

Andrin Albrecht*

White Whales, White Pools: An Aquatic Crossmapping of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Emma Cline's *The Guest*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2025-2017>

Abstract: This article introduces the method of ‘crossmapping’ to the Blue Humanities and shows how, by focusing on thematic and aesthetic functions of water, widely different texts can be brought into dialogue without presupposing a direct line of influence. Aquatic crossmapping can reveal cultural paradigms that transcend time, geography, and cultural contexts, as well as help chart the varied affordances of water itself. As a case study, this article crossmaps two US American novels almost two centuries apart: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Emma Cline's *The Guest* (2023). Despite Melville's novel being among the most adapted works of American fiction, *The Guest* is in no way hypertextually related to it. Yet, remarkable parallels become discernable by honing in on water in both of the texts: water's deceptive promise of sanctuary, its function as a source *and* marker of capital, as well as its constituting the identity of both novels' protagonists.

Keywords: *Moby-Dick*; crossmapping; Blue Humanities; capitalism; Melville; Emma Cline

1 Introduction

The goal of this article is to develop water as a critical tool for literary studies by taking seriously its potential as a “*matter of relation and connection*” (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis 2013, 12; original emphasis). I will demonstrate how reading *for* water can be used to productively link texts from vastly different genres, location, and literary periods, as well as bring to the fore thematic resonances between them that are otherwise likely to be overshadowed by more solid themes. I will do so through two case studies from US American literature, namely Herman Melville's 1851 classic *Moby-Dick*; or, *The Whale*, and Emma Cline's 2023 bestseller *The Guest*, drawing on Elizabeth Bronfen's method of ‘crossmapping’ and rendering it aquatic. Specifically, I will analyze water as a narrative device from multiple angles to consider some of its most

***Corresponding author: Andrin Albrecht**, MA, Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Department of English and American Studies, Rathausplatz 9, 07747 Jena, Germany, E-mail: andrin.albrecht@uni-jena.de

noteworthy affordances, among them water as (treacherous) sanctuary, water as capital, and water as identity.

Written almost two centuries apart, Melville's and Cline's novels, at first glance, have little in common. One is a tome of Miltonian ambition, retroactively canonized and declared the "Great American Novel" *par excellence* (Buell 2008, 137). It famously grapples with foundational topics such as democracy versus authoritarianism (e.g. Fredricks 1995), the metaphysics of evil (e.g. Watters 1940), Christianity versus atheism (e.g. Cook 2012), and the very concept of the novel (e.g. Sten 1996). The other novel is "a deceptively simple" (Jacobs 2023, n.pag.) page turner about an escort worker who bides time in the Hamptons by lounging on beaches and crashing high society pool parties. Even though *Moby-Dick* counts among the most adapted and intertextually alluded to works in American literature,¹ *The Guest* at no point overtly or implicitly references it. No hypertextual relationship between the two is established.

However, it is precisely their seeming dissimilarity that makes the two novels fruitful for a comparative analysis. Reading texts together that share no apparent connection necessitates a change of perspective: Rather than focusing on direct channels of cultural transfer, it throws into relief underlying patterns and recurrences. It draws attention to structural and thematic details that are easy to miss if we examine either text in isolation. As it gives us the chance to trace a connecting element – in this case water – across widely different contexts and manifestation, ideally, such a comparison reveals as much about the element as it does about the connection between the two cultural artefacts.

2 Crossmapping Waterways

Taking inspiration from Aby Warburg's influential early twentieth-century work on 'Pathosformeln [pathos formulas]' and 'Denkräume [thinking spaces]' (2010), cultural theorist Elisabeth Bronfen coined the term 'crossmappings' to describe the study of cultural products that share no obvious intertextual connections. In her 2018 essay collection by the same name, she writes that certain "image formulas (*Bildformeln*) from the past are retrieved from the arsenal of our cultural imaginary and adjusted to the present, so as to give expression to our contemporary articulations of intimate emotion" (Bronfen 2018, 1; original emphasis). In other words, Bronfen reiterates Warburg's suggestion that certain constellations keep reoccurring in the artistic imagination even in widely different geographical, historical, and social contexts. In

¹ The *Wikipedia* page "Adaptations of *Moby-Dick*" (2024) counts ninety-seven entries, which do not include the myriad novels, films, graphic novels, and theater plays that tell original stories but are obviously inspired by or allude to Melville's work.

analyzing such reoccurring images – ‘images’ here is meant in the broadest possible sense, encompassing literal images, symbols, types of scenes or characters, themes, or narrative sequences – Bronfen is “less interested in uncovering established influences between certain moments in different texts than in finding a similarity in the concerns they revolve around” (2018, 2). She holds:

I understand crossmapping above all as a practice in reading, in which theoretical and aesthetic apprehensions of our cultural imaginary prove to be mutually implicated. While theory seizes upon certain cultural concerns that have already played themselves out in the arena of aesthetic formalization, we need critical metaphors to draw our attention to the resilient afterlife these artistic creations have had, as well as to work out their continual relevance for contemporary culture. (Bronfen 2018, 4)

Bronfen, in other words, argues that specific ideas and specific images in a cultural consciousness are reminiscent of one another, oftentimes without evident causal connection and without our awareness. Ideas are transported through images, images are transported through structures of artistic exchange, and similar images can crop up in widely different contexts, thereby attaching to new ideas but also draw with them the paradigms with which they have been historically associated.

This notion bears parallels to Gérard Genette’s theory of hypertextuality, but offers a wider degree of freedom. Genette defines ‘hypertextuality’ as “any relationship uniting a text B [...] to an earlier text A [...] upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” (1997, 5). Part and parcel of this relationship, for him, is the process of “grafting”: a deliberate transformation of the hypotext *by* the hypertext. By contrast, the merits of Bronfen’s ‘crossmapping’ lie in its forgoing such intentional relationships and instead more generally tracing “the afterlife of cultural image formulas,” exploring how the “*energia* of an aesthetic work remains in circulation” (2018, 3–4; original emphasis) rather than how it is actively *kept* in circulation by intertextual transference.

To give a concrete example: In a chapter titled “Wounds of Wonder,” Bronfen offers a crossmapping of the Greek myth of Iris and the harpies – divine sisters but also radical contrasts, the former being the goddess of rainbows and a messenger to the gods while the latter are monstrous birds who spoil any food they touch – with the street photography of Diane Arbus. Through this pairing, Bronfen explores a pervasive interconnection of beauty and disgust: In her photographs of “freaks” and social outcasts, Arbus draws our attention to “the peculiarity of each individual human being, [...] the flaws that mark each individual as being unique, yet at the same time [seeks] to recognize the stories her subjects would tell about themselves” (Bronfen 2018, 296). Thus, according to Bronfen, the same duality of attraction and revulsion, of the monstrous and beautiful, that Greek mythology visualized as winged siblings becomes visible. In this manner, distinct cultural artefacts can function as mutual

critical metaphors, which unfold their own visuality. I [...] compare texts of different medialities along the axis of a shared visual language, so as to confront the visuality of both narrative texts as well as critical concepts with the narrative quality of images. (Bronfen 2018, 3; original emphasis)

They can be utilized as instruments to shed light on one another, bypassing questions of direct influence, and instead train attention on the transcultural patterns that emerge when one work is placed next to the other.

Consequently, the process of crossmapping and what Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis have called “thinking with water” (2013, 3) are highly commensurate. They write:

Thinking with water encourages relational thinking, as theories based on fluidity, viscosity, and porosity reveal. But if water is deployed as a potent metaphor in such thinking, [...] we must recall that these theories are inspired by relations that are decidedly material. Water is a *matter* of relation and connection. (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis 2013, 12; original emphasis)

This resonates with Bronfen’s claim about “theoretical [...] apprehensions of our cultural imaginary” attaching themselves to aesthetic forms across time and space (2018, 1). Water permeates histories and geographies; it moves from the material realm through the realm of language and ideas; it is what connects, for example, Greek mythological monsters, Mesoamerican irrigation systems, and present-day maritime cities, even though none of them were conceivably influenced by the other. In effect, any chart of waterways is a crossmap, and water, therefore, precisely one of those “*critical metaphors*, which [...] confront the visuality of both narrative texts as well as critical concepts with the narrative quality of images” (Bronfen 2018, 3; original emphasis). The question now is how to harness this critical potential in practice.

3 An Unlikely Confluence

Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* needs little introduction, which is not surprising in its own right. It has not only been called “the urtext of the human encounter with the global ocean” (Mentz 2024, 15) and thus a foundational text of the Blue Humanities, but likely counts among *the* most influential and mythically charged novels in US American literature. At the same time, *Moby-Dick* happens to be one of “those unfortunate books that are taught rather than enjoyed” (Harrison 2011, n.pag.), and bought much more often than actually read. It is the epitome of an ‘encyclopedia novel,’ a term coined by Edward Mendelsohn² to describe

² Mendelsohn develops this concept from Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), a novel heavily modelled after Melville’s. Thus, *Moby-Dick* can be posited as an ur-encyclopedia novel. In my

narratives [which] are metonymic compendia of the *data*, both scientific and aesthetic, valued by their culture. They attempt to incorporate representative elements of all the varieties of knowledge their societies put to use. [...] All encyclopedic narratives contain, *inter alia*, theoretical accounts of statecraft, histories of language, and images of their own enormous scale in the form of giants or gigantism. (Mendelsohn 1978, 9; original emphasis)

Despite its programmatic maximization of size, scope, and formal heterogeneity, *Moby-Dick* is exceptionally easy to summarize. Unlike with other famed encyclopedic novels – Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (1930), Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), or Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) – many more people than those who have actually read Melville's novel will have a good idea of its plot: A young sailor named Ishmael hires on a ship, the *Pequod*, and goes to sea to hunt sperm whales. Ahab, the mad captain whose leg was bit off by the White Whale Moby Dick monomaniacally derails the journey, turning it into his personal quest for vengeance. He convinces his crew to pursue the White Whale, ignoring numerous portents, and when they finally meet, Moby Dick sinks the *Pequod* and drags Ahab down into the deep. The simplicity of this synopsis affords *Moby-Dick* an iconicity and cultural pervasiveness far beyond most other 'Great American Novels.' Because it is so universally known, but oftentimes only in the second degree, it is an obvious candidate to ask: What do other texts take from the reservoir of the cultural imaginary into which *Moby-Dick* has flown?

A number of worthwhile answers to this question can be developed by examining Emma Cline's *The Guest*, a novel that, at first glance, could hardly be more different from Melville's. A slick psychological thriller *cum* class satire, *The Guest* clocks in at under three hundred pages. Whereas *Moby-Dick* takes place over the course of two years and circles the entire globe, Cline's novel spans a single week, and its locations are mostly within walking distance from one another. It follows Alex, a woman in her early twenties, making a precarious living as an escort worker. At the beginning of the novel, she just arrived at what supposedly are the Hamptons³ together with Simon, an affluent art dealer, who is 30 years her senior and currently her only client: She hopes that they might transition into a genuine relationship, that he might be her ticket out of precarity. However, after a series of mishaps, Simon kicks Alex out. She decides to stay in the Hamptons nonetheless and grift her way through the next few days, knowing that, in a week, Simon will host his annual Labor Day party. If she shows up after having laid low for a while, she hopes they might make amends and fall in love again.

dissertation, submitted at the University of Jena in December 2024, I examine the relationship between these two novels and the concepts of 'genius' on which they capitalize in detail.

3 None of the locations in Cline's novel are named.

If the question were about *The Guest's* hypertextual descentance, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) would be a much more obvious candidate than *Moby-Dick*: Both novels are scathing examinations of class, death, and the hamstrung American Dream, staged around East Coast swimming pools. One could likewise draw lines of influence to John Cheever's doomed quest through suburbia in "The Swimmer" (1964), and to grifter narratives set among the uber-rich such as Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955). However, in addition to the merit of counterintuitive comparisons that I argued for earlier, another reason why it is worth crossmapping *The Guest* with *Moby-Dick* specifically is because the two works share a high level of generic indeterminacy. Lawrence Buell notes about Melville's novel that it "was composed in two if not three stages" (2014, 354), which is evidenced by its abrupt changes in tone, its storylines that build up and go nowhere, the inconsistent backstories of certain characters, and the disappearance of others halfway through the book. Fluctuating between seafaring adventure and political allegory, between comedy, tragedy, and picaresque, it seems impossible to say definitely what kind of novel, what genre *Moby-Dick* is supposed to be. Even though *The Guest* is more stringently composed, it is similarly hard to pin down: It flirts with the genres of psychological and erotic thriller, with 'eat the rich' revenge fantasy, with crime fiction and romance, but never resolves into any one of them. Despite its backdrop of money, sex, drugs, and exploitation, *The Guest* is neither pornographic nor violent. Indeed, if reviewers have characterized the experience of reading it as "deeply unpleasant" (Segrave 2023, n.pag.), it was not because of shocking content but because they found it impossible to anticipate whether the novel's narrative was *about* to be shocking. In other words, until a car crash abruptly ends the protagonist's odyssey through the Hamptons, *The Guest* remains a novel in which nothing really happens but any number of things *could* happen. That indeterminacy ultimately places it a lot closer to Melville's novel than *The Great Gatsby* or *The Talented Mr. Ripley* or even *American Psycho*, to which Cline's novel bears a similar hypertextual affinity.

4 Water as Sanctuary

In both *Moby-Dick* and *The Guest*, water is initially introduced as promising escape, protection, a reprieve, or even an entirely new beginning. Cline's novel opens with the following scene, set in the liminal space of a beach, where the transition of humans between land and water is *the* pivotal component of its cultural semantics:

This was August. The ocean was warm, and warmer every day.

Alex waited for a set to finish before making her way into the water, slogging through until it was deep enough to dive. A bout of strong swimming and she was out, beyond the break. The surface was calm.

[...]

On the shore, the towels were occupied by placid beachgoers. [...]

What would they see if they looked at Alex?

In the water, she was just like everyone else. Nothing strange about a young woman, swimming alone. No way to tell whether she belonged here or didn't. (Cline 2023, 3–4)

Clearly, this opening is steeped in water. It not only sets the scene with its evocation of beachside holidays, but water is itself imbued with agency. For one, it functions as a destination: *The Guest* does not open with Alex either lying at the beach or already swimming, but moving from the beach into the surf: Water, in other words, attracts her. Moreover, it affords camouflage: Throughout the story, Alex is mortified of being recognized for an outsider. Despite being an expert in being pleasantly unassuming thanks to her profession, the habitus of high society is not part of her essence. Cline's novel reveals little about Alex's background, but it is clear she grew up in a flyover state⁴ and does not come from money. A slightly wrong turn of phrase, one detail of her outfit could single her out as a mere *guest* in this environment at any moment, but this risk is suspended in water. People do not have coded conversations while swimming; they do not pay attention to someone's acquaintances or the state of someone's clothes. Thus, water acts as sanctuary, as camouflage, as a way of temporarily flattening social difference. The beach setting as a liminal contact zone between land and water, the inhospitable and the alluring, is thus metonymical for *The Guest* as a whole. The entire novel is situated at such a contact zone – between social classes, between genders – and Alex can hold her own as long as she keeps close enough to the sanctuary of water in which her difference is imperceptible, but becomes an outcast as soon as she tries to venture too far on dry land, the exclusionary domain of a masculinist, old-money elite.

This function of water as sanctuary mirrors a similar pattern in *Moby-Dick*, despite the fact that Melville's novel features neither beach scenes nor swimming pools. It equally opens with a youth without prospects from further inland being drawn to water for protective escape. Its iconic first paragraph reads:

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago – never mind how long precisely – having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and specially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off – then I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. (Melville 2003, 3)

4 This detail at once underscores Alex's movement towards water already before the beginning of the story, and her non-belonging in this moneyed world of beach towns. Even geographically, she is a mere 'guest.'

Despite their temporal and contextual differences, at the beginning of both *Moby-Dick* and *The Guest*, a young, free-floating person on the verge of destitution is moving from land to water because it promises to suspend the forlornness they experience. There is nothing for either of them to go back to. Taking to sea promises a reprieve: Social conventions function differently, it is easier to fit in, and making ends meet will cease to be a pressing issue.

However, both openings mark that reprieve as temporary and associate water with doom in the same breath as they offer it up as a haven. Ishmael calls going to sea his “substitute for pistol and ball” (Melville 2003, 3), and indeed, his path from the shore into the sea will lead him straight into “the crooked [...] jaws of death” (Melville 2003, 177). This same trajectory is laid out in *The Guest* within a much shorter span: Initially, Alex embraces the serenity of floating in the sea. She has swallowed a bunch of painkillers and considers “the surrounding salt water another narcotic” (Cline 2023, 4). However, moments later,

she was farther out than she'd imagined. Much farther. How had that happened? She tried to head back in, toward the beach, but she wasn't seeming to get anywhere, her strokes eaten up by the water. (Cline 2023, 5)

Alex makes it back to shore, escaping the riptide by a hair's breadth, just like Ishmael, at the very end of *Moby-Dick*, is saved from drowning only by sheer luck. In both texts, the attraction, the respite, and consolation water promises are treacherous. Both novels begin with and are subsequently structured around the attractive force of water, which promises sanctuary but is quickly revealed as a trap. In a long passage also in *Moby-Dick*'s first chapter, Ishmael ruminates about how all humans are drawn to water and all roads ultimately lead to the sea:

Inlanders all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues – north, east, south, and west. Yet here they all unite. [...] But look! here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive. (Melville 2003, 4)

At first, this reads as a Romantic conception: water as a site of longing, purpose, and supernatural fulfillment. However, knowing the cataclysm in which Ishmael's and his fellow sailors' own pilgrimage to the sea culminates, this passage reveals as perilous an undertow as the one Alex is caught in.⁵ The sea-seekers bound for a dive are likely to never surface again. It is only fitting, then, that Ishmael closes these same ruminations with a reference to the Greek myth of Narcissus, but with a twist of his

⁵ This notion of water as a sublime space that is enticing at a distance, but comes to represent lethal danger up close, is paradigmatic in Romanticism. In addition to Melville, notable examples can be found in Samuel Tyler Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), Canto II of Lord Byron's *Don Juan*, or Heinrich Heine's *Die Lore-Ley* (1824), in each of which alluring bodies of water are revealed as a trap.

own: In the original myth, Narcissus, after he falls in love with his reflection in a pool of water, withers away from heartbreak (Ovid 1955, 87) or takes his own life (Conon 2002, 172). By contrast, in Ishmael's re-telling, Narcissus "plunged into [the water] and drowned" (Melville 2003, 5). One of the reasons for this resurfacing fatal attraction is water's promise of sanctuary: a heterotopia where social dynamics play out differently, where problems are temporarily suspended as if by a powerful narcotic. However, there are also two more concrete reasons of why, in both novels, people are drawn to water at their own peril: money and status.

5 Water as Capital

Water as an economic factor has been a core concern in cultural studies since even before the term 'Blue Humanities' itself was coined.⁶ In an age of rising temperatures and dwindling fresh water supplies, the role of water as "blue gold" (Barlow and Clarke 2005, viii) only gains in importance.⁷ From agriculture to globalized trade to mining, its crucial role in industry likewise needs little reiteration. It is not surprising, then, that water's function as capital is at the forefront of *Moby-Dick*. In the very first paragraph, Ishmael recounts that he went to sea because he had "little or no money in [his] purse" (Melville 2003, 3). When he arrives in the whaling town of Nantucket and finds a ship to hire on, the first thing he does is negotiate how big a share of the profits he will receive. Whaling was the first industry in which the still young United States became a world leader: At the time *Moby-Dick* was written, it constituted the fifth largest sector of its economy and drew in an estimated 10 million dollars annually, a multi-billion-dollar enterprise in today's terms (Thompson 2012, n.pag.). The novel depicts various forms of extraction – profit from whaling ships, spermaceti from dead whales, meaning from impenetrable text – which is why it has aptly been described as "among the first Oil novels" (Macdonald 2012, 7).

In Cline's *The Guest*, the economic potential of water is more covert. None of the novel's characters work in an industry that directly derives value from water. However, money and water nonetheless flow in parallel: Instead of ships, it is swimming pools. For instance, the following is one of several scenes set during a party at a beachfront mansion:

Alex made a gesture at the water.

"Do you just wake up every morning and jump in the ocean? That's what I'd do."

"Sometimes," Victor said. "Helen [the hostess] prefers the pool."

⁶ Though he uses 'blue cultural studies' and 'maritime humanities' rather than 'Blue Humanities' at that point still, I take as the term's inception Steve Mentz's 2009 article "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies."

⁷ The original version of Barlow's and Clarke's *Blue Gold* book appeared in 2002.

[...]

“Can I see it?”

“The pool?” Victor shrugged. “I guess.”

[...] The gate to the pool stuck – Victor had to pull hard before it opened.

“After you.”

The pool was a clean hollow of light, and it was bigger than Simon’s, bounded by a brick patio. Alex could imagine how nice it would be to swim its length, a few easy pulls of water. Alex slipped off her shoes and grazed a foot in the pool. It was warmer than the air. (Cline 2023, 52)

Alex focuses on water with longing, pining for what remains an unobtainable fantasy of wealth and ease of life to her. She talks about what she “would do” if she had a house like this, asks if she “can” see the pool, and when she finally does, she imagines how lovely it “would be” to swim in it. Her gaze is firmly trained on the higher-ups in a capitalist hierarchy where everyone is incentivized to imagine themselves rising beyond their current status. After all, Alex *has* been swimming in the ocean the same morning, but Victor’s assertion that the lady of the house prefers the pool signals that there is still some higher status symbol to be obtained. To emphasize water’s exclusivity, the scene describes the pool as surrounded by a fence; the gate is stuck as if it were reluctant to admit Alex at all. Like a customer before the window of a luxury store, she is allowed to admire the pool, to fan her desire, but not to own it.

The fact that Alex immediately notices this pool being bigger than Simon’s moreover gives it a distinctly phallic quality. The pool comes to stand in for infinitesimal differences at the pinnacle of the capitalist hierarchy. It makes visible, even among the super-rich that own vacation homes in the Hamptons, who is yet a little closer to the top. In a later scene, a pool that is filled with salt water – thus not requiring cleaning with chemicals – is singled out as being even more luxurious (Cline 2023, 119). By contrast, when Alex is forced to take a shower by a public beach and “the water was bracing, chlorinated: no saltwater pool here” (Cline 2023, 152), this functions as an unmistakable indicator that she is losing status. Thus, if in *Moby Dick* it is economic capital that is being extracted, in *The Guest* it is social capital. In both, water not just tempts the respective protagonists, it also very much structures the societies through which they move – and, as I will subsequently show, even constitutes the identity of the protagonists themselves.

6 Water as Identity

The narrator of *Moby-Dick* famously asks the readers to call him “Ishmael” but, by spelling this out in “one of world fiction’s most famous opening sentences, implies all of the following and more: ‘This might be an alias’; ‘Don’t expect me to tell all’; and ‘I cast myself as a rootless wanderer’” (Buell 2014, 362). In other words, Ishmael is easily as elusive as the White Whale itself. The reader is given few hints of his past

– whether that is to be taken at face value given his famously unreliable narration is anyone's guess⁸ – and even though, at the beginning of *Moby-Dick*, there are hints of a love story between Ishmael and the harpooner Queequeg, both that romance and Ishmael as a protagonist dissipate as soon as the *Pequod* departs. He is such an innocuous observer that, for large parts of the novel, it is easy to forget that he is there at all.

Alex in *The Guest* is similarly ineffable, which produces a latent sense of unease: Though her story is told in the third person, it is closely focalized through her and provides the reader with barely any information to hold on to. Alex has been described as “strangely spectral and blank,” a “curiously liquid protagonist” (Keeble 2023, n.pag.). Because of her profession, she is an expert in adjusting herself to other people's ideas; wherever she goes, she aims to create the least amount of friction. One of the reasons why she is able to crash so many parties and private clubs throughout the story is because she is so generic, a decorative object rather than a subject in her own right: a pretty young woman either white or at least passing as white who could be someone's friend or distant relative, or one of the many college students partying the summer away:

it was good to be someone else. To believe, even for a half moment, that the story was different. Alex had imagined what kind of person Simon would like, and that was the person Alex told him she was. All Alex's unsavory history excised until it started to seem, even to her, like none of it had ever happened. [...] Simon thought of Alex as a real person, or enough for his purposes. (Cline 2023, 20-1)

Both Alex and Ishmael are perfect subsets of the material affordances of water: The epitome of fluidity, water fits into openings of any shape and size, and moves around obstacles without friction. Moreover, it reflects. As the myth of Narcissus illustrates, it can function as a mirror, and a mirror in turn affords two different things: It can either corroborate someone's narcissism or project their flaws back at them. Both protagonists perform both functions: On the one hand, they become what other people want to see in them, they keep to the background, play to other people's expectations, take up no more than the space available to them. On the other hand, both characters are keen observers and highlight the corruption, the shallowness, the greed and hubris of the society around them. The book that Ishmael ultimately ends up writing is a Shakespearean tragedy that illustrates how one man's megalomania and thirst for vengeance can doom a whole society. Alex's journey highlights the horrible emptiness of the leisurely life of the super-rich.

A further core affordance of water is endurance. Unlike energy, unlike fossil fuels, unlike human bodies, water does not get used up. It can be polluted, it can be

⁸ Harold Bloom sums up the narratorial situation of *Moby-Dick* as follows: “The total quest abounds in contradictions since Ishmael, though a winning narrator at securing our favor, is unreliable. Like Huck Finn, he charmingly lies merely to keep in practice” (2015, 11).

removed from certain areas, and with enough energy expenditure it can even be broken down into its molecular components, but the total amount of water in our planetary system always remains the same. In *Moby-Dick*, this is expressed memorably: After Ahab has died and the *Pequod* has sunk, “all collapsed; and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (Melville 2003, 624). Ishmael being saved by a passing ship similarly gets the last word, his narration closing over the events like the shroud of the sea: “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee” (Melville 2003, 625).

The matter of endurance is a little trickier in *The Guest*: Like *Moby-Dick*, Alex’s journey culminates in a lethal animal encounter – a deer runs into the road and gets her friend Jack to crash his car. And like Ishmael, she alone emerges from the wreck. However, the novel ends ambiguously: Alex stumbles up to Simon’s party, but “his eyes seem to look at something beyond her” and Alex, unable to move, “[holds] her hand up in a wave. The smallest wave” (Cline 2023, 291). The semantic ambiguity of “wave” here is reminiscent of *Moby-Dick*’s final lines before the epilogue: The water closes over its characters and the reader is left in the dark on whether, like Ishmael, Alex has survived the cataclysmic crash, or whether these final lines are just figments of her dying brain while she is going under for good in the wreck. One reviewer has stated that *The Guest* “explores the contemporary logic of an old maxim: sink or swim” (Keeble 2023, n.pag.). The unspoken question then is: If those are the only options, for how long can somebody hope to keep on swimming? Are there limits to what even a liquid protagonist like Alex can endure?

7 Coda

In this article, I gave a number of examples of how reading with water can be used as a method of crossmapping in order to link texts that have no hypertextual connection. Comparing *Moby-Dick* and *The Guest* has offered a chance to think about the poetics of water in two different capitalist systems in parallel. In literal and symbolic ways, water in both texts functions as a source of capital as well as a signifier of capitalist hierarchies, while being like water allows less privileged individuals to gain buoyancy in hypercapitalist systems. Such an approach shows how, across genres and time periods, water has been imagined as a double force of attraction and of treachery, and how that imagination itself can function as a catalyst, drawing people towards water, and enshrining money and power along its shores. Aquatic crossmappings can thus reveal not only recurring aesthetic practices related to water, but also conscious and subconscious associations of it of acute political relevance.

The imaginary of water between the two texts examined is remarkably consistent but, as the ambiguous ending of *The Guest* underscores, not strictly identical. *Moby-Dick* is still defined by what we could call ‘aquaoptimism’: The story suggests that a liquid protagonist not only survives but profits from their tribulations. After all, Ishmael is saved and he *does* end up writing about his journey, presumably with more commercial success than Melville himself. *The Guest*, by contrast, tends more towards ‘aquafatalism’: The best Alex can hope for is survival, and it is not clear whether her own liquidity is able to safeguard her in the context of late-stage capitalism. Through aquatic crossmapping, these shifts in cultural context can be thrown into rippling relief.

References

- Barlow, M., and T. Clarke. [2002] 2005. *Blue Gold: The Fight to Stop the Corporate Theft of the World's Water*. New York: The New Press.
- Bloom, H. 2015. *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- Bronfen, E. 2018. *Crossmappings: On Visual Culture*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Buell, L. 2008. “The Unkillable Dream of the Great American Novel: ‘Moby-Dick’ as Test Case.” *American Literary History* 20 (1-2): 132–55.
- Buell, L. 2014. *The Dream of the Great American Novel*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Chen, C., J. MacLeod, and A. Neimanis, eds. 2013. *Thinking with Water*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Cline, E. 2023. *The Guest*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Conon. 2002. “Narration 24.” In *The Narratives of Konon: Text, Translation and Commentary on the Diegeseis*, edited by M. K. Brown, 172. München: K. G. Saur.
- Cook, J. A. 2012. *Inscrutable Malice: Theodicy, Eschatology, and the Biblical Sources of Moby-Dick*. Dekalb: NIU Press.
- Fredricks, N. 1995. *Melville's Art of Democracy*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press.
- Genette, G. [1982] 1997. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, translated by C. Newman, and C. Doubinsky. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Harrison, K. 2011. “How to Read Moby-Dick.” In *The New York Times*. October 23. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/books/review/why-read-moby-dick-by-nathaniel-philbrick-book-review.html> (accessed May 4, 2024).
- Jacobs, L. 2023. “Emma Cline's Latest Heroine Is a Call Girl on the Run.” In *The New York Times*. May 10. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/10/books/review/emma-cline-the-guest.html> (accessed May 20, 2023).
- Keeble, A. 2023. “The Guest by Emma Cline Review – A Stylish Follow-Up to The Girls.” In *The Guardian*. 24 May. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/may/24/the-guest-by-emma-cline-review-a-stylish-follow-up-to-the-girls> (accessed May 21, 2024).
- Macdonald, G. 2012. “Oil and World Literature.” *American Book Review* 33 (3): 7–31.
- Melville, H. [1851] 2003. *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale*. New York: Penguin Books.

- Mendelsohn, E. 1978. "Introduction." In *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Edward Mendelson, 1–15. Englewood: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Mentz, S. 2009. "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature." *Literature Compass* 6 (5): 997–1031.
- Mentz, S. 2024. *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*. New York: Routledge.
- Ovid. 1955. *Metamorphoses*. translated by M. M. Innes. London: Penguin Books.
- Segrave, E. 2023. "Caught in a Web of Lies: The Guest, by Emma Cline, Review." In *The Spectator*. 13 May. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/caught-in-a-web-of-lies-the-guest-by-emma-cline-reviewed/> (accessed May 20, 2024).
- Sten, C. 1996. *The Weaver-God, He Weaves: Melville and the Poetics of the Novel*. Kent: The Kent State University Press.
- Thompson, D. 2012. "The Spectacular Rise and Fall of U.S. Whaling: An Innovation Story." In *The Atlantic*. 22 February. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/02/the-spectacular-rise-and-fall-of-us-whaling-an-innovation-story/253355/> (accessed May 21, 2024).
- Warburg, A. 2010. "Werke in einem Band." In *Sigrid Weigel und Perdita Ladwig*, edited by Martin Tremml. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Watters, R. E. 1940. "Melville's Metaphysics of Evil." *The Toronto Quarterly* 9 (2): 170–82.
- Wikipedia. 2024. "Adaptations of *Moby-Dick*." In *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adaptations_of_Moby-Dick (accessed August 11, 2024).