Domesticated Savagery: Blackness and Indigeneity in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Elizabeth Stoddard’s *Temple House*

Abstract: In Melville’s and Stoddard’s novels, Queequeg and Chloe (respectively) act in some capacity as African-Native characters negotiating the agency and confines that their racial identities afford them. Queequeg’s characterization (as a racialized composite, including both African and indigenous) makes him both marginalized and empowered. Similarly, Elizabeth Stoddard’s character, Chloe, a servant to two of the families in the novel, is described as both “colored” and “Indian.” Unlike Queequeg, Chloe is an example of a character that exists in “either/or” terms in the novel, as her racial and cultural identity is not described in the language of hybridity; rather, she is either mild-mannered and Christian (black), or wild, angry, and disobedient of social norms (Indian). Like the Pequod, Temple House acts as a vessel containing a multicultural reality sometimes defining and sometimes at odds with the “American dream.”


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On September 18, 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law was passed by the United States Congress. This law strengthened an earlier act passed in 1793 by making explicit the fines and punishments white Northerners would face by harboring or in any way assisting slaves who had escaped to the North. In essence, this law expanded slavery, since it made individuals in free-states accountable for enforcing slavery. Though many northern abolitionists refused to act as agents of slavery, and continued to speak out against the injustice, the tension and conflict brought about by this law would, in part, bring about the American civil war 11 years later. When South Carolina seceded from the Union in December 1860, its state government listed among its complaints the Northern states’ inability to abide by the Fugitive Slave Law and protect state property (slaves). These national tensions inspired many nineteenth-century American writers to create texts that explain how human lives were affected by racial violence. In their texts, writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman, and Harriet Jacobs explicitly address slavery, or the Civil War, and its aftermath; others, while not explicitly naming the particulars of the conflict, construct allegorical narratives influenced by the division of the nation over the issue of personal freedom. Writers like Emily Dickinson and Nathaniel Hawthorne addressed issues inherent in this period of our nation’s history by more generally exploring issues of identity and insider/outside dichotomies. The latter group could also count among its members Herman Melville, and a much lesser-known writer named Elizabeth Stoddard. Both writers lived around roughly the same time in American history (Melville lived between 1819 and 1891, and Stoddard between 1823 and 1902), and both spent most of their lives in either New York City or Massachusetts. While today Melville’s texts enjoy much more commercial and critical attention than do Stoddard’s, at the time that they were writing, both authors’ works suffered at some point from their inability to fit within popularly acceptable modes of writing. I assert, as others certainly have, that Melville’s narrative serves as allegory for the racial tensions that existed in the country during the time that he was writing. More specifically, I see Queequeg as a character of paramount importance as a symbol of multiracial composition of the whaling industry, and as a racial composite in general—embodying stereotypes of both black and indigenous peoples. Chloe, in Stoddard’s Temple House, proves an illuminating character to compare to Queequeg because of the similar