

## Ishmael's Night of Rest and Relaxation

Rieke Jordan

Goethe-University, Frankfurt am Main, Germany

### Abstract

My article on *Moby-Dick* explores the juxtaposition of self and other, alienation and community, friendship and leisure. By way of the book's famous fourth chapter, "The Counterpane," I argue that repose, conceived as a way of spending time, exposes some of the contradictions of the capitalist dictum of industriousness. The quilt that features so prominently in the chapter is to be understood as a figure of resting and relaxing, which accumulates a patchwork of additional meanings through Ishmael's contradictory experiences during the night at the Spouter-Inn with Queequeg.

**Keywords:** quilting, Melville, repose, sensual experience, leisure, community

*The counterpane was of patchwork, full of odd little parti-colored squares and triangles; and this arm of his tattooed all over with an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a figure, no two parts of which were of one precise shade—owing I suppose to his keeping his arm at sea unmethodically in sun and shade, his shirt sleeves irregularly rolled up at various times—this same arm of his, I say, looked for all the world like a strip of that same patchwork quilt. Indeed, partly lying on it as the arm did when I first awoke, I could hardly tell it from the quilt, they so blended their hues together; and it was only by the sense of weight and pressure that I could tell that Queequeg was hugging me. (Melville 36–37)*

- 1 In this article I understand moments repose and idleness in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) as charged with aesthetic and social potential, capable of assembling oppositional forces and aligning contradictory emotions. To be at rest in *Moby-Dick*, I will argue, is an activity of spiritual, psychological, and bodily expansion. This prism of analysis considers the act of resting in the nineteenth century of ambivalent potentialities and unlocks how 'taking time' and 'spending time' can be read as revolutionary, if contradictory bodily sensations that are also aesthetic experiences. To understand the implications of such experiences, I am going to focus on the book's fourth chapter, "The Counterpane," putting emphasis on the quilt (or counterpane) and Ishmael's activities underneath it. My essay therefore peeks through an (analytical) keyhole in the Spouter-Inn and looks at Ishmael and

Queequeg in bed together—two productive, laboring bodies that are now united and reposing. These moments of repose blur experience and thought, body and emotion, in ways that transform relaxation into revolutionary experience.

- 2 We can locate transgressive potentials in repose and the “serious complexities that have long accompanied the concept of unproductivity” (Knighton 2). Moments of rest afford a productive foil to the novel’s serious complexities. My claim is that resting underneath the counterpane is both a *subjective* experience and an *objective* expression of social, revolutionary potential. The quilt acts as an occasion for social *and* aesthetic experience by bringing opposing materials, subjectivities, and text fragments into immediate proximity. Drawing on Christopher Looby’s essay, “Strange Sensations,” I explore how the counterpane allows for nuanced feelings of doubt *and* belonging. The quilt is able to offer the characters and the readers a non-linear moment of contemplation and ambivalent sensual experimentations. It provides leisure in opposition to work and labor, and thus affords a potentiality of resistance in the nineteenth century.
- 3 What can concepts like repose, relaxation, and idleness add to an understanding of the complex make-up of *Moby-Dick*? What cultural work does the quilt in particular perform in the nineteenth century? My essay explores the contradictions afforded by the counterpane, an earlier form and technique of production that unites and juxtaposes leisure and industrialization, introspection and friendship. The book is sprinkled with passages in which characters experience moments of introversion and pondering that are charged with ambiguity: Possibilities of transcendence but also moments of disbelief and suspicion qualify experience within the larger matrix of social relations. Be this on the mast-head, for instance, where Ishmael feels connected to a larger network of souls (see also Regina Schober’s article in this issue), or when Ahab famously wonders in one of his many soliloquies, such as in the chapter “The Gilder,” about “scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood’s pondering repose of IP” (Melville 373). Resting helps overcome physical and spiritual limitations, allowing characters’ to expand and connect with one another and themselves. The quilt is a threshold to a different kind of repose—the counterpane, I argue, is an allegory for the changing nature of the social and aesthetic fabric in the nineteenth century. To be at ease in (and with) *Moby-Dick* is to expand, to grow, to explore. The quilt establishes Ishmael’s experience during that night as deeply ambiguous, simultaneously uniting and separating his emotions and his body. In what follows, I will explore what that ambiguity means in relation to relaxation and its opposition to labor in the nineteenth century.

## Repose and Revolution

- 4 *Moby-Dick* tells the story of the crew of the *Pequod*, of Ishmael, of the rise of nineteenth-century American capitalism and global networks of trade, of Ahab's monomania, of camaraderie, of the whaling industry, and of the craft of writing and composing. By the time of publication, *Moby-Dick* stood in conversation with a new set of social relations that hinged equally on social continuation and on stylistic, aesthetic unfinishedness that I would posit as a proto-modernist conundrum. In "The Novel as Cryptogram," Claudio Magris suggests that this

*American epic, still close to the world of nature and not yet engulfed by the second nature of technology and social relations, is often unfinished: groping in search of some ultimate meaning in life beyond any 'prosaic' social boundary, 'it leaves the copestone to posterity', as Melville put it. This is an epos that [...] may recount the annihilation of life, but not of meaning. (103–04)*

I appreciate Magris's sense of the American epic describing a moment in American fiction and American economy that still lacked a clear organizational structure and cohesion. *Moby-Dick* hence challenges a new set of social (and aesthetic) relations and organizations, for the book enables contradictions and counterparts to co-exist and to be meshed together.

- 5 Similarly, Edward Ahearn in *Marx and Modern Fiction* explains that in "myriad ways, often through to be self-contradictory, *Moby-Dick* expresses the impulse to leave the realm of the sociohistorical, so privileged in a Marxist perspective" (165). Ahearn's idea of self-contradiction is a productive focal point for my argument. He is interested in what he calls a "mystic mood" and turns to passages that combine sacred and scientific measures "with the existence of the individual in historical and calendar time" (167). While I would bracket the religious aspect that Ahearn alludes to, I agree with Magris's and Ahearn's assessments that *Moby-Dick* does not annihilate meaning, but establishes meaning and relations among categories where they were not allocated before. I believe leisure and repose to be such categories, and Melville acknowledges aesthetic and sensual potential in the laboring bodies that take a rest or that ponder.
- 6 This approach does not ignore other persuasive arguments about the laboring bodies in the book and the revolutionary and radical connotations of work and labor on the *Pequod*. Leisure and resting offers an inversion of labor in *Moby-Dick*. C. L. R. James in *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, for instance, reminds us that *Moby-Dick* is first and foremost a book about labor, about activity. James emphasizes that the large global systems of the whaling economy are dependent on exploited and potentially revolutionary workers. *Moby-Dick* shows "industrial civilization on fire and plunging blindly into darkness" (James 45). The poet Charles Olsen places *Moby-Dick* in a similar context of labor and exploitation, madness and revolt:

*Don't think whaling was any different from any other American industry. The first men in it, the leaders, explorers, were WORKERS. The money and the glory came later, on top with the exploiters. And the force went down, stayed where it always does, at the underpaid bottom. Where the worker is after the leader is gone. (21)*

It is striking that these revolutionary bodies are those of workers embedded a global economic circulation of goods that exist during a changing moment of social relations—with their bodies and their labor figuring as commodities. Olsen writes polemically: “So if you want to know why Melville nailed us in *Moby-Dick*, consider whaling. Consider whaling as FRONTIER, and INDUSTRY. A product wanted, men got it: big business. The Pacific as sweatshop. Man, led, against the biggest damndest creature nature uncorks. The whale-ship as factory, the whaleboat the precision instrument” (23).

- 7 Can resting and repose offer a new site of resistance to industrialization—or a new frontier, as Olsen posits? Leisure in *Moby-Dick* does not contradict expansive, interconnected capitalist systems of freight, goods, and trade—as Ishmael’s transcendent moment on the mast-head illustrates. Such moments of repose and relaxation are compatible with feverish industrial activity. However, they also connect to larger societal and aesthetic shifts of the nineteenth century outlined above, namely those that reconfigure ideas of spending time and spending time *with* each other or alone differently. Repose, a “state of being quietly inactive or relaxed, or of being free from care, anxiety, or other disturbances” (“repose, n”), is an ambiguous activity in accelerating, industrialized societies. It offers an alternative to the tempos of “the highly dynamic nature of [its] technological, social, and cultural environment” (Rosa xxxxi). Melville was sensitive to other tempos, as Charles Olsen explains, for “History was ritual and repetition when Melville’s imagination was at its own proper beat” (13). In keeping with the repose of the counterpane that beat offers a counterpoint to industrial acceleration: The beat of a needle sewing a tarpaulin, the beat of the oars, the beat of Ahab’s wooden leg on the deck of the ship—such repetitions and rituals create an idiosyncratic rhythm on the *Pequod*, working against the acceleration processes on land, creating their own temporalities.
- 8 These contradictory societal (and economic) dynamics produce a state of oppositional meanings and bodily sensations—tensing up *and* relaxing, for instance, as we will see in Ishmael’s night underneath the counterpane. By way of the book’s protagonist, Ishmael, response and resting unlock uneasy boundaries within the emerging industrial civilization and laboring body that *Moby-Dick* chronicles. Ishmael’s body at rest might actually reveal the exact opposition to James’s and Olsen’s assumptions—Ishmael’s labor as commodity moving on a ship, but removed from the rest, a resting body removing itself, but not sleeping. Can working bodies actually afford to rest and repose once they are embedded in the global network of social relations? When we turn to the novel we realize that as much as bodies are at work,

Ishmael is more often than not *not* working and remains idle. In this it is typical of much writing in the nineteenth century. Richard Adelman reminds us that there are

*a wide variety of discourses [that] position repose, idleness, contemplation, aesthetic transcendence and several other species of passivity as central to contemporary individual and social life. Nineteenth-century political economy, as one example, pays such attention to the human tendencies towards idleness, repose and contemplative leisure that it often leaves economic activity itself looking like a rare and delicate occurrence. (7)*

Complementing Adelman's assessment of idleness and "contemplative leisure" in contrast to "economy" and busy-ness, Andrew Lyndon Knighton in *Idle Threats* ascribes *aesthetic* potency to such contradictory societal forces in the dichotomy of repose / economy. He explains that the circulation of "the concept of repose in the historical context of the early nineteenth century facilitates this dubious translation from natural [beauty] to art beauty" (Knighton 54). Repose is often "sloppily defined and inconsistently deployed," yet the concept

*nevertheless succeeds [...] by designating, often in the same utterance, two different things: the experience of surrendering to the tranquility of natural beauty, and the expression of such tranquility through the formal harmoniousness of the art work. Though clearly related, the two meanings are nonetheless not sleekly interchangeable – one identifying an experiential phenomenon or situation of reception, the other denoting a formal principle. [...] [The] treatment of 'repose' mirrors that accorded the 'sublime': at one a quality of objects and phenomena, the concept often also suggests a subjective experience. (54–55)*

Knighton establishes this definition of repose for nineteenth-century landscape painting, but it speaks to larger concepts of aesthetic ambivalence and experience in the nineteenth century—expressed by way of *subjective* experience in an accelerating society that equally finds aesthetic value in repose and economic value in speeding up.

- 9 Knighton's argument resonates with Jonathan Crary's ideas in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. By alluding to the structure of differentiation and the homogenization of an aesthetic experience, "idleness is represented as never truly desirable for its own sake, but rather is assumed subordinate to the other, and praised only as a multiplier of 'progress' and individual 'success'" (5). We need to acknowledge that this uneasiness about repose as aesthetic experience registers "the uncertain status of sleep" in relation to the particular dynamic of modernity, which flattens out the "organization of reality into binary complementaries (12). The homogenizing force of capitalism is incompatible with any inherent structure of differentiation: sacred-profane, carnival-workday, nature-culture, machine-organism, and so on" (13).

*Moby-Dick* challenges the rise of leisure and free time by way of its extremes (repose, paralysis), and might hint at the “the erosion of sleep” that prevails in modern, hyper-industrialized societies (11). Crary relates this uncertain status back to the modes of industrialization and modernization that lead to accumulation and expansion. Before analyzing “The Counterpane,” and the repose that takes place underneath Melville’s quilt, I will first outline the societal and cultural significance of the quilt in nineteenth-century American culture.

## The Quilt and Banking on the Future

- 10 How does the *object* of the counterpane, which functions as the threshold to the aesthetic and social experiences of rest and sleep, relate to acceleration and industrialization in the nineteenth century? What role does it play in the scenes in the Spouter-Inn? I maintain that the quilt speaks to larger complexities about a resting body, which can expand and unite with other bodies while being in “contemplative leisure” as Adelman proposes (7). The word itself, “counterpane,” a synonym for quilt, hints at such relations. Armin Schäfer points out that the term is an obsolete synonym for counterpart; it is equally a word as an object, in which aesthetic, existential, uncanny, erotic, and contractual aspects come together (28–29). The quilt carries interpretative difficulties in the book and in the nineteenth century in general, as it is both *object* and *activity*—similar to Knighton’s previous point about repose as experience and expression. The activity of counterpaning hints at the sense of continuity (and community) through contrast.
- 11 From the perspective of the cultural history of quilting, keeping a scrap of cloth is to bank on its future value through conserving and hoarding. The quilter keeps a scrap of cloth because it might prove useful in the future. The practice of quilting is firmly rooted in American life as social connectivity among quilters (such as in quilting bees as space to gossip and exchange news). Quilting takes up a peculiar role in American social and economic history. Fabric in the middle of the nineteenth century soon became a mass produced commodity (through the rise of textile mills and technological advancements), which made the activity of quilting as such redundant for specific social strata (bedspreads became mass produced commodities). As Janneken Smucker explains, at the core of the activity of quilting lies a set of ambivalences characteristic of a specific socioeconomic situation: “Quilting in the United States has long been characterized by cultural tensions: art, yet craft; old-fashioned, yet modern; domestically produced, yet dependent on industrialization; evoking thrift, yet rooted in abundance; avant-garde, yet conventional; community oriented, yet reflecting individual creativity” (np). My claim is that the tensions and contradictions at work in quilting also inform *Moby-Dick*, and particularly Melville’s representation of leisure. The quilt combines the experience and expression of communities in the United States and underlines the tension between the rise of throw-away culture and keepsake. Likewise, it examines a social unity of bodies in capitalism and the dissolving of communion *by way* of capitalism. The quilt is decidedly not

the product of a floating factory like the *Pequod*, but the kind of activities that go into producing a quilt, and that occur underneath it, stand in productive tension what occurs onboard the ship. It is to those leisure activities that I turn now.

- 12 *Moby-Dick* was published in a moment in American economic history that was marked by the tension between the rise of a throwaway ethic and “recycling.” The very contours of the dissolving of social and aesthetic practices at a specific moment in American history are captured (and duplicated) by *Moby-Dick*. The quilt speaks to these dual impulses, for waste (particularly in urban centers) started being conceptualized as remnants of capitalist activity, as Giles Slade explains: “what has been called ‘disposable culture’ or the ‘throwaway ethic’ began in America around the middle of the nineteenth century when a variety of cheap materials became available to industry. Innovations in the machinery of paper production, for example, made paper a practical substitute for cloth” (13). Quilting similarly operates on preservation, as outlined above. We see the opposition of the economic fabric of nineteenth-century Americans in quilting bees versus the individual, subjective experience inherent in these societal shifts of selecting / keeping / throwing away. This actually might enable a new, or altered, set of social relations, such as those signaled by Ahern and Magris, that hinge on the opposition to superseded social, sensual structures with an individual aesthetic experience. Further, it might also hinge on the survival on superseded leisure activities—such as quilting—that privileged rest, preservation, and sharing to those favored in industrial production and the social relation of capitalism, such as acceleration and accumulation.
- 13 The ethic of recycling and reusing resonates with the way the counterpane is put together through, namely through shapes that are cut to duplicate one another without losing their uniqueness (they are not mass-produced). Planned obsolescence and acceleration—two key components to nineteenth-century capitalist development that underscore the internal contradiction of the capitalist mode of production, are brought into conversation by way of the counterpane. Central to the chapter “The Counterpane” is hence exactly this uncertainty and awkwardness of the individual experience that renders the *communal* experience legible—and explores not merely the individual, but the individual in combination with the other. This marks a shift in my previous assumptions from acceleration and individualism toward a different set of social and aesthetic relation – of cooperation and friendship, of opposites made compatible. The novel itself can be likened to a quilt, for the act of quilting—aligning opposite fabrics—and Melville’s practice as a writer seem to be quite similar. *Moby-Dick* is a mosaic of scenes, styles, plot lines, and genres that oftentimes do not align logically. In this way, we can understand the quilt as a structuring metaphor of a book constructed out of sprawl, copying, duplication, repetition, and ultimately inducing fatigue, from time to time, in even its most dedicated readers. The quilt might also serve as an allegory for community, which is stitched together from single, individual pieces.

## Ishmael and Queequeg Underneath the Counterpane

- 14 The quilt serves as a threshold to sleep in “The Counterpane,” but the chapter itself is a threshold and looming to the voyage on the *Pequod*. It signals the ongoing importance of relaxation and of social bonding, on land on board the industrialized ship. The quilt, a remnant of non-industrial leisure activities, connotes rest, preservation, and sharing as opposed to acceleration. In this way, the quilt in the scene brings together opposing materials and men and ambivalent impulses and desires. In the following, I will turn to such temporal unions and alliances, the friendship that governs the book and the moment of introspection underneath the quilt. Jeff Morgan explains, how the symbols in the chapter, such as Ishmael and Queequeg’s “embrace, the patchwork quilt, Queequeg’s tattoos, and the blending of the latter two, represent cultural integration, but soon give way to more ethnocentric detailing” (7–8). Yet the quilt also brings two men together temporarily and affords a different kind of repose, turning Queequeg and Ishmael into friends who spend time together entwined in body and soul. So the experience underneath the counterpane is deeply somatic and unifying, “involving a rediscovery of unity in Ishmael’s being as well as an attraction to Queequeg” (Ahearn 174). The following explores the non-accelerated temporalities available in the Spouter-Inn.
- 15 As the cultural practice of quilting helps us understand, the two men who figure as counterparts under the quilt are themselves patchwork pieces; that is to say they do and do not relate to each other aesthetically or socially. Here, a feeling of ‘being seen’ and recognized in a mosaic of sensual and social relations can initiate a deep, meaningful friendship. This links leisure and friendship more explicitly and explains how leisure and resting function as cultural spaces in relation to the modes of industrial production that offer no place for leisure. A close reading of Ishmael’s experiences can help elucidate the link between the quilt and friendship as well as the contradictory idea of repose in the book. Are Ishmael and Queequeg cut from the same cloth, do they function as doubles?
- 16 It’s night at the Spouter-Inn, and Ishmael is about to go to bed with a stranger, Queequeg. But Ishmael goes to bed again (he first wanted to sleep on a wooden bench)—and the plot of the first chapters is marked by such duplications and repetitions, hence noticeably characterized by a “mob of unnecessary duplicates” (Hayford 674). This mob of duplicates needs organization, especially when “duplicates breed duplicates” (675). Harrison Hayford sees Ishmael engaging with duplicates again and again: “And he finds duplicates, not one place but two, and goes to bed twice, first on a cold narrow bench alone, then in a warm prodigious bed with a harpooner bedfellow. Why both?” (675). Once he goes to sleep again, Ishmael awaits a strange bedfellow whom he has not yet met, but whose presence he duplicates before they meet (by trying on his clothes). He will even breed a “duplicate” later, namely the tomahawk that Ishmael finds nestled in the bed the two men share. The men who sleep under a counterpane are also forming one.



- 17 Upon waking the next morning, Queequeg's arm rests gently around Ishmael. Ishmael notices the arm and the quilt. His observations, as the quote at the beginning of the article illustrates, try to make sense of experiences that he cannot fully grasp or delineate from one another—they do not clearly duplicate a precise experience, but rather form an unclear patchwork of sensations that juxtaposes “precise” and “irregular,” “weight” / “pressure” and “hug” (Melville 36–37). The question that arises for Ishmael in this confusing, ambivalent state of bliss and terror is how he can have both experiences at the same time. “The Counterpane” effectively offers a disturbing mix of images that as Wyn Kelley explains, can only be alleviated by Ishmael's off-kilter sense of humor:

*Queequeg's outlandish tattooing and the domestic quilt, Queequeg's savage body and his affectionate, conjugal hug. These disturbing mixtures and conjunctions supply the fabric for Ishmael's narration and Melville's book. Here the images of patchwork quilt and patchwork body suggest that the artistic attempt at making a unity from many disparate parts carries with it a certain unsettling 'weight and pressure,' along with the ecstasy of oneness. (72–73)*

Such is the fabric of *experience*, and the fabric of the *object*—the sensual and the aesthetic come to mix and duplicate earlier experience. Kelley's reading gestures toward the charged social relations *and* toward the aesthetic experience of the quilt. It hence encompasses the ambivalence of repose as that of humor and horror, of terror and error. Yet these perceived categories are extremely difficult to decipher, as Ishmael's confusion makes clear. If the book is governed by a mob of duplicates, as postulated by Hayford, so are Ishmael's unconscious impulses upon waking underneath the quilt, which itself is composed of oppositions and duplicates.

- 18 Even sleep is ambiguous, as Ishmael's moments of sleep paralysis show, and this is in line with Crary's explanation of the asymmetrical relation between sleep and waking in capitalist society. This relation begins to be “conceptualized in hierarchical models in which sleep was understood as a regression to a lower and more primitive mode in which supposedly higher and more complex brain activity was ‘inhibited’” (Crary 12). This uncertainty about what is higher and what lower, can be transposed onto the asymmetry and uncertainty in the chapter and the hierarchies between bodies and forms of labor (Queequeg in relation to Ishmael). Here, it helps to underline how individuality and community are paradoxical states that constantly remain in flux. We might also gesture toward the blending of the “primitive” modes (Queequeg, who is othered and seen as brute and savage by Ishmael) with more complex (brain) activities (such as sleep paralysis). Following Crary's argument, sleep and wakefulness can be understood as activities that are hierarchically divided, but yet not easily distinguishable. Ishmael does not understand where his own body ends and the other, Queequeg, or the object, the quilt, begins—neither does he know when sleep ends and his wakefulness begins, nor when present begins and past ends.

- 19 This sensual, aesthetic, sensuous confusion therefore reminds Ishmael of a traumatic experience while he is pinned down by the weight and pressure of Queequeg's arm. The morning in the inn brings back the traumatic memories from Ishmael's childhood. Being punished for fooling around, for "cutting up some caper or other," young Ishmael is sent to his room to go to bed on the day of the solstice (Melville 37). The double meaning of "cutting up some caper or other" suggests horsing around and doing juvenile pranks and, more literally, it may also refer to the fragmentation of domestic routines and patterns that Ishmael's household was governed by: night and day, community and solitude, unity and fragment. He had to stay in bed for sixteen hours, and he remembers how

*My arm hung over the counterpane, and the nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom, to which the hand belonged, seemed closely seated by my bed-side. For what seemed ages piled on ages, I lay there, frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand; yet ever thinking that if I could but stir it one single inch, the horrid spell would be broken. I knew not how this consciousness at last glided away from me; but waking in the morning, I shudderingly remembered it all, and for days and weeks and months afterwards I lost myself in confounding attempts to explain the mystery. Nay, to this very hour, I often puzzle myself with it. (Melville 37–38)*

Ishmael is consumed by terror at the memory, but he is also consumed by bliss and tenderness during the present moment with Queequeg. This childhood experience of being sent to bed and holding the phantom hand determined Ishmael's formative years, and in this sense, he grew up (being) "puzzled" and disturbed. His choice of words render "puzzle" an active verb—and the pieces of the counterpane get puzzled together, which links the activity of quilting to the experience of reposing and remembering. Ishmael uses the expression "I puzzle myself with it"—not only is he preoccupied with the memory, but he disintegrates himself to make sense of the experience with the phantom hand and then puts himself back together in his adulthood. He turns (himself) into a puzzle, and he remembers feelingly, with Queequeg's touch revealing impulses of terror and confusion, but also hints at the possibility to puzzle himself back together.

- 20 Ishmael simultaneously has an out-of-body and an in-the-body experience, within him and outside of him at the same time, somewhere between being asleep and awake. Such are the limits of the physical self that is sentient—the self that feels, dreams, registers, remembers two experiences at the same time. Returning to Hayford's comment about *Moby-Dick*'s duplicates might offer an additional answer, for the moment underneath the counterpane does not only replicate a matrimonial union, but a lingering sense of punishment and isolation. The doubling of the self (underneath the quilt and in the traumatic memory) in the quilt chapter exemplifies "a charged encounter between aesthetic dispositions inciting novel sensual practices,

and enabling them to improvise a relational experience that does not answer to any of our received categories” (Looby 71). Ishmael’s novel sensual practices, such as his experience of dissolving, are key to the importance of repose in the book: they become a means of suspending in “tense repose,” an ambivalent emotion that Melville himself also “felt and transformed into art” (Bryant x). Ishmael cannot tell body and the fabric apart; the body resembles that of the patchwork quilt, yet none of the patches of skin resemble one another.

- 21 It is, as Ishmael explains, a Cretan labyrinth in which the motionless Ishmael cannot move but only sense, and ultimately, he is lost. Andrew Delbanco suggests that “Ishmael feels himself dissolve into the flesh and fabric out on top of him. [He] cannot distinguish between Queequeg’s arm and the quilt, or even quite tell where his own body ends and the coverings begin” (133). Hierarchies and bodies dissolve with the material: he and the quilt (and Queequeg) are not different anymore—yet the dissolving of physical and emotional boundaries and properties, and hence the mixing of contradictory emotions, is key to the scene. It is the blending into another person as well as of being lost in that other person, the simultaneous dissociation and association, that make this moment in the book so powerful. No wonder Ishmael is so confused—the quilt offers a duplication of the phenomenon of unconscious impulses (the dream, terror) and objective properties (pattern, craft). The reader realizes that the counterpane is indeed chaotic, compiled of squares that do not resemble each other—hence without any hierarchy and counterintuitive to the duplicates that seem to govern the book.

- 22 Note how in the nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for strangers to share beds in inns. But it is for Ishmael:

*upon the unbecomingness of his hugging a fellow male in that matrimonial sort of style, I succeeded in extracting a grunt; and presently, he drew back his arm, shook himself all over like a Newfoundland dog just from the water, and sat up in bed, stiff as a pike-staff, looking at me, and rubbing his eyes as if he did not altogether remember how I came to be there, though a dim consciousness of knowing something about me seemed slowly dawning over him. (Melville 38)*

“Unbecoming” is infused with double meaning—not only improper, but the dissolving into the other—but how will Ishmael un-become? The quilt alludes to ambiguity, interpretation, texture and textual work, drawing on Delbanco’s idea that Ishmael feels himself “dissolve into the flesh and fabric out on top of him” (133). Resting underneath the counterpane is indeed an act of becoming, of aligning contradictions and synthesizing them into a concrete, albeit ambivalent, experience of aesthetic and sensual nature, of contemplative idleness. This contemplative idleness is key to the scene and to the experience that the older mode of production (quilt) holds available. The rest the quilt induces leads to this contemplative idleness, which

rests in the self, and facilitates a moment of “un-becoming” where self and other mingle, in this case through homosocial (and homoerotic) bonding. The experience is deeply confusing, because the Ishmael cannot get an “overview,” he is pinned down and motionless, yet he feels himself bleed into the fabric and flesh of the other. A weirdly immersive experience that focusses on just the parts, not the whole. This ambiguous potential of the quilt—texture and text, communion, being the same with the other—finds its completion by bringing two individuals together into bed.

- 23 The quilt equally expresses and makes available bliss in union but also incorporates Ishmael’s trauma of isolation in childhood in his dream-like state. Opposites are aligned and can coexist, and Christopher Looby detects an “indistinguishability of erotic and aesthetic experience” (71) in this passage. As much as the men, Ishmael and Queequeg, do not seem to resemble each other, they are being made ‘compatible’—by way of a new set of social relations that Magris posited above and by way of the cultural practice of quilting. If we remain within the realm of the sensual, the scene underlines the abject terror of being unable to determine the limits of one’s own body—that the body can still expand, can still be enhanced by another part—just like a quilt, with new sensations co-aligning with other memories. Yet this compatibility is brought about by “sensory confusion or disorientation” of Ishmael’s repressed memory—and only later Queequeg’s memories via his tattoos and his coffin on the *Pequod* (Looby 78).
- 24 The quilt also allows for a visual experience, and the ability of making sense of the world by illustration, color, patterns, repetition, precision. Remember in what detailed way Ishmael narrates Queequeg’s ablution before he comes to bed; Ishmael also minutely explains *how* he watches his bedfellow. There is a continuous emphasis on the visual experience of their encounter—the body is indistinguishable from the quilt (making body *and* quilt a *trompe l’oeil*), and Ishmael shamelessly stares at Queequeg. As a consequence, Ishmael even draws the curtains so others will not see Queequeg getting dressed (and gets the pleasure for himself alone). Christopher Looby makes a persuasive point about Ishmael trying on Queequeg’s clothes before his bedfellow returns. He likens Ishmael’s act to a striptease, which is a titillating sexual experience that refuses touch but rewards close watching—opposite to the phantom hand that he cannot see but that he feels. Similarly, it is an eerie precursor to Mark Fisher’s idea of the consumer-spectator, who moves from engaging to watching, from doing to consuming: “Yet this turn from belief to aesthetics, from engagement to spectatorship, is held to be one of the virtues of capitalist realism” (5). Ishmael is watching himself becoming somebody else (by trying on Queequeg’s clothes and enjoying it) and then resolving from a reader into a spectator, passive and non-rebellious.

## Conclusion

- 25 In "The Counterpane" the quilt is being transferred into a space of temporary domesticity that 'feels heavy' into one of spatial and temporal confusion and ambiguity. The quilt thus renders the activity of reading and resting disorienting and figures as a paradoxical object (accumulation, expansion, future value) that affords and enables paradoxical subjective impulses (rest, sleep, and, in Ishmael's case, unconscious and sensual impulses). In his mental state of disarray, Ishmael actively seeks out temporal unions, like the homosocial activity of sailing with other men, "to drive off the spleen," as Ishmael so famously claims in the first chapter (Melville 18). The quilt makes claims of how work and repose, revolution and relaxation can be brought into proximity and experienced in all its mosaic ambivalences. So as much as the quilt here may evoke domesticity (Ishmael calling himself "wife"; the matrimonial style of their night; the tomahawk as stand-in for a baby), it might perform an obverse operation. The quilt covers temporal domestic unions of men from disparate strands of life to make them legible in cultural terms.
- 26 The counterpane, a fabric of reused materials, introduces the difficulty and the ambiguous nature of the social experience in the nineteenth century, and the complications and restfulness of embedding the self into a larger (anonymous) mass of workers, people, and souls. Ishmael's experience can be read as a comment on the uneasy social and aesthetic boundaries of sleeping and resting in the emerging nineteenth-century capitalist society of the United States. *Moby-Dick* finds aesthetic strategies for a social matrix of nineteenth-century American capitalism—and, vice versa, social strategies for the aesthetic matrix of nineteenth-century American capitalism. Returning to the social-aesthetic expression / experience, the quilt is finished (an expression), and instead of it indexing production and community, it suggests sex, trauma, re-production, and the forming of a community.
- 27 We can think of this chapter also as a precursor to the unity of working bodies, as in specialization and co-operation, outlined by Karl Marx. He explains in the first volume of *Capital* that the workers' "union into one single productive body and the establishment of a connexion between their individual functions, are matters foreign and external to them" and "are not their own act, but the act of the capital that brings and keeps them together" ("Chapter Thirteen: Co-operation" np). This is underscored by Ishmael's own feelings of (bodily) estrangement and dissociation – he is dissociated from his own hand, not from the commodity (the quilt) but from his own hands, his own working tool. After their time in the Spouter-Inn, both sailors venture off to become a cog in the machine of the *Pequod* and become part of another, larger unit. Thus, Ahearn underlines how the impact of *Moby-Dick* derives from the "book's ability to cause us to experience what initially seems strange but which we gradually discover, perhaps discover in ourselves"—such as repressed memories of disintegration by way of union (174).

- 28 Both men are fragmented: both are composed of parts that make up a whole, Ishmael a puzzle, Queequeg a maze. The terrors and errors of not knowing the borders of one's own body underline in this case how the conceptualization of the self at rest is one of continuous, if ambivalent, expansion. The weight and pressure has bodily dimensions, but also societal and political ones. This idea is mirrored in the way that Queequeg does not understand how to "properly" or modestly dress himself—what belongs into the private and what can be done "in public" (i.e., putting on his boots). This individual confusion about being put together stands in contrast with Marx's point about being an entity in a larger union, and hence brings us back to Magris's argument about the social relation outlined in the book. This is reflected in the way Queequeg is "a-maze-ing" and does not look "put together" through his intricate Polynesian tattoos whose meanings are lost to Ishmael. Even if he grew up puzzled, how to be "put together" like Queequeg, like a quilt, remains a puzzle to Ishmael.

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## About the Author

**Rieke Jordan** worked as assistant professor (wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin) at the Department of English and American Studies at Goethe-University Frankfurt from 2016-2021. She obtained her PhD in North American Studies from the Graduate School of North American Studies at the Free University of Berlin (2016). Her monograph *Work in Progress* (2019) was published with Bloomsbury.

## Suggested Citation

Jordan, R. "Ishmael's Night of Rest and Relaxation". *New American Studies Journal: A Forum*, Vol. 71, Sept. 2021, doi:10.18422/71-05.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18422/71-05>

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