



Thompson, Graham (2012) "Through consumptive pallors of this blank, raggy life": Melville's not quite white working bodies. *Leviathan*, 12 (2). pp. 25-43. ISSN 1750-1849

Access from the University of Nottingham repository:

<http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/29627/8/THOMPSON-2012-Leviathan.pdf>

Copyright and reuse:

The Nottingham ePrints service makes this work by researchers of the University of Nottingham available open access under the following conditions.

This article is made available under the University of Nottingham End User licence and may be reused according to the conditions of the licence. For more details see:
http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/end_user_agreement.pdf

A note on versions:

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the repository url above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact eprints@nottingham.ac.uk



“Through consumptive pallors
of this blank, raggy life”:
Melville’s Not Quite White Working Bodies

GRAHAM THOMPSON
University of Nottingham, UK

When the lawyer-narrator in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” recollects first meeting his new employee, the image of the “motionless young man” standing on the threshold of his office is unforgettable: “I can see that figure now, pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby” (NN PT 19). While neither pitiableness nor incurability is reiterated in the lawyer’s further description of Bartleby, the word pallid and its nominal and adjectival alternatives appear repeatedly throughout the rest of the story. Bartleby writes “palely, mechanically” (20); he is a “pale young scrivener” (25), who has about him an air of “pallid haughtiness” and is a “pallid copyist” (28).¹ A similar repetition is also featured in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids.” Here the seedsman-narrator observes the “consumptive pallors” (330) of the female mill workers and further notes how “glued to the pallid incipience of the pulp” are “the yet more pallid faces of all the pallid girls I had eyed that day” (334). What also distinguishes this story is the narrator’s emphasis on blankness when he looks at “rows of blank-looking counters” at which sit “rows of blank-looking girls, with blank, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding their blank paper” (328). My aim is to explain why both stories depict workers and working bodies through the repeated use of the words pallid and blank.²

To begin with, these words are a counterpoint to the word “white,” which they evoke but from which they differ. Indeed, one effect of Melville’s iterative method in these stories is that by juxtaposing the repeated words, their differences rather than their similarities become more obvious. *Pallid* and *blank* are not simply substitutes for *white*; they are charged with meanings that complicate the representation of whiteness. Pallid not only suggests a whitish or ashen appearance or a shade of color approaching white but also signifies a lack of depth or intensity of color. Blank hints at whiteness because of its linguistic origins and suggests an empty space waiting to be filled. It can be a piece of material—metal, wood, or paper—used to produce another object;

or, it can be a verb, a veiling from sight. So while the bodies of the scrivener and factory workers in each story approach whiteness, they never achieve an intensity or depth of whiteness.

By representing working bodies through this refracted whiteness, Melville's two stories broaden the context of our reading of race and class. As David Roediger and Alexander Saxton have shown, the cultural resource of whiteness was becoming important to antebellum white workers fearful of their dependency on the sort of wage labor that no longer offered the opportunities for progression to the artisan or mechanic classes it once did and was increasingly tied to a capitalist work discipline too easily comparable to the bond labor of slavery. At the same time, party and class politics was increasingly structured by a racialized class identity based on whiteness.³ To understand how this historical context manifested itself in literary expression, we may examine the specific ways in which Melville embedded whiteness and class in the fictive language he used to depict workers and their working bodies; and we may do so with two arguments in mind.

First, Melville's engagement with the intersection of whiteness, class, and work develops through several stages in *White-Jacket* and *Moby-Dick* before culminating in the distinctive "pallid" diction of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids." When the narrator of "Tartarus" remarks that the "white girls" in the paper mill go to death "through consumptive pallors of this blank, raggy life" (NN PT 330), the over-determined demarcation of the women as pallid, blank, and white amounts to an overt connection of race and class through whiteness in Melville's prose. Accordingly, both stories supplement Melville's more expansive treatment of race, class, and work in *White-Jacket* and *Moby-Dick*.

Second, through its developing representation of race, class, and work, Melville's fiction imagines the nature and limitations of relationships that cross class and status boundaries. As we know, Melville's sea fiction not only expresses the brotherhood of shipboard life but also discourses on what is less fraternal. Similarly, despite important articulations of the more positive possibilities of affiliation, "Bartleby" and the Paradise / Tartarus diptych reiterate the limits of affiliation between, in particular, the lawyer and the seedsman and the white laboring class. In doing so, these inland stories revisit problems present in Melville's earlier sea fiction.⁴

My starting point for this discussion of the representation of whiteness, class, and affiliation is the jacket in *White-Jacket*, which is "not a very white jacket, but white enough" (NN WJ 3). It is white enough to create the ill luck that dogs White-Jacket aboard ship and white enough to generate symbolic readings of the jacket like those prompted by the white whale. For Samuel

Otter, it is also white enough to make the book “about the extension of black slavery to the decks of United States naval frigates and to the backs of white sailors” (Otter 50). Otter’s reading of the jacket as both a marker of class status and skin color, from which the eponymous narrator cuts himself free at the end of the novel “as if I were ripping open myself” (NN WJ 394), situates Melville’s novel in a common antebellum discourse: the white imagining of what it was like to be a slave. According to Otter, Melville “examines the hinges in the articulation of the analogy between white men and black slaves” where “to be like a slave is to be encased in skin you cannot remove,” while to “be unlike a slave is to possess a white jacket that is portable and divestible” (Otter 94). If whiteness, as Dana Nelson argues, is integral to those cross-class allegiances between men that constitute what she calls “national manhood” (Nelson 3), then what does it mean for any reading of class allegiance in Melville’s fiction that White-Jacket casts off his “not very white” jacket and “bloodlessly flees from his skin” (Otter 95)?

On the one hand, by demarking white and “not very white,” White-Jacket seems to disavow the significance of the jacket’s color. It is, after all, “not very white.” On the other hand, by immediately conceding that it is “white enough,” he recognizes the capacity of its color to signify and to have consequences like those that afflict him later. What is emerging here in the demarcation between white and “not very white” and in the realization that something can be “white enough” is an understanding of whiteness that is alert to the different possibilities of its deployment.

Since one of these possibilities is the linking of slavery to race, White-Jacket’s attentiveness to distinctions within whiteness also evokes another problem: the rhetoric of nativism, which in *Redburn* was countered head-on with an anti-nativist rebuttal and the sympathetic representation of German and Irish immigrants.⁵ In *White-Jacket*, however, with his disavowal that his jacket is “not very white,” the narrator is not only conscious that his identity is shaped by the whiteness of his jacket but also hesitant about covering himself in the kind of white skin he might wish, in Otter’s words, to flee. This hesitancy and White-Jacket’s subsequent desire to flee his skin may indeed invoke a racial dynamic, but its opposition between white and black, non-slave and slave, has consequences for class affiliation within the group of white sailors. Indeed, White-Jacket does not wish to forge affiliative links with all sailors.

Larry Reynolds has shown, for instance, that despite its egalitarian zeal against flogging, *White-Jacket* has antidemocratic and, in the figure of the narrator, aristocratic tendencies. As far as these class tendencies are concerned, the white jacket is the pivot in the narrator’s “study of the estrangement of a superior individual from a particularly depraved[,] base, and ignorant society”

(Reynolds 24). In this reading, *White-Jacket* becomes a “subtly antidemocratic work that supports social stratification and emphasizes the depravity and vulgarity of the mass of men, the ‘mob,’ and the legitimate superiority of a few gentlemanly individuals and groups” (27).⁶ By complicating the whiteness of his jacket and by freeing himself from it altogether, *White-Jacket*’s narrator attempts to rid himself of the racist burden of the jacket’s whiteness at the same time as he seeks to establish his allegiance to the superior class of the shipboard hierarchy. The basis of this allegiance is not color—the nativist ramifications of which would connect *White-Jacket* with the common sailors—but character. By aligning these two narrative strands, Melville allows us to see *White-Jacket* deserting both whiteness and the mob.

Melville’s further interrogation of whiteness in *Moby-Dick* is different from that in *White-Jacket* since the superior individuals with whom Ishmael seeks allegiance are not only white—the “momentous men” Starbuck, Stubb and Flask (NN MD 119–20)—but also the racially diverse harpooners Queequeg, Daggoo, and Tashtego as well as the other sailors in a crew whose racial differences, for large parts of the novel, do not interrupt friendship or solidarity. A group of Isolatoes “federated along one keel” (121), they are, for C. L. R. James, “a world federation of modern industrial workers” who owe allegiance not to any nation but to “the work they have to do and the relations with one another on which that work depends” (James 20). Throughout the novel, the work of whaling helps forge allegiances between Ishmael and the crew. “I . . . was one of that crew,” Ishmael proclaims; “my oath had been welded with theirs” (NN MD 179). In “The Monkey-rope” (Ch. 72), he is metaphorically married, and literally tied, to Queequeg by the “elongated Siamese ligature” that unites them, making Queequeg his “own inseparable twin brother” (320). This bond is both material and metaphysical: “I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two.” Ishmael’s sense of connectedness with his fellow crew members reaches a crescendo in “A Squeeze of the Hand” (Ch. 94) when he finds himself looking into their eyes “as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; . . . let us all squeeze ourselves into each other” (416).

These episodes certainly suggest a sense of togetherness, but the language in *Moby-Dick* also draws attention to the limits of affiliation. Let me be clear that I am not dismissing the idea that Melville, as Timothy Marr has argued, “identified with his society of seamen because its multiethnic alliance evoked the possibility of more worldly notions of citizenship and more authentic forms of national community” (Marr 9). But Marr’s sense of

“possibility” is provisional, and we readily find instances that may not abolish the sense of federation but nevertheless render the possibility of federation less certain. In each of the episodes quoted above, a more unsettling discourse exists alongside the instance of federation and connection. Ishmael clinches his oath with the crew, he insists, “because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine” (NN *MD* 179). The merging of his individuality with Queequeg is troubling precisely because of its metaphysical nature, his free will having received “a mortal wound” as a result of the “dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed” (179). And any distinction in the relationship seems to be diluted rather than enhanced by Ishmael’s noting that “this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes” (179). Even when Ishmael is eulogizing togetherness as he squeezes sperm, his thoughts of ridding himself of “social acerbities” are prefaced by the conditional sense of “as much as to say.” And the sheer enjoyment of this process is testament to its transitoriness. “Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever!” (416), Ishmael laments, knowing that, like physical pleasure, the togetherness he imagines cannot last.

This skepticism about federation is symptomatic of a tension in *Moby-Dick* that also emerges in the dialogue between the material and metaphysical nature of color. In “The Whiteness of the Whale” (Ch. 42), Ishmael considers why whiteness, above all other things about the whale, appalls him. He observes how terror and horror are heightened when they appear in a white form, such as “the king of terrors” who rides on his “pallid horse” (NN *MD* 192). He then associates certain attributes with whiteness: it is as an “intensifying agent”; it has an “indefiniteness”; it is “not so much a color as the visible absence of color” (195). All these things produce what Ishmael calls “a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows,” whereas the colors that make up the natural world are “subtile deceits, not actually inherent substances, but only laid on from without” (195). This shift from the material to the metaphysical in Ishmael’s contemplation leads to a reading of whiteness as nothingness and annihilation in which “the palsied universe lies before us a leper” (195). The sublimation of whiteness at this point suggests that the material bonds of federation amongst the *Pequod*’s racialized working bodies are positioned within a metaphysics of color that is alienating and destructive. Such a metaphysics undermines the validity of whiteness as a foundation for racial identity.

While C. L. R. James sees the men aboard the *Pequod* as federated through work, Melville also shows how this very activity promotes a new sense of class identity that is dependent on a discourse of whiteness. This discourse

becomes evident to Ishmael as he participates in cross-racial friendships. In “The Try-Works” (Ch. 96)—appearing only two chapters after “A Squeeze of the Hand” when Ishmael is at his most fraternal—Ishmael narrates his skepticism about his connections to his co-laborers. Of all Melville’s descriptions of the whaling process, this scene aboard the *Pequod* most resembles industrial labor. Information and detail about the try-works and the setting of its fire are followed by evocative imagery of the men taking part in the boiling down of the whale blubber. At this point, Ishmael describes the other workers in the heightened language of race. Chief among these workers are the “Tartarean shapes of the pagan harpooners, always the whale-ship’s stokers” (NN MD 423). Ishmael observes their “tawny features, now all begrimed with smoke and sweat[;] their matted beards, and the contrasting barbaric brilliancy of their teeth, all these were strangely revealed in the capricious emblazonings of the works” (423). The *Pequod* sails on “freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness,” which, Ishmael suggests, “seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander’s soul” (423).

Tellingly, Ishmael reveals that he is not part of the try-works activity but is instead standing solitarily at the helm guiding the ship. Separated from the workers and in a position of surveillance, Ishmael is better able to see “the redness, the madness, the ghastliness of others” (NN MD 423). The men with whom Ishmael has been working and communing are now turned into this scene’s savage “others” and his observation in turn prompts in Ishmael “kindred visions in my soul” as he descends into drowsiness and senses something to be “fatally wrong” (423).

Uppermost was the impression, that whatever swift, rushing thing I stood on was not so much bound to any haven ahead as rushing from all havens astern. A stark, bewildered feeling, as of death, came over me. Convulsively my hands grasped the tiller, but with the crazy conceit that the tiller was, somehow, in some enchanted way, inverted. My God! What is the matter with me? thought I. Lo! In my brief sleep I had turned myself about, and was fronting the ship’s stern, with my back to her prow and the compass. (424)

By internalizing the demonic labor scene before him so that it produces these “kindred visions” in his own soul, Ishmael’s surveillance produces a corresponding self-surveillance, warning, and reversal.

What does Ishmael’s self-surveillance alight on in the midst of the darkness of the scene? The “stark, bewildered feeling, as of death” that he senses echoes the nothingness and annihilation that he has earlier associated with whiteness. Surveying the blackness around him, at this crucial moment of physical inversion and moral reversal, Ishmael confronts his own

whiteness. The shift from material to metaphysical in “The Try-Works”—from the blackness of the workers to the darkness of Ahab’s soul—mirrors the transition in “The Whiteness of the Whale.” And given that Ishmael must have been facing in the right direction while observing the workers in the try-works, his transition from the material to the metaphysical also suggests, at least in this moment, a turning away from his co-workers. Already separated and isolated by his position at the helm, he turns his back on them as their labor in the try-works turns them ever redder and blacker. Ishmael rights himself in time to save the ship from capsizing and concludes that “To-morrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other, at least gentler, relief” (NN MD 424). At that moment, too, his own whiteness may be less starkly apparent, but he has stared into the face of what is at stake as one’s perspective on physical friendship is affected by metaphysical contemplation. The federation about which James writes seems to be much weaker at this point for Ishmael.

I am not arguing that this metaphysical reversal invalidates the material friendships forged through the labor of whaling. Nor am I suggesting that because of their different spatial and temporal registers—the linearity of a whaling voyage versus the unboundedness of philosophical thinking—somehow the metaphysical will always outweigh the material. Rather, my emphasis is on their interconnectedness; they are two sides of the same coin and inhabit each other’s domains. They are ways of imagining that do not always produce equivalent thoughts or consistent thought. In *Moby-Dick*, the movement between the physical and metaphysical can cause a destabilizing shift in perspective that in turn produces Ishmael’s conflicting impulses, which appear in his narration just as “The Try-Works” so quickly follows and subverts “A Squeeze of the Hand.” The paradox for Ishmael is that he is both connected to and separated from his co-workers by his recognition that work does not allow one to escape race. If White-Jacket flees the physical whiteness of the material jacket and re-emerges as Ishmael seeking the materiality of cross-racial friendship through the common experience of whaling, what Ishmael discovers as he moves between the physical and the metaphysical is that his cross-racial allegiances are haunted by discourses of racial division.

Nor can Ishmael’s experience in “The Try-Works” be explained as a passing aberration. The scene also recalls “Midnight, Forecastle” (Ch. 40) in which Daggoo’s body is the trigger for the riot that shakes the leisurely fraternity of the diverse crew. In response to Daggoo claiming “Who’s afraid of black’s afraid of me! I’m quarried out of it!” the Spanish sailor, finding “the old grudge makes me touchy,” tells Daggoo “thy race is the undeniable dark side of mankind—devilish dark at that.” The stand-off devolves into violence

when the Spanish sailor rejects the suggestion that one of the Nantucket sailors has seen lightning; it is, he says, “Daggoo showing his teeth” (NN MD 177). At which point the fighting begins. In “The Try-Works,” what is revealed to Ishmael among “the capricious blazonings of the works” is just “the contrasting barbaric brilliancy” of the harpooners’ teeth (423). Like the race riot in “Midnight, Forecastle,” this later chapter offers a kind of industrialized violence in which the workers, now demonized as savages, evoke a disaffiliation similar to the earlier separation along racial lines. In this new version of alienation, the “old grudge” refuses to go away.

The development that Ishmael presents also undermines the novel’s aspiration to progress from ignorance to enlightenment, or from separation to alliance. Instead, we find iteration and repetition, which, in “The Gilder” (Ch. 114), Ishmael imagines through the figurative language of weaving. He claims that

the mingled, mingling threads of life are woven by warp and woof: calms crossed by storms, a storm for every calm. There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause: . . . once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally. (NN MD 492)

The weaving metaphor shows how two distant points may be connected by the same thread. The narrator who clings to Queequeg’s coffin may be different from the one startled by his future friend in the Spouter Inn, but the speed with which Ishmael embraces Queequeg indicates that Ishmael already had a grasp on a “thread of life” that would draw them together. The metaphor also shows how proximate things can travel in different directions even as they knit together. So, in the familiar passage from “The Gilder,” the synchronicity of being infant, boy, and man allows for the possibility that the woof of the Ishmael/Queequeg narrative thread can never be sure that it will not be crossed by the warp of other discourses—like those in “The Try-Works”—which threaten the narratives of affiliation found amongst the Anacharsis Cloutz deputation aboard the *Pequod*.

One way that *Moby-Dick* manages the warp and woof of fraternity and separation, intimacy and difference, is through a series of racial pairings at the heart of which are the harpooners and Pip. The “close intimacy and friendliness” (NN MD 120) between mate and harpooneer are manifested when Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo are assigned to the boats of Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask, and in “The First Lowering” (Ch. 48), the orchestration of their racialized working bodies testifies to the harmonization required in the chase.

Responding to Starbuck's order that he stand, Queequeg springs up on "the triangular raised box in the bow" while Starbuck stands likewise "upon the extreme stern of the boat where it was also triangularly platformed." Similarly, black Daggoo balances white Flask on his shoulders and "to every roll of the sea harmoniously rolled his fine form" (221). Distracted by lighting his pipe, Stubb is brought back to the task at hand by Tashtego's instinctive understanding that the whales are close beneath the surface. The physical and occupational balancing acts in this chapter are based on bodies working in unison. However, just as bodies touch, as in the case of Flask and Daggoo, they are also marked by color. Flask is the "snow-flake" astride the "barbaric majesty" of Daggoo the "noble negro" (223). The dependency of the flaxen-haired Flask on the stability of Daggoo inverts one social hierarchy while it still raises whiteness over blackness; among the *Pequod's* three whaleboats, the one in which the working relationship most requires physical contact most starkly dramatizes the racial distinction.

The warp and woof of power is also bound to race in the pairing of Ahab and Pip, which combines the two extremes of the *Pequod's* working hierarchy. Pip's voice and perceptive intelligence equalize the disparities in this hierarchy and help Pip and Ahab retain their affinity. Stubb's abandonment of Pip is a turning point in the cabin boy's behavior. Unused to the whale chase, Pip throws himself out of the whaleboat, is left behind, and comes face to face with the "awful lonesomeness" of the open water. As a result, his soul is carried "down alive to wondrous depths" where "strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes." Confronted by the miser-merman, Wisdom, Pip sees "God's foot upon the treadle of the loom" (NN MD 414). Whatever Pip sees being woven, he begs to take the role of Ahab's missing leg in "The Cabin" (Ch. 129) so that he can, he tells Ahab, "remain a part of ye." That Pip considers himself a part of Ahab says a lot about the possibilities of an affiliation of feeling—"There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady"—across such a gulf in power between cabin boy and captain. But although Pip's "drowned bones now show white, for all the blackness of his living skin" (534), Ahab refuses the possibility of a material conjoining. And in Ahab's rejection, Pip loses himself. As Ahab leaves the cabin, Pip stands "in his air" but is separated not only from the captain but also from himself: "Now were even poor Pip here I could endure it, but he's missing. Pip! Pip! Ding, dong, ding! Who's seen Pip?" (535). The inversion that results as Pip takes Ahab's place at an imagined dinner occurs after Ahab rejects the support Pip offers and assumes his position of control pacing the deck overhead.

The complex dynamic of affiliation, color, and race contributes to the way in which *Moby-Dick* grapples with the philosophical and meta-physical inconsistencies of the “successful assertion of whiteness as ideology” or “whiteness idealized” (Morrison 16–17). This grappling continues into Melville’s short fiction even though the working bodies represented are more homogenous than those found on the *Pequod* and are engaged in very different kinds of work. A clerk or scrivener in New York City and a female machine operative in Massachusetts have contrasting experiences, but the representation of both through the common diction of “pallor” and “blankness” re-articulated from “The Whiteness of the Whale” suggests a re-situating and refining of whiteness as it relates to specific groups of laboring bodies. Michael Rogin has argued that in Melville’s short fiction, “visual symbols crowd out the dynamic, narrative human relations of novelistic plot” and that Melville gives “language priority over a mimetic representation of the world” by being “constricted within rigorously structured forms” (Rogin 157). In “Bartleby” and “The Tartarus of Maids,” the description of working bodies repeatedly as pallid or blank rather than white indicates this shift in textual strategy.

Whereas in *White-Jacket* the reader follows the jacket through a series of events that critique American antebellum society, the short stories rely on the repetition of the words pallid, blank, and white to make their critique. Moreover, such reiteration generates a resonance of its own. For instance, the way in which the whiteness of the characters in “Bartleby” and “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” is constantly deferred reinforces the misgivings about ideas of genealogical and racial purity that Robert Levine suggests Melville explored earlier in *Pierre*. Both stories also deploy this language of whiteness in two forms that press upon the problem of federation as it does or does not exist between workers and between different class and status groups. These two forms are rehearsed by Ishmael in “The Try-Works”: intense observation and internalization.

The first of these forms derives from Ishmael’s observation as he stands at the helm. The first-person narrative strategy in the short stories follows a similar form. Melville has the lawyer-narrator admit early on that “What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, that is all I know of him” (NN *PT* 13). The lawyer’s first memory of Bartleby noted above is also described in observational terms: “I can see that figure now, pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn!” (NN *PT* 19). In “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” the seedsman-narrator’s tour of the mill and assessment of the machinery and the maids is similarly visual. In the finishing room, he remarks how “I looked upon the first girl’s brow, and saw it was young and fair; I looked upon the second girl’s brow, and saw it was ruled and wrinkled.

Then, as I still looked, the two . . . changed places” (329). In the rag-cutting room, he notes that the edges of the blade “are turned outward from the girls, if I see right; but their rags and finger fly so, I can not distinctly see Yes murmured I to myself: I see it now” (330). The workings of the paper machine are shown to him in detail by Cupid, while the awe that steals over him, he says, occurs “as I gazed upon this inflexible iron animal.” He goes on to say that

what made the thing I saw so specially terrible to me was the metallic necessity, the unbudging fatality which governed it . . . there passing in slow procession along the wheeling cylinders, I seemed to see, glued to the pallid incipience of the pulp, the yet more pallid faces of all the pallid girls I had eyed that heavy day. (334–35)

At moments of intense observation, the narrators turn to the language of whiteness. The lawyer-narrator constantly resorts to pale and pallid to describe Bartleby; the seedsman-narrator constantly makes the maids blank and pallid.

By having his first-person narrators speak this diction of whiteness, Melville makes the narrators the objects of their own narratives. They achieve, then, the same kind of internalization—the second of the two formal structures—that Ishmael achieves when he recognizes those “kindred visions” in his own soul. When the lawyer says that “To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange wilfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience” (NN *PT* 23–24), the scrivener is figuratively ingested. For the seedsman, the internalization is hallucinatory: he thinks he sees the faces of the maids in the paper pulp but the faces are of his own imagining. The narrators’ predilection for the words pallid, blank, and white requires the reader to consider how these narrators manage the bonds of affiliation between the observer and the observed, between themselves and the workers with whom they come into contact.

Melville’s narrative technique also intertwines the specific discourses of whiteness and labor. The weaving metaphor is especially appropriate because the connection between mechanization and female labor was most visible in the 1830s and 1840s in the Lowell textile mills. Sylvia Jenkins Cook points out that mill workers in Lowell “were the objects of an extraordinary amount of observation and analysis,” just like the seedsman-narrator’s scrutiny (Cook 43). In a review of Thomas Carlyle’s *Chartism* in the *Boston Quarterly Review* of 1840, Orestes Brownson set the terms for subsequent debates about the Lowell mill workers and the relative status of wage labor and slave labor. “Wages is a cunning device of the devil,” Brownson wrote, “for the benefit of tender consciences, who would retain all the advantages of the slave system,

without the expense, trouble, and odium of being slave-holders” (Brownson 370). Under these conditions, factory wage labor could never lift workers out of poverty and would inevitably reduce them to the condition of chattel slaves.

In its own pages, the *Lowell Offering* rejected the charge that women mill workers were white slaves, but its defense also invoked the language of race to understand class. Slavery and seduction narratives were a key part of the way in which women writing in the *Offering* defended their reliance on wage labor because such tropes allowed them to reject Brownson’s masculine narrative of independence as well as the restrictive rural family lives many of the mill women left behind. Julie Husband has argued that anti-slavery narratives were adapted by women writers in the *Offering* in order to discuss their own plight. Sexual slavery was displaced onto the figure of the tragic mulatta seduced by a white man. Similarly, in an adaptation of the fugitive slave narrative, women were shown fleeing domestic servitude for the sanctity of mill life (Husband 15–16). Such racialized tropes suggest a structural equivalence between white and non-white experience, but the simultaneous dismissal of anything approaching slave status, except perhaps in some possible future unless conditions did not improve, also testifies to the policing of racial boundaries. Vital to the women workers is their respectability and the defense of their chance for upward mobility through adequately paid wage labor. Anti-slavery tropes work for an audience well-versed in this language—and supporters of the *Offering* included many important anti-slavery figures—but the iterative use of pallid and blank in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” navigates the binary of downtrodden black slave and respectable white wage laborer more complexly.

When trying to assess the meaning of the classification of color, the narrator asks Cupid, “What makes those girls so sheet-white?” Cupid replies, “I suppose the handling of such white bits of sheet all the time makes them so sheety,” suggesting that work generates color (NN PT 330–31). The idea of close environment changing human form such that bodies take on the characteristics of that environment clearly echoes White-Jacket’s “theory about the wondrous influence of habitual sights and sounds upon the human temper,” which he derives by observing the ship’s crew (NN WJ 46). In elaborating this theory, White-Jacket focuses predominantly on the relationship between work and character:

A forced, interior quietude, in the midst of great outward commotion, breeds moody people. Who so moody as railroad-brakemen, steam-boat-engineers, helmsmen, and tenders of power-looms in cotton factories? For all these must hold their peace while employed, and let the machinery do the chatting; they cannot even edge in a single syllable. (46)

In all of these instances one's working character is affected by one's immediate working surroundings, but the emphasis is on temperament rather than the physical appearance, which in "The Tartarus of Maids" is the object of the repetition of key words. The demarcation of color is actively connected, then, to skin color. And the sheets of off-white paper rather than the whiteness of the paper mill and its surroundings govern this effect. The mill is "a large white-washed building, relieved, like some great whited sepulchre" (NN *PT* 324) close to Woedolor Mountain with its "white vapors curled up from its white-wooded top" (325) and the "snow-white hamlet amidst the snows" (326). None of this environment, however, affects the appearance of the maids who instead take on the sheety, pallid, and blank qualities of the material they produce.

The maids do not resemble, then, the workers of Rebecca Harding Davis's iron mill, whose bodies take on the physical characteristics of the dirty mill in which they work. As Eric Schocket points out, Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" uses these blackened bodies to "mimic the physical determinism of chattel servitude by bearing similar marks of bondage and oppression" (Schocket 47). For Schocket, whiteness emerges as a promise "that the working class will not be forever excluded from the political and social prerogatives of nineteenth-century white skin privilege" (47). However, in "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," no such straightforward emergence occurs. The appearance of the maids is affected by their industrial labor, but it does not involve a whiteness corresponding to the natural or the constructed environment that might serve as an affirmation, as it did for the two and a half thousand Lowell mill workers who marched past Andrew Jackson in their white uniform dresses in 1836. Nor does it produce a blackface effect like that in Davis's story, even though Melville's narrator introduces such a possibility in the first part of the diptych by singing the minstrel song, "Carry me back to old Virginy!" (NN *PT* 319). Instead, the tawnyiness that evens out the color distinctions of the weathered crew in *Moby-Dick* is here replaced by a pallidness and blankness in the narrator's observation of the maids, which sets them apart from the dark-complexioned mill owner, the red-faced Cupid, and the narrator who himself takes on a whitish hue at the end of his tour of the mill. Just as "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" does not provide the intensity of color that would unite the maids with the whiteness of nativist rhetoric, it draws attention to the disaffiliating effects of color distinctions.

The world of office work in mid-nineteenth-century New York City had its own racial dynamics. The collars of all clerks may have been white but the ethnicity of clerks varied enormously. By 1855 nearly half of New York

clerks had been born outside the United States and substantial minorities were Irish and German. From a nativist perspective the growth in clerking jobs of all kinds through midcentury created a situation in which the whiteness and respectability of the clerk, and his position as a gentleman in waiting, could no longer be taken for granted.⁷ The eagerness of often well-educated immigrants to do both manual and non-manual work also “tarnished the prestige of clerical employments,” according to Brian Lusky and created a situation in which clerks “placed a great deal of emphasis on their white collars because otherwise they found it difficult to differentiate themselves from those who rolled up their sleeves” (Lusky 65). As accumulators of cultural capital through occupation and uniform, clerks also sought affirmation of their position through the acquisition of literary skills and in their consumption of minstrel shows, not only in the theater but also, more importantly, at home where songs were performed from sheet music.⁸ Singing minstrel songs at home enabled the immigrant clerk to reinforce a claim to racial and class superiority if not actual “whiteness.”

Just as practices of this kind were crucial to the self-image of clerks themselves, they were also vital to the employers who “had the luxury to craft a bourgeois vision of whiteness that resided in proprietorship, education, and domesticity” (Lusky 69). Such a vision could be achieved through constant vigilance of the codes and markers of race and class. This kind of vigilance, which we have seen exercised in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” also occurs in “Bartleby” and is linked intimately to work by the lawyer. When the lawyer notes that Bartleby writes “silently, palely, mechanically” (NN *PT* 20), the reader can imagine how the first and third of these adjectives may be enacted, but what writing “palely” looks like is much harder to imagine. Such an incongruity displays the lawyer’s urge to impose demarcations of color on his worker. As in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” the word white is used predominantly although not exclusively as a descriptor for the natural world or for the constructed environment; however, “pallid” and “blank” are the favored terms for working bodies. So the clerks in the lawyer’s office look “upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious sky-light shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom” (14), and it is against the lawyer’s use of white here that Bartleby becomes pallid.

Bartleby’s qualities are constantly modified by this demarcation. Not only does he write palely, but also his neatness, haughtiness, and innocence are attributes to which the lawyer attaches pallid or pale as an adjective (NN *PT* 20, 28, 38). This iterative preference for pallid rather than white suggests that the scrivener’s idiosyncrasy stems in part from an inability to locate him

against an economic and cultural register of color. At one point in the story, in what appears to be an attempt to situate Bartleby more firmly against this register, Bartleby refuses a second time to proofread his papers, and Turkey offers to step behind Bartleby's screen "and black his eyes for him!" (24). The lawyer rejects the offer and does so again when Turkey repeats it but Turkey's aggression makes sense in a logic where white-collar workers distinguished themselves from manual and non-white workers by paying close attention to the cultural capital of whiteness. To blacken Bartleby would be to demote him in status. To the lawyer, however, Bartleby's pallor signals that the scrivener lacks commitment to the acquisition of the markers of whiteness; thus, he can remain neither clerk nor gentleman.

Once Bartleby's industry wanes and the lawyer's reputation begins to suffer, the terms with which the lawyer imagines Bartleby also change. Bartleby's distance from whiteness is even more marked. At this point for the lawyer, Bartleby becomes "the strange creature I kept at my office" and one who "casts a general gloom over the premises." When "all these dark anticipations crowded upon me more and more, and my friends continually intruded their relentless remarks upon the apparition in my room," the lawyer claims that "a great change was wrought in me" (NN *PT* 38). Although he fails to get rid of Bartleby, the lawyer's list of jobs that Bartleby might move on to—a clerkship in a dry-goods store, a bartender, a traveling bill-collector, or a gentleman's companion (41)—suggest the lawyer's uncertainty about Bartleby's appropriate socio-economic and cultural position. The exasperated lawyer's humorous suggestion that someone who says so little might become a gentleman's companion only underscores the fact that Bartleby's other gentlemanly qualities would hardly serve him as a dry-goods clerk, whose tasks would require manual labor as well as white-collar work. The lawyer does not know Bartleby at all, despite his constant observation of him, but his demoting of Bartleby into either more menial or more distant positions does suggest the necessity of separation from a copyist whose reiterated pallidness serves only to short circuit the lawyer's urge for social classification that privileges the cultural capital of whiteness.

The narrators of both "Bartleby" and "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" are unsettled by their observation. Their retelling of events heightens their internal sense of self. The combination of observation and internalization is resolved in both stories by separation: on the one hand, Bartleby's death; on the other, the seedsman's departure with "whitish" cheeks to a warmer place. The seedsman, after being told that "the winter air in valleys, or gorges, or any sunken place, is far colder and more bitter than elsewhere," heads out "wrapped in furs and meditations" and "ascended from

the Devil's Dungeon" (NN PT 335). If ascending effects a cure for the affliction of the "whitish" appearance from which the narrator is suffering, then the repetition of physical separation, which marks *White-Jacket* and *Moby-Dick* as well as these two short stories, enacts a distancing effect from whiteness more generally.

The texts discussed display a hesitancy about relying on the language of whiteness once it is taken up by the mob and by working-class and democratic politics. Melville's fiction demonstrates how this language is damaging not just to black slaves but also to the identity of the workers caught up in its midst. In the short stories, there is no privileged fraternity in which trust may be placed. The lawyer-narrator, the seedsman-narrator and the gentleman bachelors are either too powerless or too disinterested to intervene in the crises before them. All seem to epitomize a notion of national manhood that Dana Nelson argues "entails a series of affective foreclosures that block those men's more heterogenous democratic identifications and energies" (Nelson ix). Both stories are bleak in outlook because they do not envisage how bonds can be established across class and status groups and therefore compensate for the foreclosures and lack of identification Nelson highlights. Both stories also focus their bleakness through the bodies of "not very white" workers.

What turns these bodies white is not only the discourse of nativist labor activism but also the more encompassing discourse of race, which, Peter Coviello suggests, by midcentury becomes central to the "language of affiliation" through which white men ally themselves to the nation (Coviello 4). Coviello argues that in *Moby-Dick*, Melville is "hammering out the complexities of his relation not only to whiteness but its nationalization" as he distances himself from Young America (94). Melville's short fiction follows a similar trajectory, but rather than dealing with Morrison's notion of "whiteness idealized" or his relation with the social elites of Young America, the tales question the nature of affiliation, just as Ishmael's connection to his co-workers is tested in "The Try-Works."

Melville's writing pushes against this discourse of whiteness when it does not have its working bodies assume the physical characteristics of their white environment but instead has them become pallid and "sheety" as a result of the work itself. This dynamic removes both stories from the context of a generalized capitalist alienation and places them in the more specific context of 1840s and 1850s class formation. By having laboring bodies die like *Bartleby* or appear sterilized like the factory maids as a result of capitalist work, the critique of industrial capitalism is clear enough; by having laboring bodies perform "a not very white" whiteness that never fulfills the whiteness attributed to them by nativist labor activism, Melville's short fiction, rather

than producing the *mea culpa* for his role in the Astor Place riot that Barbara Foley identifies, reinforces a distrust of political movements whose rhetoric relies upon ideas of class superiority, national purity, and genealogical fixity. Bartleby and the maids may appear to be white but the iterative resonances of Melville's narratives—the preferences for pallid and blank—suggest the elusive nature and unreliability of this whiteness as any basis either for social change or, ultimately, affiliation across class boundaries. Just as Don Benito in “Benito Cereno” claims that “the negro” casts a shadow upon him, Bartleby and the maids bear a similar condition of race, this time figured as whiteness, that casts a shadow upon them and that is responsible for their “not very white” pallor.

In working through class sympathies and antagonisms, Melville's fictional rendering of laboring bodies lead us to a temporal stage in working-class identity. This identity is, literally, stalled. As mentioned earlier, the lawyer describes Bartleby as “motionless.” Later, Bartleby tells him, “I like to be stationary” (NN PT 41). And, of course, he will not move from the lawyer's premises. Likewise, the female factory workers sit stationary before the machines, while their status as virginal maids in an isolated, inhospitable location hardly permits movement of any kind, into motherhood or marriage or alternative work. Motionless, passive, sterile, dead: these workers are stalled in life and identity. Their identity is not a stage through which a group is passing. Both stories depict a problem of agency for working-class Americans increasingly subject to the vagaries of the market and production routines. The nativist discourse of whiteness—untenable and genealogically bankrupt—is trapping workers who can never match its standards, since they are persistently represented by Melville as pallid and blank; that is, as “whitish,” or “sheet-white,” but never conventionally white like the white wall of the sky-light shaft in “Bartleby” or the snow that surrounds the paper mill in “The Tartarus of Maids.” To organize political agitation around a groundless concept offers no way of moving towards a future stage of working-class experience. Ill-served not only by the system of production which exploits them but by the class leaders who represent them, Melville's workers remain trapped at a pernicious point of the developing capitalist market.

By having his workers pallid and blank and “not very white,” though, Melville also represents the vacuum that exists outside that language of race upon which the language of affiliation relies. The workers cannot be white like their surroundings, since to be so would place them too close to the “whiteness idealized” that Morrison and Coviello argue is rejected in *Moby-Dick* and which also creates the nativist mob. Pallid and blank do not constitute a language of affiliation; if anything, they represent a language of sentiment and sympathy which was not for Melville an alternative language of affiliation. Melville's short

fiction may register sympathy for workers as fellow Americans (in ways which follow Otter's identification of a tendency "to enhance the position of the white laborer") but having them "not very white" also registers a distance and sense of non-affiliation. As Toni Morrison writes, "to question the very notion of white progress . . . that was dangerous, solitary, radical work" (Morrison 18). Rejecting the language of race in these bleak stories also means rejecting the possible grounds of affiliation.

Notes

¹ He is also a "pale, passive mortal" (38) and has at other times an "innocent pallor" (38), a "pale unmoving way" (42) and is "prone to pallid hopelessness" (45).

² For more on the use of the words pall and pallid in *Moby-Dick*, see Fruscione 10–13.

³ See Saxton 127–61 and Roediger 65–114. For the relationship between class, whiteness, and immigration, see Ignatiev 6–61 Jacobson 39–90. For more on whiteness and the construction of social and class boundaries, especially in the early Republic, see Wray 1–46.

⁴ Berthold and Foley argue that Melville's short fiction comes to terms with race and class as they erupted in the Astor Place riot. John Evelev sees the riot as central in the emergence of a professional-middle-class model of cultural expertise that complicated traditional distinctions between "high" and "low" class groupings and argues that Melville offers a "professional" version of Shakespeare in *Moby-Dick*. See Evelev 79–111.

⁵ See Parker 641.

⁶ For a similar failure in "Benito Cereno," see Nelson 3.

⁷ For the nativity and ethnicity of New York City clerks in 1855, see Lusky 10–11.

⁸ For more on the importance of reading and writing for clerks, see Augst 19–61 and 158–206.

Works Cited

- Augst, Thomas. *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003.
- Berthold, Dennis. "Class Acts: The Astor Place Riots and Melville's 'The Two Temples.'" *American Literature* 71 (1999): 429–61.
- Brownson, Orestes. "The Laboring Classes," *Boston Quarterly Review* 3 (July 1840): 358–95.
- Cook, Sylvia Jenkins. *Working Women, Literary Ladies: The Industrial Revolution and Female Aspiration*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Coviello, Peter. *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005.
- Evelev, John. *Tolerable Entertainment: Herman Melville and Professionalism in Antebellum New York*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2009.
- Foley, Barbara. "From Wall Street to Astor Place: Historicizing Melville's 'Bartleby.'" *American Literature* 72 (2000): 87–116.
- Fruscione, Joseph. "'What is Called Savagery': Race, Visual Perception, and Bodily Contact in *Moby-Dick*." *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies*, 10.1 (2008): 3–24.
- Husband, Julie. "'The White Slave of the North': Lowell Mill Women and the Reproduction of 'Free' Labor." *Legacy* 16 (1999): 11–21.
- Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998.
- James, C. L. R. *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*. 1953; rpt. Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 2001.
- Lusky, Brian P. *On the Make: Clerks and the Quest for Capital in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: New York UP, 2010.

- Marr, Timothy. "Melville's Ethnic Conscriptiions." *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 3.1 (2001): 5–29.
- Melville, Herman. *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Writings, 1839–1860*. Ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern UP and The Newberry Library, 1987; hereafter cited as *NN PT*.
- Morrison, Toni. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (1989): 1–34.
- Nelson, Dana. *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998.
- Otter, Samuel. *Melville's Anatomies*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999.
- Parker, Hershel. *Herman Melville: A Biography, Volume 1: 1819–1851*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Reynolds, Larry J. "Antidemocratic Emphasis in White-Jacket." *American Literature* 48 (1976): 13–28.
- Roediger, David R. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York: Verso, 1991.
- Rogin, Michael. *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*. New York: Knopf, 1983.
- Saxton, Alexander. *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Verso, 1990.
- Shocket, Eric. "'Discovering Some New Race': Rebecca Harding Davis's 'Life in the Iron Mills' and the Literary Emergence of Working-Class Whiteness." *PMLA* 115 (2000): 46–59.
- Vincent, Howard P. "'White-Jacket': An Essay in Interpretation." *New England Quarterly* 22 (1949): 304–15.
- Wray, Matt. *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006.