Viewing Moby-Dick through the Lens of the Charles W. Morgan

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Viewing *Moby-Dick* through the Lens of the *Charles W. Morgan*

I was fortunate to be on the second leg of the 38th Voyage of the *Charles W. Morgan*, an outbound reach from Newport, Rhode Island, to Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts. I chose this leg of the voyage because it would overlap the course Melville sailed aboard the *Acushnet* and then follow in the imaginary wake of the packet schooner, *Moss*, which carried Ishmael and Queequeg from New Bedford to Nantucket. When the *Morgan* crossed the mouth of Buzzard’s Bay and sailed up Vineyard Sound, it would traverse both the actual and the imaginary routes Melville traveled and perhaps provide an opportunity, in the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne in “The Custom-House,” for “each [to] imbue itself with the nature of the other” (Hawthorne, *Library of America Collected Novels*, 149). To what extent would the historically accurate workings of a whaleship help me better understand the aesthetics of an epic novel that was inspired by the business of whaling? To answer this question, I planned to stage readings of passages from *Moby-Dick* that could be associated with material aspects of the ship and to capture video that could be embedded in an online module designed to supplement a range of courses in which *Moby-Dick* is taught at my institution, and perhaps beyond.

My initial goals were modest: to create video illustrations for chapters like “The Line” or “The Try-Works,” while having other voyagers and crew members read relevant passages from these chapters in real time. This was primarily an experiment in pedagogy designed to discover the extent to which the *Morgan* could be used as a material source for understanding Melville’s novel. I intended to treat the *Morgan* as a source for *Moby-Dick*, but I learned that Melville’s novel is itself a potent source for scholars, informing and inspiring their work across a range of disciplines. When I described my project to the other eight voyagers onboard, I was surprised to learn that five of them had brought along their personal copies of *Moby-Dick*. More surprising still, each person had a favorite chapter that referenced source elements related to their own scholarly interests. The cetology chapters embody what I call an aesthetic of curiosity: these chapters mark moments when a range of intellectual pursuits intersect and inform one another, fueling the sort of critical, speculative thinking that leads to innovation.
For example, Jason Smith, a historian interested in how cartography was used to define the ocean in commercial and strategic terms, was excited to read from chapter 44, “The Chart.” With a sea chest to serve as desk, and a variety of props including navigational charts “borrowed” from the Captain’s quarters, a sextant and compass, and a copy of Nathaniel Bowditch’s *American Practical Navigator*, Jason read up through the footnote describing the chart prepared by Lieutenant Matthew Fontaine Maury that recorded sightings of right and sperm whales.

Joe Forbrich, a playwright and actor, gave an intense reading of the section of chapter 45, “The Affadavit,” that references Owen Chase’s *Narrative of the Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex*. Joe’s most recent work, a play that dramatically brings to life Chase’s story of survival, was due to premiere the following night at the Martha’s Vineyard Playhouse, and he grabbed my battered copy of *Moby-Dick* eager to find the passage that showed his and Melville’s common inspiration: “I have seen Owen Chase, who was chief mate of the Essex at the time of the tragedy; I have read his plain and faithful narrative; I have conversed with his son; and all this within a few miles of the scene of the catastrophe” (NN Moby-Dick 206).
Jamie Jones, a cultural critic interested in the history of whaling, read movingly from chapter 87, “The Grand Armada.” Jamie’s research focuses on the cultural afterlife of the whaling industry, and she is especially interested in how the 38th Voyage informs the meaning we can make out of whaling history in 2014. We spoke about the significance of the Morgan’s day sails from Provincetown to the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary, a feeding ground for several species of whale native to New England’s waters, as symbolic of ongoing conservation efforts to rectify the over-fishing of the world’s oceans. She chose to read the passage in which the crew of Starbuck’s whaleboat witness “young Leviathan amours of the deep,” a moment that reveals the novel’s nascent concern to check our urge to treat the natural world as a resource rather than a living environment (NN Moby-Dick 338).

Perhaps the most gratifying moment occurred when I asked three members of the crew, deckhands Joee Patterson and Ryan Loftus and second mate Sean Bercaw, to read in sequence the several paragraphs in chapter 1, “Loomings,” in which Ishmael relates why he goes to sea “as a simple sailor, right before the mast” (NN Moby-Dick 5). These three are seasoned sailors of tall ships, two of whom told me they had never read Moby-Dick. Yet Melville’s sentences resonated with their lived experience, and knowing smiles and laughs were shared by their shipmates when Ishmael explained the difference between paid sailors and paying passengers. When second mate Sean Bercaw, who was often on the receiving end of sharp commands from the first mate Sam Sikkema, finished reading the paragraph that begins “What of it, if some old hunks of a sea-captain orders me to get a broom and sweep down the decks? What does that indignity amount to, weighed, I mean, in the scales of the New Testament?” (NN Moby-Dick 6), one of his crew offered the low-key comment “That was a really appropriate passage for you.” Sean agreed; “Yes, it was . . . the universal thump.” The camaraderie of shared labor was palpable, the fellowship that knows “all hands should rub each other’s shoulder-blades, and be content.” Such community was the ultimate lesson I learned from the 38th Voyage. Community in work, both physical and intellectual, feeds a deeper curiosity in the world, and experiencing Moby-Dick on the decks of the Charles W. Morgan brought this truth home in ways that will inform my teaching and scholarship for years to come.

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