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| The Whale as an Object:  Examining the Subject/Object Relationship in  Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* |
| **Honors Thesis** |

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All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him.

–Captain Ahab, *Moby Dick* (177; ch. 36)

**Embodied Signification**

Captain Ahab speaks these words to his doubt-ridden first mate, Starbuck, in the 36th chapter of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. In this scene, Ahab reveals his true design for the *Pequod*’s voyage: to find and kill Moby Dick, the whale that severed Ahab’s leg. Traditionally, this passage has been read as Ahab’s questioning whether or not the white whale consciously, maliciously intended to maim him, whether his mutilation had significance beyond a simple random attack. The whale’s physical exterior, it seems to Ahab, belies some secret, sinister force pervading throughout it...or perhaps this essence does not exist at all. No matter to Ahab; whether this malignity is imagined or not, he intends to hunt the whale and smash through the “pasteboard mask” of its body, unearthing its interior (if indeed it has an interior) and killing it in the process. To Ahab, the whale is a source of perplexity, frustration, and spiritual turmoil. But it may also provide him with an outlet through which he can purge these things.

It should stand as common knowledge that Moby Dick is the object of Ahab’s hatred. But what exactly do we mean when we say “object”? The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists 10 different definitions for the word “object,” many of which describe Ahab’s relationship with the whale. The first entry reads thusly: “Originally: something placed before or presented to the eyes or other senses” (“object, n.”). The whale is a “visible object” placed before Ahab’s senses, thus provoking his scrutiny. An object may be a “goal, purpose, or aim; the end to which effort is directed; the thing sought, aimed at, or striven for”; or similarly, a “person or thing to which a specified action, thought, or feeling is directed (“object, n.”). Certainly the whale is Ahab’s unwavering end, his “fixed purpose” (183; ch. 37), and the recipient of his fury. Perhaps most crucially, though, the whale is a “thing which is perceived, thought of, known, etc.; *spec.* a thing which is external to or distinct from the apprehending mind, subject, or self” (“object, n.”). Ahab and the whale are discrete beings, inhabiting separate bodies. Physically and psychically, the whale is not a part of him, so although Ahab can perceive the whale, he can never truly *know* it inside and out. But what can one make of this partition between the whale and Ahab? Is it an unshakable boundary, a prison wall that resists all thrusting? Or is it thin and flimsy, breakable as a pasteboard mask? Or perhaps it is the very solidity of the boundary that *invites* thrusting, challenges a defiant Ahab to demolish it. If indeed the seeming impenetrableness of the whale’s boundaries is what “tasks” and “heaps” (178; ch. 36) Ahab, then the prison wall, paradoxically, may turn out to be an open door: an open door that joins the two together.

But why would Ahab desire to be united with an object he claims to hate above all else? As Sharon Cameron postulates in her book *The Corporeal Self*, it may not be the *whale* Ahab hates, but rather what the whale embodies. Cameron paints a portrait of Ahab as a man in the midst of an identity crisis, not simply asking who *he* is, but what the *self* is, and where it begins and ends. “What lies within the self, what outside? What connects inside to outside, and…can the place of connection be fixed? These,” says Cameron, “are precisely Ahab’s questions” (23). Ahab is one self, one perceiving subject, in a world full of objects, of things not “made of [his] [substance]” and “thus, by definition, alien” (Cameron 24). What’s more, Ahab is an incomplete self, in more ways than one: hence his missing leg (Cameron 24), and hence his need to “[thrust] through the wall” (Melville 177; ch. 36) separating himself from the beings around him. Destroying the boundary between the self—the subject—and the object world allows for two possibilities of “completion,” one of them being that the outward world can flow inward, “filling” the subject. As Ahab describes his plans for building his ideal man to the carpenter, he queries, “[S]hall I order eyes to see outwards? No, but put a sky-light on top of his head to illuminate inwards” (512; ch. 108). To see the world through eyes is merely to perceive it from across the void between subject and objects, to see the “pasteboard mask” of appearances. But to bypass the eyes all together is to absorb the world, to “strike through the mask.” “Not being separate would replace knowledge,” and “[b]eing would replace cognition” (Cameron 25). To erase the mediating eyes is to be *of* the world, not merely *in* it—and to be completed by a world that becomes indistinguishable from the self.

Alternatively, to break the barrier between the internal self and the external world is to allow what’s inside to flow outside, even to conquer and assimilate what is outside and *make* it part of the inside. This concept is perhaps nowhere better literalized than in “The Quarter-Deck,” in which Ahab offers the measure to the crew and ceremonially enlists them in his quest to kill the whale. As Ahab orders the mates to cross their harpoons, Ishmael comments that it “seemed as though, by some nameless, interior volition, he [Ahab] would fain have shocked into them the same fiery emotion accumulated within the Leyden jar of his own magnetic life” (180; ch. 36). Per Ishmael, it is not merely that Ahab inspires fervor in his crew; he actually *transfers* his own intensity to them, pours it into the men via “spirits [that] were simultaneously quaffed with a hiss” (181; ch. 36). “Spirits” has a double meaning here: both “Ahab’s non-corporeal essence” and “the actual grog the men drink” (Cameron 33). When Ahab appoints Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask to be “cupbearers” for the three harpooners, he says to the mates, “I do not order ye; ye will it” (180; ch. 36) because Ahab’s will and the crew’s will have become one. Through “drinking Ahab’s spirit,” the crew becomes an extension of Ahab’s own will, another living appendage moved by his volition.

It is easy to see Ahab’s purpose in permeating the boundaries of his crewmembers, igniting his own mad passion in them: the more hands and hearts against Moby Dick, the better. His relationship with Moby Dick, however, is more complicated. While Ahab’s mission is to find and kill the whale, his fixation upon the whale’s destruction is more of a symptom than a cause—and has very little to do with the whale itself. The whale, as Ishmael points out, is only important to Ahab as an avatar, not because of any inherent value or property. According to Ishmael, Ahab “came to identify with him [the whale], not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them” (200; ch. 41). “[A]ll evil, to crazy Ahab,” continues Ishmael, “was visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick” (200; ch. 41). It is not the whale as an object that Ahab hates...but the whale, as an object, provides a convenient vessel into which he can discharge his frustrations, sorrows, and miseries. The whale, in other words, is a tool for exorcism: an opportunity for Ahab to extend beyond himself and deposit those parts of himself he dislikes in another body—a body that can be destroyed.

Ahab, then, pays very little heed to boundaries, whether those boundaries be his own or others’. On one hand, he longs to dissolve his own boundaries, the boundaries of his self regulated by the boundary of his body, and let the outside world fill him to completion. Conversely but not paradoxically, he also insists on breaching others’ boundaries to make their bodies extensions of himself, effectively erasing those beings’ identities and replacing them with his own. More than the whale itself, it is this overbearing, overreaching project of Ahab’s that frightens Ishmael. Ishmael fears Ahab as a destroyer of barriers between subjects and object and a usurper of those objects’ meanings, and his fear of Ahab is echoed in his fear of white light. Ishmael devotes Chapter 42, “The Whiteness of the Whale,” to delineating his thoughts on the color white. He suggests at various points that whiteness has some innate power to terrify, much as a “young, strong colt, foaled in some peaceful valley in Vermont, far removed from all beasts of prey” reacts violently when exposed to the smell of a buffalo’s musk (211; ch. 42). “There is no remembrance in him [the colt] of any gorings of wild creatures in his green northern home, so that the strange muskiness he smells cannot recall to him anything associates with the experience of former perils” (211; ch. 42). Even so, says Ishmael, this instance shows, “even in a dumb brute, the instinct of the knowledge of the demonism in the world” (211; ch. 42). Whiteness, as Ishmael goes on to say, is for him “as the shaking of that buffalo robe to the frightened colt” (211; ch. 42): it carries an intrinsic horror that affects everyone, regardless of culture or prior experience. Though neither Ishmael nor the colt “know where lie the nameless things of which the mystic sign gives forth such hints; yet with me [Ishmael], as with the colt, somewhere those things must exist” (211; ch. 42). Whiteness, in other words, must exist coherently on its own.

Because of this indefinite, unsettling quality, whiteness, “coupled with any object terrible in itself,” may “heighten that terror to the furthest bounds” (205; ch. 42). It would be insufficient to say, however, that Ishmael is alarmed solely by what whiteness *does*; he is also unsettled by what whiteness *is*. “[I]n essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors” (212; ch. 42). White is both everything and nothing at the same time, Ishmael tells us, “a dumb blankness, full of meaning” (212; ch. 42). But although white light is invisible to the eye, we can see no colors without it. “[A]ll other earthly hues,” says Ishmael, “are but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot” (212; ch. 42). No object in the world simply *is* the color it appears to be, but only gains its visible color by virtue of reflecting white light, “the mystical cosmetic” which “for ever remains white or colourless in itself” (212; ch. 42). “[P]ondering this,” Ishmael concludes, “the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear coloured and colouring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him” (212; ch. 42). Without white light, that extra agent added on top of objects to make them comprehensible to us, Ishmael postulates that the world would be a barren landscape of white nothingness. But a world without color is a world empty of all meaning, one in which none could stand to live without going insane. “And of all these things,” concludes Ishmael, “the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?” (212; ch. 42).

But even Ishmael’s fear of the white whale’s implications turns out to be a reflection of his fear of Ahab’s overriding subjectivity. For if color—and if *meaning*—is not inherent to any object in the world but must be granted from without, then what ground has Ishmael to say that Ahab is wrong, that he can’t force the whale to carry his own meaning? At nearly every turn, it seems Ishmael is making some sort of effort to determine what a whale is. He collects various names for the animal in “Etymologies” and scattered references to whales in literature in “Extracts.” He devises his own “scientific” nomenclature for various species of whales in “Cetology” and examines whales in artists’ depictions. He spends entire chapters contemplating the whale from nose to tail, from skin to skeleton, from spout to grandissimus. And while he fails, ultimately, to define the whale or peel back its physical layers until he hits a meaning, Ishmael’s quest to determine, once and for all, what a whale *is* may be an effort to rescue it from Ahab, to grant it a prior meaning that resists being overwritten. Whereas Ahab wants to “thrust through the wall” separating himself from other objects, Ishmael wants to protect and preserve this wall, thereby protecting and preserving the whale, the crew, and the world from tyrannical Ahab and others like him.

But what makes Ishmael so sure that Ahab is indeed a tyrant? We know what Ahab has done: extended himself beyond his boundaries as a subject to reinscribe the meaning of objects separate from and beyond him. Must we call this, however, an insidious and tyrannical act? What if, instead, we deemed Ahab’s appropriation of objects beyond his own borders an expression of freedom? Ahab, after all, refuses to be beholden to objects, and in so doing frees himself from the responsibility of heeding their borders while allowing himself to grant the whale his own meaning. Per Ishmael, of course, this refusal constitutes a violation, an invasion and forcible upheaval of a fixed and stable thing. Ishmael conceives of himself as a crusader for the object… but we may just as easily turn around and see *him* as the tyrant who would have us all subjugated to the object. Who, then, is the liberator and who is the oppressor? More generally, is it more important that we liberate the subject or preserve the object? What are the benefits of both, and what are the consequences? These questions surface not only in *Moby Dick*, but also in contemporary literary theory and even in digital rhetoric. Which do we hear when we listen to a recording: a speaker or a voice? Who makes a text: the author or the reader? Does the way we view a text reflect the way we view different socioeconomic classes? And can the dead sing? As disparate as these questions may seem, they—and the tensions in *Moby Dick*—all have roots in the same dilemma: ought the boundaries between subjects and objects to be open or closed, if indeed those boundaries exist at all?

**Meaningless Texts, Meaningless Disparities**

Like Ishmael, literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels desires a very strong and clear dividing line between subject and object—in this case, between reader and text, and this line, says Michaels, takes the form of the author’s intention. Taking a stance against subjectivity, Michaels rejects the viewpoint that a single text can mean something different to every reader. As he states in his book *The Shape of the Signifier*, “the claim that text means nothing will turn out to have exactly the same cash value as the claim that it means different things to different people” (8). Michaels equates multiplicity with emptiness; if we say that a text can mean many different things, we must sacrifice the notion that it *has* a meaning. “And you find yourself committed to the primacy of the subject position,” continues Michaels, “because the question of what’s there [in the text] will always turn out to be...a question of what’s there to you, a question about what you see” (11). For Michaels, a text’s meaning comes from the author’s intention and the author’s intention alone. To be clear, though, it is not that Michaels believes any text possesses an objectively true meaning; what he is advocating is merely an approach—specifically, that we approach a text with the aim of uncovering what its author meant, because “if the meaning of the text exists independent of the reader, it makes no sense to think that it can change from reader to reader” (Michaels 114). Per Michaels, the only way a text’s meaning can vary from subject to subject is if it means nothing at all—and the only way it can mean nothing at all is if it is composed not of signs, but of marks.

The difference between a sign and a mark (or what Michaels calls a “shape”), of course, is that a mark carries no meaning. Thus, according to him, “the emergence of the shape of the signifier as constitutive of the identity of the text” gives birth to “every account of literary texts that imagines they can have more than one meaning or, more particularly, that imagines they can mean something other than what their authors intended” (61). If a text is made of marks, says Michaels, then not only does it make sense for it to mean something different to everybody, it makes *no* sense for the text to have one meaning. And if a text has no meaning, then for Michaels, it ceases to exist. “The minute we see no point in asking whether we got a text right or wrong,” he says, “we cease to understand ourselves as interpreting the text at all and begin to understand ourselves as instead registering its effects on us” (76). In other words, according to Michaels, if we say that a text is nothing but empty marks, then when we read it, we are answering questions not about the text, but about *ourselves*; we are not so much interpreting as we are experiencing, and each unique subject is bound to experience the text differently. Hence, when people have different ideas about the same text, it is not so much that they disagree over the meaning. They simply differ. “[T]he difference between what you see and what I see,” explains Michaels, “is just the difference between where you’re standing and where I’m standing—literally, a difference in subject position” (10).

According to Michaels, this position of having all differences and no disagreements is not only problematic, but downright dangerous. Our near-total reliance on “difference[s] without disagreements” (64), claims Michaels, entails devastating social consequences, and according to him, this is nowhere more obvious than in our fixation on multiculturalism. “Cultures, in theory if not always in practice, are equal; classes, in theory and in practice are not” (Michaels 17). No one’s culture is right or wrong, and we live in a world with many cultures by respecting and appreciating their differences. But for Michaels, the same respect for differences that drives multiculturalism“has also become a primary technology for disarticulating difference from inequality” and a “way of learning to live with inequality” (17) because it convinces us that to *view* the lower classes as equal is to *make* them equal. Merely seeing the poor differently, however, won’t change either their condition or the forces making them poor. “It’s one thing to celebrate Black History Month; it’s another thing to redistribute wealth,” quips Michaels (168). If all we can do is appreciate the differences between classes, says Michaels, then we have no way to argue that class hierarchies are *wrong*—and certainly no way to dismantle those hierarchies.

This inability to condemn inequality, says Michaels, points to yet another threat posed by eliminating the wall between subject and object: if we have no fixed and stable object on which to base interpretations, then how can we defend or attack *any* interpretation of it? According to Michaels, “it is only the idea that something that is true must be true for everyone that makes disagreement between anyone” possible (31). If no interpretation (or as Michaels would say, if no experience) of a text reflects or even attempts to reflect some “right” meaning, then, reasons Michaels, it must follow that one interpretation is as valid as the next, and that one cannot be better (or more “correct”) than another. If this is so, if we have no way of proving that one viewpoint is true while another is false, then for Michaels, right and wrong evaporate completely, leaving us with no means whatsoever with which to build and refute arguments. Without coherent objects which we either interpret correctly or incorrectly, all we are left with, says Michaels, are differing subjects. All we have left is Ahab.

**Voice: The Speaking Subject**

Heretofore, we have been examining a critic who holds that a rigid, solid split between subjects and objects builds the foundation for a just society. Although digital rhetoric scholar Erin Anderson is more concerned with enabling creative expression than obtaining social justice, she nonetheless engages with the same pull between subject and object that Michaels does. Anderson, however, offers a very different response to this debate. In an attempt to expound and more firmly situate voice’s role within sonic rhetoric and digital composing, she works to revise, or rather update, the way in which both speakers and digital composers relate to voice. In her article “Toward a Resonant Material Vocality for Digital Composition,” she posits that holding onto voice “as a function of authorship, personhood, and identity” places restrictive burdens on our use of digital voices in composing; thus her aim is to “[open] up vast archives of recorded voices to practices of manipulation and invention.” To achieve this end, Anderson challenges previous conceptions of what voice is, what voice does, and how speakers (subjects) are related to the voices (objects) they produce. Firstly, Anderson maintains that voice is neither equivalent to language nor merely “a means to an end of rational speech and linguistic meaning.” Rather, quoting Mladen Dolar, she suggests that we think of voice as “the material element [of speech] recalcitrant to meaning.” Secondly, Anderson complicates voice’s seemingly straightforward relationship to the human body. “While the voice undoubtedly comes from the human body,” says Anderson, “it also inevitably *leaves that body behind*” (emphasis Anderson’s). Per Anderson, this fact unsettles the notion that voices are “either...the rightful possession of a unique human body or...the authentic expression of a unique human subject.” Drawing on Steven Connor, she poses instead that “my voice is not something that I merely have, or even something that I, if only in part, am. Rather, it is something that I do. A voice is not a condition, nor yet an attribute, but an event. It is less something that exists than something which occurs.” Neither a possession nor a form of “unmediated access to the self,” the voice, holds Anderson, is more like an event.

Anderson further elaborates on this concept by borrowing Pierre Schaeffer’s principle of “acousmatic sound,” which “insists that we take up sounds not as secondary properties of their sources but as objects in themselves, which can be experienced independently of their sources.” “To consider voices as ‘properties,’” says Anderson, “is to subordinate them to their bodies of origin, but to reconsider voices instead as ‘effects’ allows us to account for their causal relationship to the bodies that speak them, while allowing them a valid existence *beyond* those bodies.” If we stop being preoccupied with asking from *whom* a voice comes and focus instead on what a voice *does*, no longer are we primarily concerned with representing the speaker’s original intentions; instead, we may ask how this voice can be used. “Under this framework,” concludes Anderson, “digital voice becomes not simply a hazard, but rather a resource: a performative material with potential to act and to affect in its own right.” This revised concept of voice as event rather than property may seem trivial, even unnecessary, as long as the conversation remains fixed on live voices. When it comes to recorded voices, however, the “notion of voice-as-effect becomes more immediately accessible, expanding our abilities...to compose with voice as a malleable material” (Anderson). If voice is merely an effect, a performance devoid of deep metaphysical ties to bodies and selves, then why not compose with pre-recorded digital voices? Why not speak through the voice of another?

**Prophecy and Performativity**

If Ahab and Anderson appear uncomfortably similar in their treatment of objects as extensions of subjects, what, then, is the difference between them? One way we might answer: prophecy. After indoctrinating the crew into his war on Moby Dick, Ahab sits in his cabin and remembers the prophecy foretold to him by Fedallah: “The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and—Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one” (183; ch.37). It seems odd at first that Ahab would call upon a prophecy to avenge himself. We usually think of prophecies as anticipating some divine will or otherwise predetermined working of fate, and as Ahab tells us, he rejects higher powers all together. “I’d strike the sun if it insulted me,” he says to Starbuck.“For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations. But not my master, man, is even that fair play. Who's over me? Truth hath no confines” (178; ch. 36). So, if the sun could initiate a relationship with Ahab, he could reciprocate that relationship. Such an action on Ahab’s part, however, would not only mean accepting an exchange decreed by nature, but also accepting that the sun is his equal in the relationship. Therefore he refuses such a relationship, refuses this logic of “fair play” as his “master.” Who or what *is* “over” Ahab, then? Nothing: not God, not nature, and not truth. And since Ahab bows to no truth outside of himself, *he* establishes what is true.

Again, then, if Ahab is the only power Ahab acknowledges, why would he put stock in prophecies? But Ahab’s belief in prophecy is only a source of confusion when we believe it entails his yielding to *another* being or force’s plan for him. Ahab cannot yield to a higher power because there is no higher power than himself; it follows, then, that Ahab’s prophecy has only to align with his *own* will. Thus, when he says “I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer,” (183; ch. 37), he is not calling upon a supernatural force, but instead creating this reality, creating this outcome, creating this truth. His prediction is less of a statement and more of a performative declaration; Ahab creates truths as he utters them. What’s more, the truths that Ahab builds are true not just for himself, but for everyone. By claiming ownership of the whale, Ahab fixes its meaning for his entire crew, and anyone who does not adopt his account of the whale (i.e., Starbuck) is simply wrong. So, whereas Anderson’s performativity is merely functional, Ahab’s performativity is both absolute and prophetic, and if he invokes a higher power to form the truths he utters, it is only because (in his mind) he himself is God.

So, to a certain extent, Ahab and Anderson overlap in their treatment of objects as continuation of subjects. Anderson believes that recorded voices can perform the words of their remixers, while Ahab believes that Moby Dick can carry a piece of his own spiritual makeup. But if Anderson’s position on voice, its usage, and its relationship to people seems troubling, problematic, or just plain strange upon first glance, it is important to remember two key pieces of information: for one, Anderson in no way attempts to define what voice “really” is; she merely seeks to arrive at a useful framework for thinking of voice in terms of digital composition (and in a similar vein, she is *not* saying that previous conceptions of voice are “wrong”). Secondly, Anderson’s reformulation of voice is not random, but timely, pertinent, and called for. She makes it a point to historically trace, for instance, the notion of “simultaneity,” or the idea that the “*liveness*” (emphasis Anderson’s) of a speaker’s voice grants the listener access to the speaker’s metaphysical presence. The advent of the telephone, says Anderson, reinforced the notion that voice equals person, that “the presence of the speaking person was directly transported through the wires of a telephonic conversation.” But the idea of voice’s simultaneity took a blow from yet another technological advance: the phonograph. Drawing on Jonathan Sterne, Anderson explains that “alongside the development of sound reproduction technology in the Victorian era emerged a belief in the ability of the human voice to ‘be preserved indefinitely on record’ (290), ‘embalmed’ much in the same way that the human body could be embalmed through emergent chemical processes” (citation Anderson’s). Suddenly, voice recording technology had made it possible for voices to speak even after their speakers had died; so in the public consciousness, the “exteriority of the voice” became drained of its “interior self-awareness” (Sterne, as cited in Anderson). But these cultural shifts in our perception of voice do not, maintains Anderson, reflect our abandoning “mistaken” beliefs about voice while moving closer to an objective, preexisting, and “true” understanding of voice. Rather, these changes in vision (or perhaps hearing) both emerged when new technology rendered them unsuitable and inadequate. In other words, our understanding of voice adapted to accommodate contextual shifts at particular historical moments.

Anderson claims that we are now in the midst of one such contextual shift that occasions a “reimagining” of what “voice” means today. The impetus for this change, she says, is not only the fact that “the capacity for cutting, splicing, mixing, and reassembling voice has only become increasingly potent with the emergence of digital audio,” but also “the increased *accessibility* of vocal materials: the capacity to store voice recordings in compressed file formats and then to circulate them through networked media” (emphasis Anderson’s). The wide availability of internet access, digitally stored voices, and (often free) audio editing software have all dramatically changed the stage on which voice now speaks. Therefore, for the first time *ever*, we now “find an opening not simply to compose with voices, but, more specifically, to compose with *the voices of others*—and perhaps, in some sense, to speak through others’ voices as if they were our own” (Anderson). And perhaps, hints Anderson, we may *collaborate* with the voices of others, too—even the voices of the dead.

To help foreground her “reimagining” of voice, Anderson points to musicologists Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut’s case study of Natalie Cole’s song “Unforgettable.” In 1991, Cole released the song in which she sings alongside the recorded voice of her father Nat King Cole, who had died over 25 years before the song was made. Though “Unforgettable” is typically classified as a remix or a so-called posthumous duet, Stanyek and Piekut hold that “Unforgettable” is a collaboration, “an act of mutually agential ‘co-labor’ in which one of the key participants simply happens to be dead” (Ancerson). This stance is totally ridiculous...*if* one imagines that Natalie Cole was collaborating with her father. But what would it mean to say that Natalie Cole collaborated with her father’s *voice*? Then, the agency of the other collaborator has been shifted from the singer to the voice. Inspired by Karen Barad’s notion of agential realism, Stanyek and Piekut “arrive at this strange possibility [of collaboration] by rethinking agency itself, no longer as present intentionality, but as future ‘*effectivity*’,” (emphasis Anderson’s), or the potential of digital voice to be reworked over and over again. For Anderson, “effectivity” provides yet another reason to reexamine and refine our current understanding of voice. Before recombinational and remixing practices became so easily possible, there was no need to account for “effectivity” in our perception of voice, no need to even conceive of such a phenomenon. But changes in context caused by changes in technology now demand that we consider voice’s “permanent impermanence” (Anderson) in its ability to be both recorded *and* remixed. In much the same way that the notion of voice equaling presence becomes deeply problematic when we harness the ability to experience voices without their speakers, positioning speakers (or singers) themselves as agents becomes dubious when voices may easily be manipulated to perform in ways that defy the speaker’s original intentions. So even if the notion of vocal performativity still strikes us as improbable or even simply odd, it is still no stranger to us than the split between voice and presence was to the Victorians.

**Incommensurate Differences**

What remains to be said for Michaels and Ishmael? Although they both express similar fears of characters like Ahab and Anderson, it still seems as though Ishmael is slightly more at ease with the prospect of subjectivity than Michaels. In fact, perhaps the most crucial difference between Michaels and Ishmael is that while Michaels’ vision of objectivity is utopian, Ishmael’s is horrifying. Consider once more his image of a world without white light (i.e., perspective) and therefore devoid of color (i.e., meaning): “[P]ondering this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear coloured and colouring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him” (212; ch. 42). For Ishmael, it is frightening that color and meaning are not inherent to the world or the objects within it; it is even more frightening, though, to imagine a world in which there is *no* light, no real subject position at all. In such a universe, poses Ishmael, no one could retain his or her sanity. He offers us Pip as proof.

Pip, the cabin boy, jumps from a whaling boat during a chase and is left floating adrift for the duration of the hunt. Here, alone in the middle of the ocean, he is driven mad by “[t]he intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity” (453; ch. 93). But what exactly does this mean? What happened to Pip? According to Ishmael, Pip has lost his identity. This conclusion marks yet another revealing difference between Michaels and Ishmael: Michaels deplores identity as a meaning-making tool. If an object is meaningless (or treated as meaningless), then any attempt to “interpret” it will rely on the subject’s experience, and the subject’s experience is determined by his or her identity; “what [the object] makes you think of...must be a function not only of what it is but of who you are” (Michaels 113). Pip was immersed in a totally empty world (not unlike Ishmael’s colorless world) that had no use for his identity or perspective—thus, says Ishmael, Pip’s identity vanished and left him crazy. With the “infinite of his soul” having been “drowned” (453; ch. 93), Pip subsequently lives as a sort of identity-fluid being; as he says himself, put him atop a pine tree and he *becomes* a crow, as opposed to a boy pretending to be a crow (475; ch. 99). Additionally, when Pip’s identity disintegrates, so does his ability to create any sort of meaning. In Chapter 99, “The Doubloon,” Ishmael (or for the most part Stubb) examines how several crewmen interpret a gold coin etched all over with “strange figures and inscriptions” (470; ch. 99). Queequeg, for instance, compares the images on the coin to his own tattoos. Stubb interprets the markings on the perimeter of the coin as the zodiac. But Pip is unable to read the coin at all; instead, he watches the crewmembers ascribe meaning to the coin and comments, “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look” (475; ch. 99). What Pip describes here is, in essence, the act of interpretation itself: a multitude of different subjects appraising the same object. But while Pip can see this act, he is unable to participate in it himself because his identity, his meaning-making tool, has been lost. Without an identity, Pip ceases to be a subject at all.

It seems, then, that when it comes to identity as a meaning-making apparatus, we are left at an impasse: Both Michaels and Ishmael have indicated that giving all power to identity is giving all power to the subject—and all power to Ahab. But take away identity, says Ishmael, and no one is able to make sense of anything. So not only, it appears, can Ishmael find no solid ground on which to discredit Ahab; he seems to have discovered that we cannot operate whether we allow our identities to rule *or* eliminate them completely. Ishmael trapped in a corner, then, unable to appeal to either the subject (the identity) or the object (the whale) to help him. But perhaps his situation would not be so dire if he merely asked a different question. Instead of asking what must be *true* in order for Ahab to be *wrong*, what if we instead evaluated Ahab’s beliefs based on their consequences? To recap, Ahab uses the whale as an external holding vessel for his various ills and miseries. The benefit of such an ideology, of course, is that once the whale’s physical body is killed, then so are all the grievances the whale *em*bodies to Ahab. The fact that Ahab holds this belief is not in itself a problem; it becomes problematic, however, when it motivates him to effectively commandeer the *Pequod*, risk the lives of his entire crew, and refuse aid to a fellow captain searching for his son lost at sea. Put differently, we may not be able to say that Ahab is absolutely, definitively wrong, but just because we merely *differ* from him, we are not powerless to pass judgment on his actions. Even if we cannot (or simply refuse) to say that Ishmael is right while Ahab is wrong, there is still no question that one of their positions is still better than the other based not on their tenets, but on their effects.

So, yes the dead can sing if we believe that their *voices* are performing, if we cast voice as a subject instead of its singer. Theoretically speaking, our commitment to preserving different interpretations of a text simultaneously should logically propagate a commitment to seeing class inequalities as simple differences. But as the struggle between Ahab and Ishmael shows, differences between subjects are not simply neutral, and neither do they void disagreements. Rather, they invite us to analyze their ramifications based on how they impact ourselves and other people. With this reasoning in mind, preserving—or demolishing—the split between subject and object no longer seems as critical as it once did. Once we free ourselves from our preoccupation with the binary, we may find we are able to effectively address more pressing concerns.

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