and their historical moments of production and thereby makes them available for diverse readings in unexpected contexts. And with *Moby-Dick* at least, public discourse proves to be both unexpectedly astute in its treatment of certain facets of the text and revealingly blind to others.

As a cultural touchstone, *Moby-Dick* occupies a position with only a handful of other nineteenth-century literary productions—Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, to name a few—that have exceeded their own textual and historical boundaries and entered into our common lan-

guage; they have become, in Jonathan Arac's phrase "hypercanonical" (6). Elements of each of these texts, often a central image or action that, for historically mutable reasons continues to resonate in differing historical contexts, have been absorbed by the culture at large and, at times, twisted out of all recognizable shape. Arac has documented, for instance, the painful effects of the cultural appropriation of Twain's novel, which, perversely, has licensed the public circulation of one of our culture's most troubling racial epithets (28-29). In a similar way, beginning in the 1960s, "Uncle Tom" itself became an epithet, one that bears very little relation to the character in Stowe's novel. Somewhat more benignly, *Frankenstein* exists in the popular imagination in versions likely to make careful readers of the novel cringe, as a kind of misremembering of a movie featuring a character named Dr. Frankenstein battling against a green monster (of the inflatable sort that adorns suburban lawns each October), also named Frankenstein—neither of which appear in Mary Shelley's novel.

Yet if these distillations in popular culture appear to be distortions of the "texts themselves," reductions that display a drive toward the containment, rather than the release, of wayward meaning, what their persistence in the culture reveals is precisely the opposite. That is, as signifiers that circulate independently of their "source," the singular image or narrative that popular culture extracts from these classic texts relocates the locus of meaning in culture rather than in an author or text.⁶ Thus, defenders of Twain against charges of racism proceed dismissively, by asserting that detractors fail to accept the already settled question of the plain meaning of the novel. That is to say, the resolute defenses of *Huckleberry Finn* in the face of criticism express a certain discomfort with the dehiscence, the release and free-play, of meaning.

Yet it is precisely the dehiscence that explains why one does not need to have read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *Moby-Dick* to grasp the cultural meaning of "Uncle Tom" or of Captain Ahab. Richard Brodhead has written, for instance, that Melville's novel "has been absorbed into American folklore—so much so that people who have never seen a copy of *Moby-Dick* know who Captain Ahab is and use the chase of the great white whale as a metaphor for the obsessive pursuit of irrational goals" (18-19). This metaphor, which I will call the Ahab trope, depends not upon textual, but upon cultural, knowledge. To employ it, then, is to partake in neither allusion nor appropriation, both of which imply reference to some discernible work or object. That is to say, whereas allusion calls upon an act of substitution—Ahab and the white whale bring to mind a specific text, Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby-Dick*, as well as a set of related associations that readers of the novel may possess—the cultural metaphor of Ahab's pursuit of the white whale requires no such substitution; it does not depend upon any special knowledge of a particular referent. Indeed, at

most, the Ahab trope depends only upon prior knowledge of the reference itself; it is in this sense its own referent. Similarly, while appropriation suggests possession, taking for oneself property that belongs to someone else, the Ahab trope draws only upon prior appropriations of the meaning of Ahab's pursuit of the white whale, meanings that may or may not be derived from the work produced by the pen of Herman Melville.

Unloosed from its moorings in the author as generator and arbiter of meaning, the Ahab trope can be applied in endless contexts, to countless situations. Moreover, these applications are far less univocal than Brodhead's concise description—"the obsessive pursuit of irrational goals"—suggests. Indeed, one of the most interesting features of the Ahab trope in contemporary culture is its multiple valences. For instance, in political discourse, as we'll see later, it is uniformly an expression of disapprobation. By contrast, in other contexts, the trope is often used in ways that suggest that Captain Ahab, rather than an obsessive in pursuit of the irrational, is actually a model of dogged persistence, a kind of modern-day, goal-oriented careerist whose aims might even be praiseworthy, even if seemingly unattainable. This is typically the case when the Ahab trope appears in discussions of American business. For instance, in 1996, Janice Maloney's *Fortune* magazine profile of the CEO of the software company Oracle Corporation announced in its headline that "Larry Ellison Is Captain Ahab and Bill Gates Is Moby Dick" (119), emphasizing, not entirely disapprovingly, Ellison's competitive drive. Of course, Gates's Microsoft Corporation, possessing what would seem to be unassailable power in the marketplace, has itself often been described as the great white whale. The website of journalist Gary Rivlin for his 2000 book, *The Plot to Get Bill Gates*, contains the teaser "Think Moby Dick in Silicon Valley" and describes the book as the tale of corporate leaders in Silicon Valley, who form a "kind of Capt. Ahab's Club distracted by the Great White Whale of Redmond, Wash." At the same time, Gates has himself been likened to Ahab, as when John Markoff in the *New York Times* in 1999 asked of one of Microsoft's business ventures, "Has Bill Gates become the Captain Ahab of the information age?" "Gates' white whale," the article continues, "remains an elusive digital set-top cable box" that will integrate the PC, the Internet, and television "into a leviathan living-room entertainment and information machine."

Captains of industry as the captain of the *Pequod*: such analogies draw on Ahab to express, on the one hand, a particular view of the novel—Ahab's persistence as a thing to be admired—and, on the other, to reinforce the values of corporate culture—ambition, aggression, fierce competitiveness. Take, for instance, a 1967 *New York Times* obituary of the former chair of Amerasia Oil that admiringly notes that Alfred Jacobsen was said to have "hunted for oil 'with the passion and dedication that inspired Cap-

tain Ahab in his pursuit of Moby Dick in the ocean'" ("Alfred Jacobsen"). The force of the comparison here depends both upon a disregard for the details of the novel—after all, the hunt for oil, as Starbuck reminds his captain, is precisely what Ahab gives up in pursuit of vengeance—and upon a strangely accurate characterization of it. Passion and dedication, part of the cant of business culture, and qualities presumably possessed as much by Ellison and Gates as by Jacobsen, are, indeed, terms ascribed to Ahab in Melville's novel. In the chapter in which he is first introduced, Ishmael notes "an infinity of firmest fortitude, a willfulness in the fixed and fearless, forward dedication of [his] glance" (124). And later, Ishmael remarks upon "the wildness of [Ahab's] ruling passion" (211).

That the *Times* would invoke such a view of Ahab is fitting, for every bit as much as Ishmael in his attitude toward Ahab, the deployment of the Ahab trope in the context of American commerce betrays a deep ambivalence, a powerful cultural anxiety, about both the social and the psychic costs of success in the capitalist marketplace. In this regard, the trope echoes, almost uncannily, David Leverenz's reading of the novel in *Manhood and the American Renaissance*. There, Leverenz views Ahab as "an exaggerated prototype for the male behavior pattern that helped ensure the worldwide dominance of American industry . . . the hard-driving, finger-drumming, aggressive executive, whose life so frequently ends its heartlessness in a heart attack" (288). The personal toll that lies beneath what Leverenz calls "entrepreneurial American manhood" (281) is registered in more anodyne form, for example, in syndicated business columnist Gene Mage's 2002 article, "Melville on Management," which draws five lessons from *Moby-Dick* when viewed "from a business perspective." The lessons include "Beware Ahab," who was "completely consumed with killing Moby Dick to avenge the wounds of his past. In the workplace, wounded managers make current decisions not on the merits, but to validate their broken sense of self"; and "Enjoy the Journey" like Ishmael, who "found joy and friendship in a series of seemingly chance encounters with local characters" in Nantucket. Mage concludes that "Even if Ahab had 'succeeded' in killing Moby Dick, it would not have mattered the next day . . . Rather than wasting your life and career chasing your personal Moby Dick, find a way to make a lasting impact on the lives of people."

Does Mage's column constitute a "reading" of the novel? Or perhaps a better question is, what kind of reading of the novel does Mage offer? On the one hand, it is wildly ahistorical; it displays no particular interest in Melville as an artist, or in the novel's social and historical context, the conditions of its production, or even its "literary" qualities. On the other hand, it does reproduce a number of widely accepted critical understandings of the novel: Ahab and Ishmael as opposing forces, alternative axes of meaning; the thematic importance of individualist self-fulfillment versus

the communally-based possibilities of democracy; and an insistence on recognizing the *Pequod's* voyage as the capitalist enterprise it is (it's no surprise that, on this score, Mage takes the position of Starbuck: "Lesson 4: Remember the mission"). Indeed, if anything, Mage's example is a bit too conventional, a fact that illustrates, not the isolation of academic from popular discourses, but a certain congeniality between them. After all, Mage's discovery of a useful set of lessons for "modern career seekers" in the novel is surely no less historical, nor even less faithful to the text, than Leverenz's suggestion that Ahab is a prototype of the modern corporate executive. Hence the opposition Mage sets up at the beginning of his column—between "literary criticism" and his own "business perspective"—turns out to be no opposition at all.

Which certainly isn't to say that there aren't crucial differences between the kinds of readings produced by business journalists like Mage and scholars like Leverenz. For one thing, Leverenz's reading, grounded by an interest in cultural conceptions of manhood, exposes the workings of precisely the same "American gender ideology" (302) that the Ahab trope invariably masks. In all of my searches for public references to Ahab's quest for the white whale, I have encountered only two instances in which a woman is compared to Captain Ahab—a troubling reminder that the notorious gender exclusivity of Melville's novel continues to be a defining feature in the halls of power in American society, from professional sports to business and politics.⁷ In contemporary American culture, women in power are more likely to be compared to, say, Marie Antoinette, as when Camille Paglia, reviewing Sena Jeter Naslund's novel *Abundance* in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, strains to point out that former first lady and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton "wore a lavish black-velvet opera coat trimmed with gold braid to sweep, Marie Antoinette-like, into her interrogation by the special prosecutor Kenneth W. Starr."

I don't mean to suggest that being compared to Ahab somehow represents a sign of honor or respect for women in positions of power, or for anyone else for that matter—certainly not in the political sphere. Indeed, in political discourse, unlike in business journalism, the Ahab trope almost without exception signifies irresponsible statesmanship; it amounts to a personal indictment buttressed by a warning of impending doom. That is, when captains of industry are compared to Ahab, the trope carries with it a certain level of admiration. In politics, by contrast, to be compared to Ahab in his quest for the white whale is to be flatly accused of a dangerous obsession, or worse, of reckless, power-mad behavior with potentially disastrous consequences both for the victim(s) of the pursuit and, implicitly, for the body politic.

Such indictments and warnings have a long history.⁸ For instance, a 1987 editorial by George J. Church in *Time* magazine, critical of Reagan's

handling of events in Central America, quotes a critic of the administration as saying, "The Sandinistas are Reagan's Moby Dick, and he is their Captain Ahab." The column concludes with an image of imminent disaster: Reagan's policies "could increase the prospect of the worst-case scenario coming true" (28). Similarly, in an essay on the Persian Gulf War printed in *The Nation* in 1991, the late scholar Edward Said wrote that the first President Bush had "turned himself into Captain Ahab" (145). In these instances, Ahab signifies not "passion and dedication" but treacherous self-aggrandizement and authoritarianism—meanings as evident in the political context as the former are evident in the corporate context.

Indeed, Said's remark must surely reverberate for even casual readers of journalistic commentary on the current Gulf War, which, as we'll see, frequently casts the current President Bush in the role of Captain Ahab. However, it was during Bill Clinton's presidency that use of the Ahab trope intensified, both in its force and its frequency. In January of 1998, an editorial in the *Wisconsin State Journal* began, "Independent counsel Kenneth Starr has been to Bill Clinton what Herman Melville's legendary Captain Ahab was to Moby Dick, relentlessly pursuing his prey even when all hope of landing him seemed lost" ("Prolonged Scandal"). Similarly, an editorial in *The Progressive* in April of the same year, titled "Clinton and Captain Ahab," referred to Starr as "a man obsessed, and like Captain Ahab, he doesn't know how to control himself." The references continued to appear throughout the year⁹ and by August, the late Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was elaborating on the aptness of the metaphor in the editorial pages of the *New York Times*, noting that Starr's "pursuit of Mr. Clinton has rightly been compared to Captain Ahab's monomaniacal 'quenchless feud with the White Whale.'" Schlesinger even provided an extended quotation from the novel's powerful chapter, "Moby Dick," concluding, "Captain Ahab versus the American Presidency: if Mr. Starr's quenchless feud continues, he may well do permanent damage to the American system of government."

As for the current US president, he has been likened to Ahab by everyone from bloggers too numerous to mention to David Ignatius in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, and Said again, who, in a reprise of his remarks on the first President Bush, noted just before the invasion of Afghanistan that "Collective passions are being funnelled into a drive for war that uncannily resembles Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick (qtd. in Gornick). In an extended (and somewhat belabored) use of the trope, Alex Vardamis of the *San Francisco Chronicle* described President Bush and Captain Ahab as "psychological soul-mates." And Garrison Keillor, in a satirical essay published by the online magazine *Salon.com*, portrayed Bush as a lunatic Ahab, ignoring all advice but that of his trusted mates, Lieutenants Rice and Cheney. Nor is Bush-as-Ahab

confined to the American press. I have found similar references in newspapers from Australia, England, and India.¹⁰

It is hard to tell whether the frequency of such references represent examples of a kind of journalistic echo-chamber, in which columnists and commentators simply repeat what their colleagues have said—in which case we are dealing not with references to Melville's novel, but with references to prior references—or whether such a collection of statements is to be read as a demonstration of the novel's continuing hold on the modern imagination or even of Melville's prophetic powers. Whatever the case, what is striking about all of these examples as sites of reading *Moby-Dick* is both the easy assumption, on the part of public commentators, of the novel's political-ideological resonance and the transparency of signification they impose upon—or simply presuppose about—the text. That is to say, not one of the political instances I have just cited expresses the slightest doubt about the symbolic meaning of Ahab's quest for the white whale; they betray none of the ambivalence that marks the use of the trope in the context of the marketplace. At the same time, it is, paradoxically, the very univocality of this political reading—*Moby-Dick* clarified into what Charles Sanders Peirce calls an "iconic" sign—a reading universally known and shared by everyone, that makes it available for a wide range of applications (105). As a result, the very social divisiveness that is both the cause and the effect of the metaphor coexists alongside an apparent cultural consensus about the political meaning of Ahab's pursuit of the white whale. The basis of disagreement is neither hermeneutical nor ideological so much as it is diagnostic. It is not a matter of what the metaphor means, but to whom it applies.

And as the examples with which I began this essay demonstrate, it appears to apply to almost anyone (who is male and in a position of some prominence) in American culture. Thus there is more than a little truth to Starbuck's rumination when, late in the novel, he enters Ahab's state room to find the old man sleeping and a loaded musket ready at hand. Addressing Ahab, the captain's fixed purpose, and its inevitable result, Starbuck murmurs in soliloquy, "Flat obedience to thy own flat commands, this is all thou breathest. Aye, and say'st the men have vow'd thy vow; say'st *all of us are Ahab's*. Great God forbid!" (515, emphasis mine). Yet, as we have seen, not every modern Ahab is to be feared. Where Ahab-as-captain of industry is a figure to which the culture responds with some ambivalence, and Ahab-as-political leader is a figure to be denounced, Ahab-as-sports hero is a figure that American culture exalts.

So Ahab can be deployed either to praise or condemn: in American public discourse Ahab appears as both reckless authoritarians and as heroic strivers, threats to the body politic and emblems of human achievement, men to be feared and men to be admired, exemplars of tragic hubris and

models of undaunted courage. All of which more or less accords with the ways scholars have read Captain Ahab in Melville's novel for almost a century. In fact, one of the striking features of the Ahab trope is how closely its disparate uses in popular culture replicate the novel's literary history. That is, the early revivalists of the 1920s and 1930s fashioned Melville into the very type of the heroic artist struggling for the expression of truth in a world of falsehoods. Ahab, in turn, was characterized as a tragic hero modeled in some ways after the hero-artist who created him, an allegorical representation of man's spiritual strivings, seeking to penetrate to the very axis of human experience. By contrast, critics in the 1940s and 1950s turned against Ahab, viewing him, in F. O. Matthiessen's terms, as "a fearful symbol of the self-enclosed individualism that, carried to its furthest extreme, brings disaster both upon itself and upon the group of which it is part" (459). Hence the emergence of Ahab as representative of totalitarian will—a reading derived, as Donald Pease has compellingly argued, from the Cold War context within which Matthiessen and other critics of his era wrote.

The point here is that what I am calling the epitome that characterizes popular culture's reading of *Moby-Dick*, despite its effacement or repression of so many other features of the novel, is no less overdetermined and grounded in a protean view of both the text's meaning and the signifying function of Captain Ahab than the polysemy always already assumed by academic readings. A related, if minor, point then follows: popular and academic readings of *Moby-Dick* are not so distant as one might expect. If scholars produce readings of Melville's text in ways that elucidate antebellum US culture and its sites of ideological conflict, not to mention the historical sites and conditions of their own reading, popular journalism reads *Moby-Dick* as a free-floating cultural text—reads it in ways that elucidate contemporary American culture.

In fact, even the blind spots in popular understandings of *Moby-Dick*, the instances where, unlike academic criticism, popular culture gets the novel wrong, can prove instructive. In Donald Pease's account, for instance, Cold War critics turned to Ishmael as the representative of freedom in contrast to Ahab's authoritarianism. Popular culture has not taken this Ishmaelian turn; I have located no widespread "Ishmael trope." This may be due to the fact that Ishmael's presence in the novel—asserted primarily in terms of what Walter Bezanson has called the novel's "enfolding sensibility" (36)—is a presence that does not lend itself so readily to the epitomizing process that popular discourse seems to demand. Or, even more revealingly, I would argue that it is because those scenes in the novel—the little narratemes or images—that do lend themselves to the distilling process are of a kind that American culture continues to avoid facing squarely. I'm thinking, for instance, of the cross-racial friendship of

Ishmael and Queequeg, epitomized by the two of them together in bed, legs intertwined, "a cosy, loving pair" (52). Leslie Fiedler notwithstanding, as an iconic expression of cultural values, this, I suspect, (to paraphrase Ishmael) is diving deeper than America is ready to go.

Indeed, the relentless focus on Ahab as the epitome of the novel in popular discourse comes at the cost of attending to the real and messy questions of gender, race, and homosocial relationships (to name a few) that too often remain the exclusive province of academic discourse. So just as David Leverenz, however much he may have in common with business journalists when it comes to *Moby-Dick*, turns out to be better equipped to explore the complexities of cultural conceptions of masculinity, so too have other Melville scholars been willing to consider the implications—and central importance in the novel and American culture—of Ishmael and Queequeg together in bed. Such a difference, I think, suggests the continuing need for cross-fertilization between academic and popular discourses, an invitation to think of scholarship not just as a bulwark against the inevitable reductions and distortions of popular culture (for popular culture, as we have seen, does not always reduce and distort), but as a chance to engage it. Why can't a woman be an Ahab? Why can't Ishmael stand for a different kind of heroic striving?

The example of Ishmael and Queequeg, in contrast to Ahab's quest, calls attention to the limitations of the Ahab trope—and thus, perhaps, to the limitations of the distillation process of public discourse itself, to that which it can and cannot do. On the one hand, it (obviously) cannot engage that which it excludes, and is therefore unlikely to transform the culture. For that, readers have to look elsewhere.¹¹ On the other hand, it can help to give recognizable shape and form to other kinds of cultural texts—the corporate world, politics, sports—each with its own, sometimes mystifying, system of signification. *Moby-Dick* and the Ahab trope help to explicate those signs. They provide metaphors with which to explain metaphors. In doing so, they illustrate what by now—in the wake of post-structuralism, the new historicism, and cultural studies—is a familiar point: that every act of reading is a matter of substituting one cultural signifier for another.

Indeed, Melville himself engaged in precisely this sort of semiotic substitution when naming his ship's captain in the first place. That is to say, by 1850, "Ahab" was already a powerful cultural signifier. The biblical King Ahab, who, in scheming with his wife Jezebel to gain possession of the vineyard of his neighbor Naboth, provided an apt—and frequently used—political metaphor for American territorial expansion in the 1840s. In antebellum America, comparisons of pro-expansionist politicians like James Polk to the Biblical Ahab were at least as common as comparisons of modern politicians to Melville's Ahab. The fact that Melville's Ahab has, by and large, displaced the bible's Ahab is an illustration of the novel's

reach and the use readers and non-readers alike have made of *Moby-Dick*. And to be sure, the impulse to put *Moby-Dick* to work to explain the historical events we find ourselves confronted with appears to be all but irresistible. In fact, there is a long tradition in Melville studies of what we might call anachronistic readings, from D. H. Lawrence, who in the wake of World War I asked in 1922, "If the great White Whale sank the ship of the Great White Soul in 1851, what's been happening ever since?" (147); to Charles Olson, whose *Call Me Ishmael* (1947) places the novel in relation to the growth of the modern petroleum industry; and C. L. R. James, whose Marxist reading in *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways* foregrounds the present of his own writing in 1952 as he advocates for the *Pequod's* crew against the threat of totalitarianism both in the novel and in the Cold War United States. Writing later about an earlier historical moment, Christopher Durer calls *Moby-Dick* "a dark historical prophecy" and compares Ahab to Adolph Hitler: "The mystique which Ahab creates for himself is analogous to Hitler's psychological enslavement of the German nation and his notion of himself as the leader . . . Ahab is . . . a prototype of a twentieth-century fascist dictator, someone like Adolph Hitler" (8). Even a critic as eminent as Leo Marx found *Moby-Dick* a useful index for understanding the present. Writing in 1976, Marx recalled that "During the late 1960s, it was impossible to teach the book . . . without recognizing the analogies between the situation aboard the 'Pequod' and our government's relentless prosecution of the Vietnam War" (3). Like Ahab, the presidents who conducted that war "tended to project all evil on to a single Enemy—the hated whale for them being communism" (3).

There is nothing unusual about grasping for literary analogies to explain to ourselves the history of our own present. And yet when Marx writes, in echo of Andrew Delbanco and Lewis Mumford, that "*Moby-Dick* is a symbolic matrix in which readers of different times discover different meanings" (3), I hasten to demur. The novel is both more and less than that. On the one hand, I am dazzled, continually, by the novel's richness of insight and ample funds of signification—so much so that I take delight in every mention of it that I come across. On the other hand, collating the materials that I have presented here makes it clear to me that the novel has also become a kind of fecund emptiness, a site of meaning-making that is both playful and revealing. In this regard, it is like whiteness itself: "a dumb blankness" upon which readers impose what they most desire and fear. The expression of those fears and desires often walks a fine line between useful commentary and outright distortion. But for me at least, even the distortions—some of them as monstrous as the inaccurate pictures of whales Ishmael so disdains—have their charms. It is with one of them, perhaps my favorite of all public references to *Moby-Dick*, that I will conclude.

The item comes from *Beef*, a meat industry trade publication. In a 2005 commentary, J. Patrick Boyle, president and CEO of the American Meat Institute, responds to a US Court of Appeals decision clearing Tyson Foods of using marketing agreements to manipulate cattle prices:

In Herman Melville's classic novel, *Moby Dick*, Queequeg, a key shipmate and tattooed-native from the South Sea Islands, would attempt to see into the future by tossing chicken bones across the deck of the ship. How those chicken bones fell in relation to each other foretold the harpoon man of the impending fate of their doomed vessel, the *Pequod*.

After praising both the court's decision and the public benefit that follows from allowing the meat industry its independence, Boyle concludes, "Perhaps Captain Ahab should have paid more attention to the fortunes foretold by the chicken bones on the deck of his ship than about the white whale hunting him." The collision of corporate special interests and classic American literature, it would seem, makes for good comedy. And as best I can tell, Boyle appears to be thinking not about Melville's novel, but, somewhat mistakenly, of the 1956 John Huston film adaptation of *Moby-Dick*. Yet even an item as out of the way and inaccurate as this one, I would argue, serves a potentially useful function, helping to keep the novel alive in the culture. And who knows? Perhaps it even sent a few curious readers to the novel in search of those chicken bones.

Novel, film, trade publication—each forms a part of *Moby-Dick*'s profuse textuality, its excesses of signification, its publicly produced meanings. And each of them, for better or worse, is an important part of the novel's (not just literary) history, so that even a meat industry magazine can provide a means of cultural dissemination. Of course, Melville's novel is hardly the only literary text in possession of such a rich historical afterlife. Rather, it is only the most ubiquitous (or so I suspect; it would certainly be revealing to know). Captain Ahab shares a world—a world at once independent of and related to *Moby-Dick*—with Uncle Tom, Huck Finn, Hamlet, and dozens of other literary characters who live beyond the pages of the works that first introduced them, who circulate in the general culture, and whose disparate meanings are, in no small part, a social phenomenon. Both the characters and the meanings are invoked in all sorts of rhetorical occasions—not just in appropriations and adaptations in film, television, and on the stage. This essay has tried to show that the when and where and how of these invocations, of these unconventional sites of reading, are not so far removed from our own scholarly concerns as they might at first appear; and, even when they are, they can still reward careful scrutiny.

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Notes

1. The quotations in this paragraph, in order, refer to, respectively: Saraceno; Eagan; Zgoda and Rand; Glauber; Reynolds; and Markon.
2. Friends, students, and colleagues know that I collect references to Melville and *Moby-Dick*, and, with some frequency, I receive cards, envelopes, e-mails, and phone calls with "sightings." Cartoons making corny white whale jokes adorn my office door—right next to Thomas Lux's poem "Eyes Scooped Out and Replaced by Hot Coals" (in which the playful speaker proclaims that the title's punishment be inflicted upon "each countryman or woman who, / upon reaching their majority / has yet to read" *Moby-Dick*). Monday and Wednesday mornings often bring messages calling my attention to the previous night's episodes of *The Simpsons* (which, by my count, averages at least one *Moby-Dick* reference per season), and of the medical drama *House* (which explicitly fosters a view of the title character, a brilliant but misanthropic physician with a conspicuous leg injury, as a kind of Ahab-like monomaniac). In my files is a full-page newspaper ad from the late 1990s touting the Microsoft Corporation's electronic book device, the Microsoft Reader, which reproduces the opening page of *Moby-Dick*. Other tips have led me to films, ranging from recent adaptations of Melville's works, like *Bartleby* (starring Crispin Glover) and the French film *Beau Travail* (loosely based on Melville's *Billy Budd*), to others of all kinds and varying degrees of merit, including *Before Night Falls*, *Deep Impact*, and the cult-classic *Heathers*. I have been directed toward books as different as Sena Jeter Naslund's novel *Ahab's Wife*, Robert Sullivan's *A Whale Hunt*, and Philip Jose Farmer's science fiction novel *The Wind Whales of Ishmael*, which a friend in New York purchased for me from a street vendor; toward art exhibitions and stage performances of various kinds, including my first-ever opera; and toward rock bands like Captain Ahab, Mastodon (who in 2004 released a *Moby-Dick*-themed recording *Leviathan*), and the German group Ahab (whose 2006 disc *The Call of the Wretched Sea* features a destructive sperm whale on its cover and songs with titles like "Old Thunder," "Of Monstrous Pictures of Whales," and "Ahab's Oath"). One student presented me with a compact disc containing songs from a high school production of *Moby-Dick: The Musical!*; another sent me a picture of herself standing in front of an aptly-named seafood restaurant outside Nashville, Tennessee. And whenever I teach the novel, some student inevitably asks whether Starbucks coffee has anything to do with Melville. For the record, histories of Starbucks note that the chain was originally named after "the coffee-loving first mate of the *Pequod*" in *Moby-Dick*. Starbuck never drinks coffee in the novel; however, he participates in the following exchange when the *Pequod* meets the *Virgin*: "'What has he in his hand there?' cried Starbuck." Stubb replies, "... it's a coffee-pot, Mr. Starbuck; he's coming to make us our coffee, is the Yarnan" (351).
3. For a useful overview of Melville in popular culture, see Inge, who focuses primarily on adaptations of Melville's works in film, recordings, television, comics, and popular fiction. He mentions the kinds of references I pursue here only briefly in a final section on "General Culture."
4. Cameron argues that "what troubles Pip is not the disparity of public and private meanings [of the doubloon], but rather the smoothness of their link (580).
5. For discussions of the Melville revival, see Lauter, Spark, and the "Historical Note" included in the Northwestern Newberry edition of *Moby-Dick* (732-56). For discussions of filmic adaptations and appropriations of the novel, see Stern, Cahir, Couser, Hinds, Weiner, and Metz. For *Moby-Dick* on stage, see Wallace ("Eckert's

Great Whales"), Otter, Schultz ("Feminizing Moby-Dick"), and Insko. On *Moby-Dick* and twentieth-century visual art, see Wallace (*Frank Stella's Moby-Dick*) and Schultz (*Unpainted to the Last*). On Melville in the comics, see Inge ("Melville in the Comic Books") and Cook. On *Moby-Dick* and the Cold War, see especially Pease, Spanos, and Murphy.

6. I have in mind here, of course, Foucault's "author-function," which reconfigures our understanding of the role of the author as the center and "source of significations which fill a work" (118). Foucault argues that the author is "the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning" (118). In other words, "if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surge of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion.... The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning" (119).

7. A brief 2006 death notice of reporter Oriana Fallaci in *National Review* refers to her as an "Ahab of journalism" ("The Week"); and in 2005, Dana Milbank of the *Washington Post* referred to Interior Secretary Gale Norton as "the administration's Ahab" in the fight to allow drilling in the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge.

8. An article in the *New York Times* in 1942, for instance, drew inspiration from a naval ship named the *Herman Melville* to reflect on America's entrance into World War II, noting that "The proper Melville parallel for the grim work now going on from Australia to the Gilbert Islands would be the stormy soul of Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick" ("Topics of the Times" 26). Slightly more pointedly, a *Times* article in November of 1968 by David Wise, "The Twilight of a President," casually remarked that "Vietnam is Lyndon Johnson's white whale, and he still chases it, even in the twilight of his Presidency."

9. For instance, in April of 1998, *Newsweek* wrote that "Starr is increasingly regarded as an uncomfortable, politically biased figure, an oddly jolly Captain Ahab" (Thomas 26). The following July, Massachusetts congressman Barney Frank deployed the analogy on the television program *Meet the Press*. "Ken Starr has become Captain Ahab," Frank said, "he is so determined to bring down the white whale that he's going to keep going and going" (*Meet the Press*). The Starr-as-Ahab comparison even made its way abroad. Nancy Dunne in *The Financial Times* from London quoted a University of Texas professor as saying "It's very clear that Starr has the same attitude toward Clinton as did Captain Ahab toward the great white whale." And an editorial from Edinburgh, in *The Scotsman*, observed that "Despite all the guile at his command, Ahab's obsession to harpoon the beast leads to his own destruction. This century's Ahab, Kenneth Starr, is about to be similarly consumed, although he appears not to know it" ("Captain Ahab Sinking Fast"). Two years later, Oliver North turned the trope against Clinton, asserting that "the quest for a legacy" was "Bill Clinton's white whale."

10. In a variation on the theme, Bush's recently departed political advisor Karl Rove has suggested that he himself is Moby-Dick, pursued by Democratic party Ahab: "I realize that some of the Democrats are Captain Ahab and I'm the great white whale," Rove told reporters upon his retirement "I noticed the other day some Democratic staffers were quoted calling me the big fish. Well, I'm Moby-Dick and they're after me" (Baker and Fletcher).

11. My research has revealed that there are at least three gay bars in the United States named "Moby Dick's"—in San Francisco, San Diego, and Dallas. Surely there are more. This fact may suggest the existence of an alternative, in popular culture, to the Ahab trope and perhaps a popular counterpart to queer readings of the novel.

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