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The Nonhuman in Literature

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Unlikely Couples: Queer Interspecies Entanglement in *Moby Dick*

In “Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species,” Anna Tsing builds on Donna Haraway’s concept of the companion species to claim that tracking human interactions with mushrooms allows us to understand how humans and nonhuman animals, plants, and fungi have historically, and in the present day, co-created each other. “What if we imagined a human nature that shifted historically together with varied webs of interspecies dependence?” Tsing asks, emphasizing that “*Human nature is an interspecies relationship*” (144). For Tsing, human-mushroom interactions are particularly fertile places to find evidence of interdependence and entanglement because mushrooms grow at the seams of society, in liminal places between different kinds of land. The way fungi spores travel, spread, and form symbiotic bonds with lichens and plant roots also offers Tsing a potent model for thinking about empire and colonialism. By zeroing in on the small spores, the mushrooms growing on the roadside, Tsing finds a way to localize what she calls “the universal” — global forces that are too large to conceptualize but that nonetheless materialize in specific, differential ways across local environments. The main framework, that “human nature is an interspecies relationship,” thus becomes endlessly portable and useful for thinking about all sorts of situations outside of the microbial. One unlikely example of how Tsing’s multispecies landscapes can be extended is perhaps to be found in Herman Melville’s 1851 novel *Moby Dick*. Like Tsing, Melville is deeply interested in what happens on the fringes of capitalist societies: Tsing goes off-road to pick mushrooms, Melville’s characters go out to sea to catch whales. I think it’s worthwhile thinking about these two together, and asking what Melville’s novel might contribute to Tsing’s understanding of how we have always been more-than-human.

In the first chapters of *Moby Dick*, however, before they go out to sea at all, Melville spends a long time setting the scene: describing what a costal fishing town is like, explaining the cultural make-up of crews, noting the lingo and habits of sailors. After all, “New Bedford is a queer place,” and the reader has to be initiated into its queerness, as does the narrator, Ishmael (34). Ishmael also becomes part of the whaling world through being introduced to Queequeg, already an established harpooner. In Chapter Three, “The Spouter-Inn,” Ishmael and Queequeg meet in circumstances that, like New Bedford, can only be considered as very queer. Due to the high occupancy of the inn, the innkeeper, Peter Coffin, tells Ishmael that he can stay if he agrees to share a bed with one of the harpooners. The amount of anxiety that Ishmael has about this simple proposition serves simultaneously as comic relief and as signaling that Ishmael is quite isolated and unused to intimacy with other people: “No man prefers to sleep two in a bed,” he says, as if presenting a universal truth. “I don’t know how it is, but people like to be private when they are sleeping” (16). Ishmael’s uncomfortableness is compounded by the fact that he knows nothing about this strange harpooner. To calm his fears about sharing the bed Coffin tells Ishmael that it is quite large, a fact he knows first-hand because it used to belong to him and his wife: “There’s plenty room for two to kick about in that bed; it’s an almighty big bed that” (20). Before Queequeg even arrives, Ishmael’s nervous anticipation and the innkeeper’s labeling of the bed as a matrimonial bower set the stage for this encounter to be significant, plot-wise. Mostly for comical purposes, but also I think in a deep structural way, Ishmael is positioned in the narrative as an uneasy bachelor waiting to wed his bride: after his first night with Queequeg, they will be entangled for the rest of the novel, and neither will be quite the same person they were before.

When Queequeg and Ishmael finally do meet, Ishmael must immediately confront his reaction to the racial and cultural differences between them. He is at first put-off by Queequeg’s “unearthly complexion” and “squares of tattooing,” as well as practices of cannibalism, head-shrinking, and a religious ritual involving a small wooden icon (22). Being in physical proximity to such foreignness scares him: “this wild cannibal, tomahawk between his teeth, sprang into bed with me,” he says, with some approbation (25). Not only is their sharing a bed queer, it’s also miscegenous — and it’s the racial difference, not phobia of same-sex affection, that initially bothers Ishmael. Despite this first shock, Ishmael eventually calms down, and reminds himself that “the man’s a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him” (26). But it’s notable that Queequeg’s humanity is solidified or restored in Ishmael’s eyes by sharing a bed in a queered parody of marriage, as if the queer intimacy that they share allow racial difference to be elided. Waking to find Queequeg’s arm thrown over him, Ishmael says, “You had almost thought I had been his wife” (26). While Ishmael says he makes “loud and incessant expostulations upon the unbecomingness of his hugging a fellow male in that matrimonial sort of style,” the tone of the scene is utterly charming, and it is clear that this is the beginning of a compelling relationship between the two, one predicated on interdependence and intimacy despite fundamental cultural differences (29).

Dwelling on this first encounter between Queequeg and Ishmael is valuable because it provides a predecessor for thinking about other relationships throughout *Moby Dick*. In particular, the way matrimonial language is deployed in this scene as a way to talk about connection that is not literally marriage but are nonetheless important. The text is full of queer connections and unusual pairings; parallel to Queequeg and Ishmael, we might consider the identification of the crew with the boat, and the odd couple of Ahab and the titular whale. In the last few chapters of the book, as the *Pequod* enters into its series of encounters and then final battle with Moby Dick, resonances of the language that describes Queequeg and Ishamel’s first meeting occur continually. As Stubb gets into the heat of the chase, he exclaims, “‘this swift motion of the deck creeps up one’s legs and tingles at the heart. This ship and I are two brave fellows!—Ha ha! […] for by live-oaks! my spine’s a keel’” (585). At first Stubbs records simply feeling intimately affected by the movement of the ship, then anthropomorphizes the ship as a “brave fellow,” and finally claims kinship with the ship by saying parts of his body have *become* ship-like. Whether the ship is becoming human or the human is becoming ship, from Stubb’s perspective at least, cross-identification is happening, and through the queer encounter of the chase, a new category of relationship between the sailor and the ship develops.

The whale itself, Moby Dick, is also described in the chapter “The First Chase,” as being in on the queer joke. In the first part of the pursuit, the whale seems to toy with Ahab and the other whalers, teasing them by appearing briefly and then disappearing back underneath the waves. As the text represents it, the whale spontaneously controls its own visibility, apparently both aware of its pursuers and deliberately leading them on. In one passage where the whale allows the crew to see it, the language of marriage comes across very clearly:

A gentle joyousness—a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness, invested the gliding whale. Not the white bull Jupiter swimming away with ravished Europa clinging to his graceful horns; his lovely, leering eyes sideways intent upon the maid; with smooth bewitching fleetness, rippling straight for the nuptial bower in Crete; nor Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam. (576)

Here the whale’s mannerisms, and the adjectives used to describe it — gentle, mild, gliding — belie its history and future of violently attacking humans: Moby Dick is a suave and slippery performer. The reference to the abduction and rape of Europa by Zeus in the form of a bull works on a double level, on the one hand making an analogy between the ship (abductee) and the whale (abductor), and on the other hand humorously raising the possibility that the whale might, like Zeus, be another entity only wearing the form of the whale for this particular excursion. In this space where the possibility of Moby Dick as a metamorphosing spirit and a seducer emerges, so to does the language of marriage: when the whale has so playfully reversed the power dynamics of the hunter and the hunted, it is represented here not as a victory in battle, but as a “nuptial bower.” Just as Queequeg and Ishmael are represented as having been “married” in the novel’s opening, the ship and the whale seem to be becoming linked in a similar way as the novel concludes. Instead of heterosexual reproduction, the “marriage” between the ship and the whale leads to total death, destruction, and the dissolution of categories, so that everything ends up “spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex” (604). In its final instantiation, queer co-creation leads to the final mixing together of people, animals, and things.

However, like Tsing’s beloved mushrooms growing on the site of the Chernobyl reactor, something in Melville’s novel survives the catastrophe: the narrative itself. The survival of Ishmael, which allows the story to be told, signals resilience in the face of the total destruction, as well as investment in the novel’s queer states. For Tsing, the mushrooms that remain after nuclear disasters are both sign-posts for danger and hopeful beacons that life can continue. In *Moby Dick*, queerness, interracial friendship and love, cyborg identity, and communication with nonhuman animals are all forms of entanglement that seek to mediate difference. For both, interspecies entanglement is inevitable. It’s not enough to read Queequeg and Ishmael’s relationship as queer: their queerness creates space for and works in tandem with the final interactions between the crew, Ahab, the ship, and the white whale.

Works Cited

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Tsing, Anna. "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species." *Environmental Humanities* 1 (2012): 141-54. *JSTOR*. Web.