

Melville & Justice

The Melville Society at the ALA

Chicago, May 20–23, 2026

There is no folly of the beast of the earth
which is not infinitely outdone by the madness of man.

– Herman Melville

Until the rightless thing receives its rights,
we cannot see it as anything but a thing for the use of ‘us’.

– Christopher D. Stone

At the heart of Melville’s writing is a concern for justice. So capacious are his figurations of justice, so layered his anatomies of styles of governing animate and inanimate matter that this concern arguably goes to the heart of the century-plus revival of all things Melville too.

We invite proposals that consider justice in Melville across a broad array of topics—including law, labor, sexuality, race, empire, and class, as well as animal studies, the Anthropocene, the nonhuman and more-than-human worlds. We also invite proposals that operate within and/or across different scales in Melville—from the microscopic to the macroscopic, the social to the environmental, the extrasensory to the sensory, the affective to the atmospheric, to name a few—and that seek to understand the relationship between these scales and their horizon(s) of justice. Finally, we invite proposals that put Melville in conversation with queer, Indigenous, and decolonial approaches for evaluating harm, obligation, interdependence, repair, and associated topics such as multispecies justice.

In other words, this CFP might call to you if you are drawn to questions like:

- What vision of justice do we find in Melville?
- Do different domains demand different forms of justice?
- And where, exactly, is justice to be found?

You might frame these questions in terms of injustice too—all the better to consider how Melville’s works seek to interrupt the historical present’s production of racial capitalist futures that ongoingly render the majority of lives and life disposable and extractable.

Finally, since Melville is famous for breaking down simplistic, powerfully entrenched binary distinctions, how does his work constitute an alternative to antebellum rhetorics of justice founded on distinctions between a higher law and the law? And how does it constitute an alternative for contemporary debates in literary studies, philosophy, identity-based post-1968 fields, and elsewhere?

To rethink justice in Melville, to think with Melville about justice, please send your 250-word abstract and a brief bio to jschroed@risd.edu by January 11, 2026. This is a guaranteed panel.