

RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Note Teaching *Moby-Dick* in the Anthropocene

by Sari Edelstein



THE WHALEMOBILE IS A REPLICA OF A REAL ADULT FEMALE HUMPBACK WHALE NAMED NILE. IMAGE BY: COLLEEN LOCKE

"There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method."

- *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville

When I decided to teach a semester-long course devoted entirely to *Moby-Dick*, I assumed the students who signed up would have a passing familiarity with the book, that they would recognize its title, know it features a white whale, maybe even be able to recite the famous first sentence of chapter one. I even naively thought they might have chosen the class *because* of their interest in whatever the title conjured, perhaps a desire for old-fashioned cultural capital or maybe an affinity for the maritime. And yet, on the first day of English 205, I realized that only three of the twenty-five students had ever heard of *Moby-Dick* at all. No one had selected the course because of a pre-existing interest in or curiosity about the text; on the contrary, the course fully enrolled mostly because it was offered during an opportune early-afternoon Tuesday/Thursday slot and satisfied the Humanities criteria for the General Education requirement with no pre-requisites.

But to be honest, this is what I wanted -- a room full of college students with no prior interest in literature. The students were drawn from multiple majors beyond English, many of them still undeclared. Half of the group was women; one was a trans/non-binary student, and the majority were students of color. The group also included queer students, veterans, immigrants, and parents. This range of subject positions and life experiences was a boon, especially given the novel's structuring interest in how meaning itself is fundamentally perspectival.

While Melville's novel is about an obsolete culture of a past economy that bears little surface relation to our own, I wanted the students to see that a massive tome about whaling, written over a hundred years ago, might offer a way of thinking about our contemporary relationship to the natural world and to one another. The course was anchored in the question: How do we read Melville's classic novel after nature: after the discovery of petroleum, after the US has become inextricably dependent on fossil fuels not only for our daily conveniences but for our notions of freedom and individualism, after we have permanently altered the atmosphere and the weather, after we have filled the ocean with trash? What does it mean to teach this book now – in a climate emergency?

I set up the course so that we would venture to different worlds, making the case that literature offers a way into many realms beyond itself. I hoped that off-campus experiences and interdisciplinary readings could simultaneously connect students to the book *and* connect the book to their everyday lives and to the urgent questions of the twenty-first century. Some of these activities were actual physical expeditions (a whale watch, a museum visit) while others were more intellectual. In this sense, the course enacted and extended the novel's own roving, promiscuous impulse, incorporating questions from other disciplines and animating Herman Melville's encyclopedic ambitions.

Jettisoning chronology, I divided the syllabus into conceptual units, each emphasizing a different world or vantage point, which included the historical, the oceanic, the animal, the literary, the ecological. The syllabus paired chapters of the novel with readings that moved from contemporary poetry to economic history to gender studies. I realized that I could not ask students to contemplate *Moby-Dick* and resource extraction without simultaneously learning something about the fossil fuel industry (which fueled our whale watch). Nor could we read the ocean as a material space (not merely a metaphor) without coming to understand more about the science and stakes of ocean acidification. For me, it felt just as experimental to invite the present onto the syllabus as it did to allow science into our discussions, not as a straw man but as a viable paradigm and source of knowledge. As Priscilla Wald and Wai-Chee Dimock forcefully put it, "Science illiteracy is no longer an option for humanists."¹ In a state of climate emergency, we cannot afford such willful ignorance; there is an ethical demand to recognize and wrestle with what we have done to the planet and to consider the uneven consequences of this abuse.

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Beyond expanding the methodological scope, I moved beyond the parameters of the traditional classroom. As we waded into the cetology chapters, I invited an expert in cetacean conservation, to inflate her life-size humpback whale in the university's Campus Center – and that afternoon, my class actually took place inside the whale, where we learned about whale biology, the crucial role of whales in oxygenating the oceanic ecosystem, and the massive and ongoing threat that fishing lines pose to marine mammals. Sitting inside the whale, we were in a position to consider the interconnectedness of marine life forms with terrestrial ones and to take the whale's body seriously as a biological reality not merely a figure for something else.

I was struck by a student's observation as we reached the end of the novel. The Pequod encounters another whaling ship, called the Rachel, whose captain is beside himself with grief and worry as his young son is lost at sea; he frantically begs the Pequod's crew to help search for the boy: "My boy, my own boy is among them. For God's sake—I beg, I conjure"—here exclaimed the stranger Captain to Ahab, who thus far had but icily received his petition. 'For eight-and-forty hours let me charter your ship—I will gladly pay for it, and roundly pay for it—if there be no other way—for eight-and-forty hours only—only that—you must, oh, you must, and you *shall* do this thing.'"

One of my students noticed that in this short interaction (a "gam" in whaling parlance), the word "stranger" is used more than eleven times to describe the desperate captain.

But the even more noteworthy aspect of this repetition is that Ahab is actually acquainted with this other captain; he is not, in fact, a stranger. As Melville writes, "Immediately he was recognized by Ahab for a Nantucketer he knew. But no formal salutation was exchanged." Thus, they are neighbors, landsmen from the same island, not strangers at all. Ahab's use of this word then signifies a willful misrecognition, and his rejection of the other captain's desperate plea is often read as his final abandonment of humanity – and the harbinger of his destruction.

But I would add that its more than just Ahab's lack of sympathy on display here: this culminating scene lays bare the social consequences of ecological exploitation: all lives, human and more-than-human are devalued, rendered disposable, in an economy premised on slaughter and slavery. An orientation of care itself comes to seem *strange* in a culture so deeply structured by violence, profit, and individualism. This scene thus offers a point of entry into and a way of thinking about what Margret Grebowicz calls the "simultaneity and co-creation of environmental and social loss."²

After Ahab's refusal, Captain Gardiner's ship moves on; it is "seen to yaw hither and thither . . . this way and that way her yards were swung around." This mode of sailing contrasts with that of the Pequod as it obsessively zeroes in on *Moby-Dick*, setting the course for its destruction, and eventually, it is Gardiner's ship, the Rachel, described as "deviously cruising," which rescues Ishmael in the final pages of the novel. The non-linear, desultory movement of this ship is thus lifesaving, though it seems unfocused and incoherent, out of step with the pursuit and profit orientation of other ships. Ishmael's survival thus underscores the point that "our planetary fate—whatever we do or however we identify—is yoked to the agency of strangers (human and nonhuman)," as Sarah Ensor puts it.³ In other words, our collective fate is tied to other human and more-than-human lives.

Within a university-industrial complex structured on disciplinary partitions, on coverage, on accelerated pathways to graduation, there is perhaps something strange about spending a whole semester on a single book, "deviously cruising" from biological science to literary history, from whale watches to close reading. But the unmapped, wandering course of Captain Gardiner's ship might offer a useful model for ecological thinking and pedagogical practice. Such devious movement can create the conditions for engagement and consequently for an ethical relationship to the living world. A slower pace necessarily offers an alternative to a curriculum of passive consumption and can encourage students to think critically – perhaps for the first time – about their own consumption habits (academic and otherwise) and the ways that those choices are often constrained or made for them by others.

In the last three weeks of course, I gave students the opportunity to pursue questions and topics of their own choosing in small groups. Where the midterm essay required

them to look deeply into the text (and to write a more traditional literary analysis), this final project asked them to pursue a line of inquiry borne out of the novel. Their presentations included biographies of little-known African American whaling captains, a report on the continued consumption of whale products in spite of the international ban on whale hunting, an analysis of *Moby-Dick* paraphernalia in popular culture (including the prevalence of *Moby-Dick* tattoos), an investigation into the history and ethics of whale tourism, and an exploration of how the ambergris chapter might shed light on Western complicity with the exploitative labor practices that produce iPhones. Collectively, they came to see how the lust for whale oil created the conditions for our contemporary reliance on oil, to see how the ostensible progress of civilization depends upon a genealogy of resource extraction, conquest, and violence. And while *Moby-Dick* makes that violence visible, even erotic, late capitalism often conceals it.

By the end of the course, we had been on a journey together: a voyage deep into the novel's philosophical questions and preoccupations, but we had also traveled outward into new realms where I was far from the expert. *Moby-Dick* offered us not only a prehistory of petro-capitalism but a meditation on ecological relationality and dependence. To teach *Moby-Dick* in the Anthropocene, then, is to look in many directions: back at the historical moment that commodified the natural world on a vast, global scale; forward at a future that will involve mass extinction and dislocation; and at the present, a time when we still have the opportunity to change course, to recognize other living beings not as strangers but as neighbors.

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Notes

1. Wai Chee Dimock and Priscilla Wald, "Preface: Literature and Science: Cultural Form: Conceptual Exchanges." *American Literature* 74.4 (December 2002): 75.
2. Margret Grebowicz, *Whale Song* (New York: Bloomsbury), 2017.
3. Sarah Ensor, "Queer Fallout: Samuel R. Delany and the Ecology of Cruising." *Environmental Humanities* 9.1 (2017): 149–166.



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