Herman Melville and the Literary Pursuit of the Planetary[1]

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My charting here of the career of my intellectual involvement with Herman Melville's planetary imagination will hopefully suggest why I hold him partly responsible for my coming across the Pacific to Diliman to teach literature in the first semester in 2013-2014. Melville registered his engagement with the problems of life so intensely and creatively through his words that they speak with intimacy and vitality to readers facing the issues of the twenty-first century. I wish to express my gratitude because my visit would not have happened at all without the kindness and generosity of the University's administrators and the faculty and students of Department of English and Comparative Literature.

Similar to Filipino seafarers seeking adventure and employment, nineteen-year-old Herman Melville, whose father died when he was thirteen, took to the ocean. The peripatetic circuits of Melville's travels for the next five years – out from the "Narrows" of New York to Liverpool and back in 1839; up the Erie Canal to the broad prairies following the Mississippi and Ohio rivers the following year; and then in 1841 round Cape Horn and through the vast Pacific on a whaling ship before doubling back three years later on a U.S. naval ship – revolutionized his perspectives on the planet. The voyage of the whaler was among the longest ocean journeys ever made by humans, equivalent perhaps to today's excursions to outer space. Melville's choice to ship as a common sailor granted him the latitude to explore different class, ethnic, and sexual domains. Melville relished his renegade freedom of "vagabondizing" (*Correspondence* 199) equipped with only a hammock and a carpet bag. It is clear that Melville generated much of his early literary capital out of his striking encounters with cultural difference while immersed in shipboard activities and wandering the strands and streets of distant lands. This exposure to expansive transcultural and natural worlds taught him lessons that nourished the roots of a radical sensibility. Melville devoted his career to courageously worlding his experience through the literary latitudes of his "sea freedoms" (*Correspondence* 56). He would claim as Ishmael that "a Whaling ship was my Yale College and my Harvard" (*Moby-Dick* 112)

Sharing Ishmael's "everlasting itch for things remote" (*Moby-Dick* 7), my education valorized the experiential and released important lessons from the transgression of provincial boundaries. My family of six traveled by car through almost all of the lower 48 states while my father taught in the summers. Six of my years between ages 18 and 30 unfolded outside the United States:

playing ice-hockey is Sweden, unlearning in New Zealand, gardening in Israel, and then beginning my married life by teaching high school for three years in Pakistan during the Russian phase of the Afghani war. It was there that I discovered *Moby-Dick* and my intellectual impetus. (My professor never told me our college was half-an-hour from Melville's home in western Massachusetts and I didn't read it when assigned it.) There it was, one of the few books in class sets in the basement of my school in the years before Amazon could provide any other options. My Muslim students led me to ask burgeoning questions: Why does the tattooed Polynesian celebrate Ramadan with a wooden idol on his head, and action that would be a vile idolatry in Islam? Why does Fedallah have an Arabic name? Why is Ahab's monomaniacal revolt called a "sultanism of his brain" (147)? Is Ishmael named for Ismail the exiled son of Abraham and forefather of the Arabs? These questions led me to my doctoral study at Yale where I wrote a dissertation called "Imagining Ishmael: Islamic Orientalism in America from the Puritans to Melville."

Although that research broadened into a cultural history of what I called "islamicism,[2]" its literary core analyzed how Melville regularly filtered orientalist figures through the alembic of his multivalent imagination, transmuting them into effective vehicles for both critical and contemplative symbolism. These ranged from the stereotypical to the sublime and from the subversive to the celebratory. In his writings, Melville represented a critical view of the Islamic world as a despotic and even demonic realm of gothic horror. Melville subversively deployed islamicism to infidelize some of the customs of his own culture. He forcefully registered his call for reform by aligning contemporary American practices—such as the tyranny of sea captains and the materialist pretenses of Protestant propriety – with malignant behaviors associated

with Christianity's long-term foes. Yet Melville conversely engaged islamicist rhetoric as a protean resource to empower his literary quest and evoke the vitality of democratic culture on a planetary register.

Drawing from Goethe and Thomas Carlyle, Melville suffused Ahab with some of the romance of the Prophet Muhammad's independent revelation to magnify his authority and to increase the register of his revolt. No one on board the *Pequod* is able to counter Ahab's awesome power as he fanatically carries out his holy war. Yet Melville also saw fresh and universal nobility in the courageous energy and wild earnestness of Ahab's stance and his rebellion against both the petty hypocrisy of parochial conventions and the affronting dictates of divine fate, exfoliating a model of Melville's own rebellious power as an exotic author of subversive literary worlds.

Melville licensed images of islamic orientalism to gain a Byronic latitude for his early narrators by investing them with orientalist privilege. Melville's boldest assumption of islamicism was the narrator of *Moby-Dick*'s proclamation to "Call me Ishmael," which announces his affiliation with a figure most widely known in the nineteenth century as the Abrahamic ancestor of the Arabs. Melville's annunciation of Ishmael empowered him to criticize Christian civilization from a position that, although biblical, was also one aligned with the traditional enemies of Christianity, one from which he could speak with the contentious power of an established outsider. By allowing Ishmael to be the only survivor of the events in the book, Melville cedes all authority to his perspective and brazenly indicts the enclosed nature of Christian supremacy by rendering God's covenant with humanity more open, democratic, and inclusive of the outcast. Melville's Book of Ishmael integrates the infidel renegade and slave into the

center of his narrative, and ultimately into the national canon because of *Moby-Dick*'s importance to American literature.

For Melville, the alterity of Islam was an enigmatic phenomenon enabling deeper critical contemplation and not a problem to be resolved by trumpeting the redemptive superiority of Christian culture. At many places in his works Melville situates the face of this enigma in Muslim Maritime Southeast Asia. Not immune to the stereotypes of his age (still extant today in figures of the Moro), Melville evokes the shady Malay as the epitome of atavism represented by Ahab's spectral "tiger-yellow" crew: "a race notorious for a certain diabolism of subtilty" (*Moby-Dick* 217). When the *Pequod* is waylaid by Malays after it sails through the straits of Sunda between Java and Sumatra, Ahab applauds the "inhuman atheistical devils" for encouraging him to quicken his own pursuit of the whale (383). Melville links the piracy of these "rascally Asiatics" with the savagery of Ahab's own monomaniacal revenge. The fuller (dis)embodiment of Ahab's shadow is of course the nefarious Parsee Fedallah, described as "a muffled mystery to the last" and a "character…the like of whom now and then glide among the unchanging Asiatic communities, especially the Oriental isles to the east of the continent" (231).

My postdoctoral work on Melville expanded beyond islamicism to focus on the broader creative pageantry of what I call his "ethnic conscriptions." Melville's excursions licensed him to be different which empowered him both to subvert ethnographic types and to reordinate ethnicity as situational and performative. Early in his writing career, Melville registered this liberty by incorporating the textual forms of various "others" into the fabric of his literary characterization. Melville ventriloquized his textual appropriations by placing them on the tongues of his ethnic

characters, a kind of plagiaristic passing through personification. This strategy of incorporating other sources through multicultural mouthpieces was an ingenious process that enabled him to embody insights gained through the process of private reading within the more fraternal forms of interracial sociality in the worlds he wrote into being.

Reliant on his reading, and more upon prejudicial stereotypes than on transcultural knowledge, Melville was often forced to transform others into the symbolic resources he needed to disrupt his reader's complacencies and place their allegiances in critical relief. However, such an imaginative engagement with otherness often doomed his characters to be rather allegorical presences whose situated bodies were so subordinated to the cultural work of his fiction that their performances replicated the acts of colonization that Melville hoped to undermine. Inhabiting the bodies of others as a means of expanding the reaches of democracy was a project complicit with antebellum American cultural imperialism, an occupying act that Melville would ultimately reject.

In his later writings, Melville demonstrated that evoking the forms of cultural diversity could not generate reliable insights into the interiorities of others. Textualizing the other consigned him/her to an ungraspable silence whose effects Melville chose to dramatize in such characters as Babo in "Benito Cereno," "Bartleby," and Djalea in *Clarel*. Instead of rejecting multicultural characterization, Melville ultimately came to employ ethnic difference as a sign of the strange mysteries of human experience that cannot be explained. Melville made ethnicity a more active and authentic emblem of the liberty of unconvertable otherness from its fatal reduction into discourse, and ultimately a primal symbol of the writer's will to create. Laying claim to

the ethnic enabled Melville to assault the ethnocentrism of his readers by employing the trappings of human difference, including racial skin color, as a cosmopolitan symbol of the heterodox privilege of authorship. The heterological difference that stemmed from his travel had forever disrupted his allegiance to what he called in *Clarel* "the state of local minds inveterate,/ tied to one poor and casual form" (5-6).

Melville's works form a diverse body of literature that registered a global affiliation with the alien, the other, and the ethnic as expansive and as problematic as that of any American author not only of his time but also of our own. Unlike many of his time, Melville refused to repress his exposure to the enigma of human variety but actively celebrated it as a fresh and original dimension of a new literature that lay claim to a broader and more global genealogy. It is Melville's attempts to bridge and ultimately to embody the alienation that such alterity imposed that form the special courage of what I called his "ethnic cosmopolitanism." Melville savagely exposed the nakedness of aristocratic claims to superiority and the hypocrisy of a nation founded on equality but thriving on slavery, exploitation, and dispossession. Melville portrayed Americans themselves as ethnically marked creatures of the codes they had devised to traduce others. By figuring cultural difference as a disguise that obscured an essential human unity, Melville marked ethnicity itself as an ethical field through which he could test the allegiance of his readers and measure the sincerity of the new nation's ethos of equality.

Melville understood that humanity was unified in its evolution—he called man "that multiform pilgrim species" (*Confidence Man* 9)—and that the most dehumanizing action

was to deny another person's natural affiliation in that commonality.

In Melville's most optimistic moments he gloried in the fact that, despite the fall from Eden, humans remained divine in their pedigree and fraternal in their relation. While humans ideally shared a noble genealogy that united them in a cosmic domesticity, the grinding anguish of human strife and division were dark realities that Melville could never ignore for long. In Melville's view there were two Adams: the robust primitive in the garden exulting in the creative pleasure of progeniture and the fallen vagabond in earthly exile experiencing a world of woe ending only in death. As an outcast species, humans inherited the crushing dislocation that had been heaped upon Adam. Melville was unwilling to break the circle of human unity and took on the burden of its contentious diversity as a central and inescapable conundrum of the human condition. He dismissed the "white man's burden" of uplifting the barbarian and replaced it with the ironic and critical mission of marking the whole world as ethnic in the savagery of its fallen nature.

By depicting how all humans are held captive within the "spheres" of their own cultural provincialism, Melville revealed how this puzzling "man-of-war world" is often a ship of fools (*White-Jacket* 164). Violence against one's own kin and neglect for the welfare of others affirmed the universality of human barbarism. Melville expressed this common legacy forcefully when he claimed that the French Revolution "levelled the exquisite refinement of Paris with the blood-thirsty ferocity of Borneo; showing that broaches and finger-rings, not less than nose-rings and tattooing, are tokens of the primeval savageness which ever slumbers in human kind, civilized or uncivilized" (*Israel Potter* 63). To Melville the most savage of Americans was not the Indian

but the citizen of the United States, who, though thriving in a land of republicanism, chose to perpetrate violence and injustice towards others and brag about his exploits. Melville frequently presented Americans as hybrid ethnics who remained racialized primitives in spite of their aspirations to civilization.

Yet Melville's real genius and originality stemmed from his creative capacity to open the flood-gates of the world and feed his own vision with the cosmopolitan tide of humanity. Melville celebrated a hybrid society that did not rope itself off in pallid and incestuous conventions from the fertile contamination of diversity. Many of Melville's narrators and characters are figured as rovers and wanderers, exiles and orphans. Melville arrogated the transgressive perspective of outcasts to locate an alternative to the hypocritical pieties of what he called "snivelization" (*Redburn* 100). Melville embraced primitivism to vitalize his heretical cultural critique. For Melville, the unvanquished infidel and the downtrodden alien were noblest inheritors of humanity's condition because they both raged against earthly fatality and endured its penalty. As Melville remarked in his journal in the Holy Land, "Hapless are the favorites of Heaven" (*Journals* 91).

The strengths of Melville's ethnic cosmopolitanism emerged from how his literature honored individuals who retained their human dignity despite being punished by interhuman violence and the injustice of fate. Perhaps Melville's most sympathetic account of human suffering is his remarkable sketch of the Chola Widow in "The Encantadas" published in *The Piazza Tales* halfway through his life in 1856. Hunilla is a Chola—a mix between an indigenous native and a person of Spanish descent— from the Peruvian port of Payta who suffers a life of the grimmest desolation imaginable. After being abandoned by a French

whale captain on the isolated Norfolk Isle, she witnesses the drownings of her husband and brother – her only companions, other than the dogs most of which she is eventually forced to abandon to a fate similar to her own. She is finally recovered by the ship of Melville's narrator whose crew charitably carries her back to the coast of the continent. Melville canonizes this forsaken woman—who was consigned to struggle and suffer in solitude on an empty island—into a saint who embodies the earthly trials of the "lone shipwrecked soul" at the hands of a "feline Fate". The fortitude of her silent pride in the face of torturous experience inspires Melville's faith in the resilience of dignity. "Humanity, thou strong thing, I worship thee," Melville attests, "not in the laurelled victor, but in this vanquished one" (*Piazza Tales* 156-157) Here Melville's ethnic cosmopolitanism expands both the reach of American literature by enfranchising indigenous Latin Americans and the community of his fraternity (as he did with other female characters such as Delly and Isabel in *Pierre*) by honoring the experience of women. Melville's fictional fall from the Polynesian paradise in his fiction of the 1840s to the barren cinders of Galapagos a decade later—islands whose only charm rested in the irony of their name "The Encantadas"—registers his evaluation of the challenges of acting upon Christian virtues in a modernizing world whose reigning values make it expedient to ignore them. It is fitting that the other famous visitor of Melville's time to these equatorial islands of the eastern Pacific was Charles Darwin whose scientific discoveries were later used to support the justification of the cultural superiority that Melville challenged in his writing. Melville's images of early desolation in "The Encantadas" prepared the way for his disenchanting journey to the Holy Land a couple of years later where its legendary hope foundered on the stones of Judea.

My most recent work learning from Melville's artistic explorations has shifted the ordination of its enterprise in illuminating ways. I have shifted from assessing Melville's latitudinarian engagement with human difference on the surface of the globe to examining how Melville sought to understand the (r)evolving material planet in vertiginous space and time. His extravagant reckoning stretched across geographical latitudes into new hemispheres, but it also expanded along a vertical axis connecting the immensity of the stars above with the abyss of the oceans below. Melville's odyssey through open oceans, verdant islands, expansive prairies, frozen extremes, and barren deserts exposed him to a "*realizing sense*" (*Redburn* 128) of the immense power and terror of the material earth itself. During the half century when Melville was traveling and writing, scientific developments in geology, astronomy, and natural history quickened the Copernican dissolution of earthly fixity, reconceiving the earth as, in effect, a "loose fish" in deep time (*Moby-Dick* 398). Melville's works charted how the planet lived out its Greek etymology as an abandoned "wanderer" bewilderingly astray in an unknowable cosmos, a spinning and orbiting outpost shaken by the chaotic flux of its own fluid depths and eruptions.

Melville's renegade peregrinations exposed him to the primal physicality of the terraqueous globe circling in space in ways that displaced ultimate lessons from scriptural texts to an imaginative reading of the "books" of nature that he witnessed through this expansive travel. Melville's encounters with pristine natural beauty offered him a redemptive glimpse of a celestial paradise fresh in its unspoiled creation. But earthly extremes also dramatized the chaotic and changing material forms that marked the planet as fallen, a kind of "Tartarus" or hell (*Piazza Tales* 323). Melville's writings oscillate between a pantheistic

merging with the cosmos and a fatal encounter with forces of heartless materialism. Yet Melville also found through his writing a repose centered in a sustaining connection with the vital energies embodied by the capacity of material forms to regenerate and evolve new life. By pointing to and holding together radically different and changing poles, the planetary compass of Melville's infidel creativity bodied forth a living language that linked the abstracted certitudes of religion to dynamic material processes that were paradoxical and provisional – what he called "the mingled, mingling threads of life" (*Moby-Dick* 492).

In his sea fictions, Melville improvises a literary cosmogony that intermingles the oceanic with the astronomical by figuring islands as planets, oceans as lagoons, and archipelagos as constellations. He mischievously materializes the ascent to heaven as a pagan voyage into a cosmic ocean. Again and again in his writings, Melville celebrates a pantheistic merger with the constellations rather than devotion to the singular star that beckoned the Magi to the manger in Bethlehem. When set upon the strange sea for the first time, Redburn writes of becoming "lost in one delirious throb at the center of the All," responsive "to all the wild commotion of the world" and "reeling on and on with the planets in their orbits" (*Redburn* 66).

Nevertheless, Melville's portrayals of the naturalistic hell he witnessed on earth negated any naïve belief in the benevolence of creation or the promise of natural redemption. Melville's journeys around the icy extremes of Cape Horn altered his sense of the vast range of the planet's inhuman power. The frozen poles were only one extreme in Melville's writings, others centered on the slides, quakes, and eruptions of lava from molten magma that undermined the earth's solidity. The geological cataclysms of the planet's

chaotic evolution rendered destruction and waste as the formative processes of the earth's own foundation. Melville presses heavenly resurrection and intelligent design back into the materiality of the tomb: an earth constituted by a chance reformation of its own dead forms.

While cataclysms on land destabilized the very grounds of life, for Melville it was the fluid and unfathomable abyss of the ocean that most embodied matter's cannibalistic power to devour human lives. It was the sinister shark that incarnated the immanent forces of destruction manifest in nature. The shark embodies the viscera of transcendentalism – manifesting by its appetite for flesh that the oversoul also has its underfangs. The black cook Fleece in *Moby-Dick* positions "Gor" (God) as "Massa Shark" (297), the owner of a plantation planet who runs a predatory system of insatiable consumption. Queequeg concurs that the God that created the shark must be "one dam Ingin" (302). Even Celio in *Clarel* asserts that the Prince of Peace taught a hypocritical ideal when he questions why "The shark thou mad'st, yet claim'st the dove" (42). Melville makes clear that Ahab projects this sharkishness to refashion the mammal Moby Dick into a malignant monster against which he crusades with defiant rage.

Over the course of his writing career, Melville regularly engaged the changing forms of earth's material reality, moving beyond scriptural notions of redemption and damnation to center on matter's immanent capacity to generate continuing life in the midst of the fatal embrace of earthly destruction. As in Whitman's "This Compost," in which the "foul meat" of decay is calmly and chemically transformed into the sweetness of leaves of grass, Melville celebrated nature's capacity to germinate anew after devastation and disaster (Whitman 341). The elms growing around the graves of Civil War battle in "Malvern Hill"

seem naturally to know that "sap the twig will fill/ Wag the world how it will, leaves must be green in spring" (*Published Poems* 50). Indeed it was the sustenance released from moss and mold – what Ishmael called the "cheerful greenness of complete decay" (*Moby-Dick* 193) – that ironically fertilized the life that continues beyond decease and desolation.

Alignment with the instinctive urge of nature itself sustained the freshness of creativity in the "dust, dearth, and din" of the earth (*Poems* 415). Melville's wondrous vision in *Moby-Dick* of the "weaver god" on the island of Tranque figures the "ceaseless industry" of the earth's "living sap" looming forth tapestries of palms and "ground vine tendrils" wound through the warp of a dead sperm whale's skeleton (449–50). Melville found "cheerful" and "charmful" vitality in the "simple grace" of unassuming plants such as catnip, aloe, hardhack, lilac, ivy, asters, and rosmarine – lowly groundlings averse to ephemeral display that naturally retained the freshness of life "in spite of the Worm" (*Poems* 335). The resilient instinct of flora to sprout shoots, tendrils, plumes, tufts, and blooms embodied Melville's own creative urge to continue writing poetry in the face of eruptions of doubt. Melville's fine unpublished poem "Pontoosuc" personifies this pagan wisdom through the visitation of a wood nymph who counters Solomon's wisdom that "All dies" with her own generative truth: "End, ever end, and forever and ever begin again!" She represents the world's lesson that death and life revolve into each other like night and day, like light dimpling shade. She embodies death in her "cold . . . rootlets" and "humid clinging mould"; yet the kiss of her "warm lips" engenders the "fragrant breath" of life (*Poems* 431-434.)

Melville's own tombstone in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx announces the generation that emerges out of annihilation, not by the Christian cross of his wife's Lizzie's

stone planted next to him after her death in 1906, but rather by a blank scroll devoid of any words, with only his name and the dates of his birth and death inscribed beneath it. Its material form embodies the final lesson Melville learned from life – not only that "The last wisdom is dumb" (*Mardi* 620), but also the continuing presence of the "vital sap" that allowed him to "centrally disport in mute calm" in the midst of decay (*Moby-Dick* 389). The living ivy growing today at the foot of Melville's stone has its monumental counterpoint in the sturdy vine whose main branch stretches in relief across the stone – its two stems with twelve leaves (one of which slightly overlaps the empty scroll) both topped with tendrils pointing upward at different heights on each side of the scroll. Beneath the empty scroll embossed over the vine are patches of live green lichen watered from tricklings from the unraveled curl at the base of the roll. Melville's final repose posthumously generates his expressed will that he "be urned in the trunk of some green tree, and even in death have the vital sap circulating round me, giving of my dead body the living foliage that shaded my peaceful tomb" (*White-Jacket* 316).

Notes

[1] This essay shares the trajectory of the reflections on the life and works Herman Melville that have been published in Timothy Marr, "Imagining Ishmael: Islamic Orientalism in America from the Puritans to Melville," Ph.D. dissertation (Yale University 1998) revised, expanded, and published as *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); "Melville's Ethnic Conscriptions," *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* (March 2001): 1-25; "Without the Pale: Melville and Ethnic Cosmopolitanism," in *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville*. Ed. Giles B. Gunn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 133-65; "Melville's Planetary Compass," *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville.* Ed. Robert S. Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[2] Islamicist idioms are best conceived as a transcultural discourse referencing Islamic history and Muslim practices whose source lies neither in the Qur'an nor in Islamic theology but rather in the cultural imagination of non-Muslims. The lower-case term *islamicism* registers this variance between orientalist codes and Islamic faith.

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