

More Apparent than Real:¹

***Benito Cereno*, Jacksonian Imperialism, and the Ocular Fallacy**

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Abstract

Resumen

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When Herman Melville published *The Confidence Man* in 1857 to no critical acclaim and even less money, he was 38 years old and had published ten books of consistently detumescent public viability in a mere twelve years. Seemingly contented to obscurity, he spent the next thirty-five years writing a corpus of poetry which has been cast almost universally in the most negative of lights (for example Spengeman's caricature of poetry-inclined Melvillians as "clinging to the emergent coffin of Melville's prose"). While I will not attempt to defend Melville's at best misguided decision to compose verse (though I will admit begrudgingly to enjoying the odd turn of phrase), Melville did spend vastly more time on his poetry than his prose, a move in part motivated by his failure in the latter and the cerebral isolation offered by the former. Melville neither had nor entirely expected success from his poetry, and consequently the Melville that emerges from these texts articulates a political vision which (perhaps as a result of the non-possibility of publication) is at once more honest, complete, and far

more transparently disillusioned with what Melville viewed as the fallen state American policy and nationhood.

Melville's epic-length, quasi-autobiographical² poem *Clarel* (1876), aside from being quite possibly the longest poem in the English language and the last full-length book Melville published,³ reveals Melville's most acrid assessment of the possibilities of American individual and socio-political spheres. C.L.R. James, the rare Melvillian who has ventured the brick-like *Clarel*, calls Melville's seeming proto-existentialism "thoroughly modern," "modern" in this case perhaps describing the death-like torpor surrounding much of the poem's action. A series of glum, ex-pat pilgrims conduct a tour of what was then Palestine, and, much like Chaucer's pilgrims, the corpus reflects Melville's similarly glum assessment of the state of American affairs. The young, titularly named protagonist, Clarel, searches for spiritual enlightenment, and concludes that we are all solitary "cross-bearers" with no possibility of unified, national redemption. For readers of Melville's earlier tale, *Benito Cereno*, who suspect that Melville's antebellum vitriol against slavery and imperialism does not maintain a possibility of social, individual or political redemption, *Clarel* confirms this sentiment in the character of Ungar. The pilgrims encounter Ungar towards the end of their journey, and Melville seemingly constructs Ungar as an amalgam of virtually every exploitative incident in American expansionist history.

Ungar is a blueblooded, half-Cherokee, anti-slavery, Confederate veteran. A lineage noteworthy first because the Cherokees were allowed to have slaves and fought bitterly amongst each other during the war. Second, Cherokees made up the only Confederate regiment to switch to the Union en masse, and the Cherokee general, Stand

Watie, was the last Confederate general to surrender. Ungar's pedigree is both complicit and victim, he is additionally symbolic of American colonialism through his perceived connection with the PEF⁴ (whom the Pilgrims mistake him as an agent of), and the remnants of both sides not only of the Civil War, but the armies that fought the Mormons, Indians and the Mexicans. The PEF was headed by General Sherman and stocked conspicuously with veterans of all those conflicts. Ungar heads east to Palestine, ostensibly surveying for a factually-based, imperialistically-minded American surveying agency, rather than the traditional frontier west, a movement reflecting Melville's frequent incantation of the death of the American frontier over the course of *Clarel*. A frontier coincidentally that Ungar has been a part of, on both sides, from the religiously persecuted English Catholics to the Cherokee ("a Pocahontas wedding/ of contraries" (I.xxviii.32-3). Ungar is, arguably, as complexly American as Melville's vision of America itself.

Melville has his character Rolfe, a familiar rover type reminiscent of Melville's ex-pat idealists in *Typee*, *Oomoo*, *Redburn*, and *White-Jacket*, and the voice of reason within *Clarel*, articulate his assessment of America in response of the appearance and caustically divisive presence of the Ungar character:

Know
 Whatever happen in the end,
 Be sure 'twill yield to one and all
 New confirmation of the fall
 Of Adam. Sequel may ensue,
 Indeed, whose germs one now may view:
 Myriads playing pygmy parts—
 Debased into equality:
 In glut of all material arts
 A civic barbarism may be:
 Man disenobled—brutalized
 By popular science—Atheized

Into a smatterer—" (IV.xxi.121-33)

The narrator responds:

America! (IV.xxi.139)

Ungar, Melville's representative American, literally embodying much of the diversity Melville recognized in America, both politically and ethnically, signifies within the text the failure not only of the Reconstruction, but a lineage (from Adam) of an original "social" sin of post-Jacksonian imperial policy—at one point going as far to say that imperialist policy merely forestalls an inevitable class war.

Melville's dark vision of American identity within *Clarel* may result from the horrors of the Civil War, Melville's never-stable mindset, or the publication of that text at the height of Reconstruction—of which the politically savvy Melville undoubtedly saw the underside. What is important for this reading of Melville, and the point of intersection between Melville's Antebellum and Reconstruction work, is the manner in which Ungar emblemizes simultaneously an imperialistic presence⁵ and a complicated and often conflicting intersectionality within his background that the pilgrims who encounter him misidentify at the same time as they construct Ungar as a (if not the) representative American—more so than any member of their group.

Much recent historiographically oriented Melville scholarship (Otter, Sundquist, etc.), and indeed much recent work in American nineteenth-century scholarship in general, posits the locus of critical investigation within Melville around the issue of slavery, and the manner in which Melville's narratives circumnavigate the troubled waters of contemporary racial constructions. While I seek to contest neither the validity nor the utility of such critical orientations, the character of Ungar suggests that the racial constructions which so clearly affect Melville's narrative productions may be read as a

critique, not only of the period's racial politics, but the manner in which the visual manifestations of race commingle with expansionist American proclivities. More succinctly, I suggest that Melville's conflation of clearly and complexly intersectional constructions of Ungar's racial makeup, the pilgrims' failure to recognize the significations of those conflicting intersectionalities, and the manner in which Ungar is ostensibly representative of American imperialist intentions, suggests Melville's interest in linking the opacity of racial identity (and the significations of a racialized identity) with American imperialist aims.

Certainly, Melville's early works revolve around an imperialist critique (i.e. *Typee*, *Mardi*, *Oomoo*, etc.), a point which scholars on such works tend to agree. However, certain of Melville's works (*Moby Dick* and *Benito Cereno* specifically, though not exclusively) have been read through a critical lens which translates such tales into a black/white racial binary that locates those texts within an antebellum discursive climate revolving around that dualistic racial construct.⁶ What *Clarel* forces this critic to consider however, is the manner in which Melville conflates the failure to "read" Ungar's opaquely intersectional racial makeup within a specifically imperialist role. Considering this conflation in Melville's Reconstruction work, this critic seeks to investigate the manner in which imperialism and these opaque intersectionalities of identity⁷ may be used to complicate the racial binary through which Melville's Antebellum work is read, specifically within Captain Amasa Delano's repeatedly mistaken applications of racial constructions within *Benito Cereno*.

Perhaps Melville's fatalism concerning publication, combined with the popular and critical silence surrounding his work, Reconstruction politics, and the

autobiographical nature of *Clarel* serves to darken Melville's assessment of racial understanding and American imperialism. However, I will argue here that Melville's dystopian Reconstruction vision has substantial grounding in a less autobiographical tome, *Benito Cereno*. *Benito Cereno* reveals Melville's at least nascent fatalism concerning the prospects of the resolution of Antebellum racist modes of seeing, and further the anti-imperialist tenor of that issue for Melville.

The plot of *Benito Cereno*, very briefly, involves an American captain (Amasa Delano) boarding and assuming control of the helm of a disabled Spanish slave ship captained by the titularly named character. It is only at the end of the text that Delano realizes there has been a slave revolt/mutiny on board the Spanish ship that was headed by a slave, Babo, which Delano quickly quells, and the miscreant slaves are either executed or returned to slavery. *Benito Cereno*, published in 1856, while most certainly in large part a response to the Compromise of 1850⁸—and in that manner the commingling of imperialist and racist policy⁹—reveals a Melvillian response to imperio-racist discourse that in its fatalism speaks less complexly to the domestic issues of slavery, than to the manner in which the performative display of chattel slavery—more succinctly the ocular fallacies of racist “seeing”¹⁰—falls into the machinations of a colonialist mantle unaffected by the possibility of the abolition of slavery. This is to say that while Melville deftly articulates the ocular fallacies of antebellum America, these ocular fallacies are the individual, subjective symptoms of an imperialist consciousness Melville indicts irrespective of the possible end of slavery. Furthermore, in *Benito Cereno*, Melville indicts the pervasiveness of the fallacy of ocular proof in a text which narrativizes that fallacy within the passage of an imperialist mantle from a Spanish to an

American primacy as a transference reliant on the maintenance and preservation of specific modes of imperialist “seeing.”

I would like to begin this discussion by first elucidating upon three constructions central to my thesis, 1.) the fungible black body within the coffle displays of chattel slavery; 2.) the relation of the fungible black body to a mode of hegemonic “seeing” (actually mis-seeing) I call the ocular fallacy; and 3.) the existence (and disparities between the original and Melville’s retelling) of the true-life Amasa Delano’s account of his encounter with a mutinous slave ship called the *Tryal*.

Much has been written concerning the commodification of the black body through the injustices of chattel slavery, and the manners in which the fungibility of the black body in the coffle display influenced and influences constructions of the black body. I do not seek to repeat the mistakes of previous generations of scholars by essentializing the black body without considering such diverse factors as miscegenation, class, gender, or age. However, my text seeks not to delineate these intersecting racial constructions per se, but rather to demonstrate that the coffle display produced fungible black bodies that whites, as a non-unified racial group here located only in the social hierarchy of slavery (and indeed others of moneyed qualification—including certain Indian groups), “saw” in a manner which either denied or grossly misconstrued the possibility of black interiority outside the grotesque, bodily constructions of the coffle.

Qualifications aside, the status of the black body as a commodity considerably problematizes the various textual constructions of that body. As Saidiya Hartman states, the fugability of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of

other's feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property the dispossessed body of the slave is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion (21).

Hartman goes on further to state that the constructions of the coffle, which were characterized by a falsified revelry, singing, and dancing, created the pervasive illusion that the slaves had "achieved a measure of satisfaction with that condition [the condition of slavery/commodification]. Thus the efficacy of violence was indicated precisely by its invisibility or transparency and in the copious displays [false revelries] of slave agency" (25).

This text does not seek to elucidate upon the constructions of identity resultant from the hideous narratives of the coffle spectacle, but rather seeks to draw the reader's attention to a disparity in a broad hegemonic gaze between the conditions of the enslaved body and the manner in which that hegemonic gaze codes what it sees. This is by no means to suggest that this process is universal in execution, but rather that the hegemonic gaze codes what it sees with a truth value inconsistent with the actual structures of oppression that are being misread. The assumption that the gaze accurately reads what it actively misreads is a condition I call the ocular fallacy.

I do not seek to classify the ocular fallacy as a Southern condition, but rather as a condition of seeing extending to both sides of the slavery debate—even from some of slavery's most ardent oppositional figures. Melville, as will be seen below, constructs Captain Amasa Delano as a specifically Northern figure whose constructions of enslaved bodies would have been considered moderate, or even liberal, at the time of the

publication of *Benito Cereno*. Even William Ellery Channing, a Northerner with no affection for slavery, constructs the black body in terms consistent with both the blindness of the ocular fallacy and the pseudo-scientific ethnological typologies of his (and Melville's time):

Of all the races of men, the African is the mildest and most susceptible of attachment. He loves, where the European would hate. He watches the life of a master, whom the North American Indian, in like circumstances, would stab to the heart... Is this a reason for holding him in chains?
(quoted from Karcher 26).

In Melville's text, Captain Amasa Delano, whose prejudices are obscene by today's somewhat more liberal standards, considers the enslaved body in similar terms to Channing: "In fact, like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to Negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs" (*Benito Cereno* 73). Melville seems invested in attributing to Delano a certain hegemonic normativity of seeing that would allow the contemporary white reader of *Benito Cereno* a certain identificatory access to the character, thus making more stark the later revelation of the slaves' perfidiousness and mutiny.

The pervasiveness of the ocular fallacy, in tandem with the mutiny aboard *Benito Cereno*'s slave ship, would seem to portend the possibility of a slave rebellion onboard the American ship of state. However, by examining Melville's almost wholesale appropriation of Amasa Delano's own real-life account of the mutiny, and the minor distinctions that Melville renders in his own account of that mutiny, this text seeks to prove that Melville indicts the pervasiveness of the ocular fallacy not only (or even

largely) as a precondition for possible slave revolt at home, but rather as a condition for the success of American imperialism abroad. This presentation will elucidate this theory by approaching *Benito Cereno* first through the textual disparities between Amasa Delano's "true" narrative and Melville's retelling; second, through the manner in which Melville articulates the transference of the ascendancy of American imperialism over that of the Spanish as a linguistic transference hinging on a delayed perlocutionary utterance; and third, demonstrate the manner in which Delano's ultimate failure to "see" (even at the end of the text) is conditioned by his nationalistic assumption of the imperialist mantle.

The differences between Melville's account and Delano's, are mainly in detail, but these details figure largely in Melville's constructions of meaning. Delano's text (of which the *Benito Cereno* section is only a chapter-length interlude) was published in 1817 under the top-heavy title of *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, Compromising Three Voyages Round the World*. Delano, coincidentally a distant relative of FDR, details his encounter with the ship *Tryal* in similarly credulous fashion, the main difference between the two texts being Cereno not actually dying in Delano's text (in fact he takes Delano to court for piracy), and the conflation of a father-son conspiracy of Babo and son, Muri, to the singular Babo¹¹.

However, the smaller details Melville fudges create a narrative continuity which *en masse* adorns Cereno's ship in the vestiges of a fading imperialist power, and Delano as the somewhat oblivious inheritor of that helm. In totem, these vestiges of failing power articulate the *San Dominick* not as a symbol of the possibility of slave revolt, but rather as the detumescence of one imperial power and the tumescence of another. More specifically, while Melville does in fact imply the possibility of slave revolt through the

mention of *San Dominick* (the *Tryel* in Delano's text), his Anglicization of the Spanish colony, Santo Domingo, locates that reference within an 1850's debate on US expansion to specifically Spanish colonies. Allan Emory cites a ongoing *Putnam's* debate—occurring during the serialization of Melville's *Israel Potter* within the aforementioned magazine—advocating US imperialist movements towards Cuba, Peru, and other specifically Spanish colonies (Emory 50). Eric Sundquist also locates this reference within the discursive moment of the mid-1850s, and (like Emory) locates that reference as both an imperialist moment and as a warning that a similar slave revolt to the one Melville retells could occur on American soil (Sundquist 142). Strangely, neither seems to account for their linkage of Benito Cereno's ship, the *San Dominick*, to the Haitian slave revolt they claim the ship to be named after within Melville's text. Why would Melville use a Spanish ship to imply the possibility of an impending slave revolt, when the Haitian revolt was only successful on the French side of the colony (and not the Spanish)?

The specifically Spanish emphasis of Melville's text separates the success of the Haitian slave revolt of the 1790s on the French side of the island from the continuation of Spanish rule on the opposite. Through the total non-presence of French colonialism within Melville's text, Melville articulates a narrative continuum of imperialist presence wherein the Spanish cede their lands to American control in a manner compatible with US expansionist aims in the 1850's. Additionally bolstering the argument that Melville does not indeed intend to imply a successful slave revolt, the revolt is more subversively couched within the contemporaneous failures of the revolutions of the European 1848 which, by 1856, were manifest.

Other details confirm the presence of an imperialist continuum passing from Spanish to American hands. Delano never mentions the physical decay of the *San Dominick/Tryel*, whereas Melville not only creates the rotting specter of the once-frigate, but additionally articulates the decay of that ship from an imperialist presence. Not originally a slaver, but a man-o-war, additionally a man-o-war from the height of imperial power in both Spain and South America:

the state-cabin door, once connecting with the gallery, even as the deadlights had once looked out upon it, but now calked fast like a sarcophagus lid; and to purple-black, tarred over, panel, threshold, and post; and he bethought him of the time when that state cabin and this state balcony had heard the voices of the Spanish king's officers, and the forms of the Lima viceroy's daughters had perhaps leaned where he stood
(*Benito Cereno* 64).

The combination of colony, empire, and the oft-stated decay of Benito Cereno's ship within the appropriating vision of an American captain only too eager to take over the helm, amplified within a contemporary discursive atmosphere considering the appropriation of Peru, is not coincidental.

The decay of Spanish imperialism, as coded through the decay of the Spanish ship, informs Melville's text in several striking ways. First, the imperialistic context of the text decenters the plot from slavery, and towards the manner in which Captain Delano's assumption of the slaves as property at the end of the text is a part of the assumption of an imperialist mantle. Second, the decay of the Spanish ship and the falsely perceived infirmity of its captain (as well as that captain's mistakenly perceived

relation to his crew) compels (at least in Delano's perception) Delano's proprietary assumption of the control of the Spanish ship. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the coding of the narrative at least ostensibly as a narrative of imperialist transfer demonstrates, most forcibly, the function of the ocular fallacy in that imperialist transfer. It is because Delano misperceives the relation of Benito Cereno to his crew as a normative relation (his judgements about Cereno's character notwithstanding), and because Delano misperceives the slaves as docile to the point of being "Newfoundland dogs," that Delano is ultimately able to affect the transfer of command.

There are further elements of Melville's narrative which bolster this reading of *Benito Cereno* as being coded as an imperialist transfer dependant upon the functionings of the ocular fallacy in the figurehead of American power, Amasa Delano. Amasa Delano's account (not Melville's), immediately prior to the Benito Cereno incident, details an account of his own ship's recent mutineers, an account which would bolster Melville's narrative if he were writing an account of a impending revolt in an American context. Second, Melville proffers a monetary reward for the recapture of Cereno's ship, a move inexplicable outside expansionist rhetoric, particularly when the slaves are not included in that propertied motive—rather the possibility of doubloons. Taken as a whole (the anglicized Spanish, the ship's imperial decay, and the material reward for expansion), Melville's primary alterations of the Delano text reveal Melville's stake *not* in the possibility of implying a successful, impending slave revolt on American soil, but rather in the conflation of a racist imperialist "seeing" with the transference of colonial power from one imperialist nexus to another.

Very strikingly however, these textual details underscore a verbal transference of that imperial power which hinges on Captain Delano's repeated illocutionary implication of his assumption of the command of Cereno's ship. Illocutionary utterances which, to utilize Timothy Gould's structuring of a substantial illocutionary/perlocutionary gap as "illocutionary suspense" or "perlocutionary delay" (31)¹², hinge not upon Benito Cereno's perlocutionary acknowledgment of intent, but upon Delano's delayed acknowledgment of the superfluousness of such a perlocutionary utterance. Indeed, such an utterance is never made, and Delano assumes command of Cereno's helm (without the power over the ship—which Babo holds¹³) without such an utterance, and, once Delano recognizes that Babo and not Cereno is in command, Delano urges his men's routing of now-Babo's ship with the first explicit statement of the abandonment of Spanish command. Three aspects of this warrant immediate consideration: first, the manner in which the power dynamics of the text shift without actually being in Spanish hands whatsoever (or within the mutinous slaves' hands); second, the manner in which the formal transference of power between captains representing nation-states underlies a power structure within which the ability (and failure) to see and to construct the significations of that seeing are the sole prerogative of an American captain whose sight is conditioned by the ocular fallacies inherent to that captain's power position; and third in the manner in which Melville codes the interaction between the American and Spanish captains within a Nineteenth-century proto-psychological understanding of what is commonly referred to as "faculty psychology."

Examine the passage wherein Delano first entertains the idea of assuming the command of Cereno's ship:

On some *benevolent plea* withdrawing command from him, Captain Delano would yet have to send her to Conception¹⁴... a plan not more convenient for the *San Dominick* than for Don Benito... Such were the American's thoughts. *They were tranquilizing*. There was a difference between the idea of Don Benito's darkly preordaining Captain Delano's fate and Captain Delano's *lightly arranging*. Don Benito's (59-60).¹⁵

First, note the ease with which Delano envisions the transference of command, a "benevolent plea," "lightly arranged." Melville deftly juxtaposes these presumptions' tranquilizing effect against the foil of Delano's darker suppositions concerning what (little) he understands of his precarious position to underscore what the reader learns later, namely that Cereno maintains no power of command whatsoever. Delano assumes the helm "with pleasure" (81) in an appropriating colonial embrace, a gesture to which neither Cereno nor Babo ever assents.

What is striking however, is that Delano's repeated illocutionary implication of the change in command only masks the actual transference of power which took place at the moment of his boarding of Cereno's ship. The reason Delano never receives perlocutionary confirmation of his "right" to assume command, is that that right has already been assumed by his very presence on the ship. While Babo certainly maintains a certain palpable degree of control over Benito Cereno's body, and while Cereno does later tell Delano that his (Delano's) life was in danger as well, there is a very real sense that the mutinous slave Babo maintains no control over Delano that Delano would himself recognize. While Cereno is marginalized for obvious reasons, Babo, the only possible conflicting source of power on Cereno's ship, actually requires the assistance of

Delano in order to navigate the ship into the harbor safely. While Babo, unbeknownst to Delano, may be constructing the terms of Delano's demise, within the action of the text Babo and Delano are never once in a situation within which Babo wields any real control over Delano whatsoever. All of Babo's power is potential power, never actualized.

While Delano may be wandering the minefields of such presumption, what ultimately cements his unperceiving authority is his inability to narrativize the goings on of the ship in any manner other than the imperialist presumptions of his racist "seeing". Delano's coding of what he himself recognizes as the curious goings-on aboard the ship, articulates those goings-on through the lense of an imperialist vision which Melville's plot structure draws into deep focus—even with regards to Cereno, who in a thinly veiled anti-Semitism, Delano supposes must come from some family of Castilian Rothschilds. Delano's thinly masked bigotry certainly does not create his empowered standing with regards to the other characters within the text, but the conditions of his failure to see, the "ocular fallacies" through which his perception are filtered, code the circumstances within which he finds himself as circumstances which justify his racial superiority. Ironically, it is through Delano's failure to see the potential threat to the power structure of his own and Cereno's ships that Delano succeeds in alleviating that threat. Had Delano at any time been able to read behind the limited vocabulary through which his world is read, the power dynamics may have shifted. In this manner, Delano's racist presumption almost has a performative force, insofar as that which Delano believes is going on, is, despite contingencies, effecting the change in power Delano never ceases to believe is going on. Cereno never holds a position of power within the text, Babo holds potential power—which is never actualized, and consequently the ocular fallacies of

Delano's racist seeing allow him to actualize the transference of command through the illocutionary assumption of that command in a fashion which ultimately leads to the formal assumption of the helm once Cereno's true situation is manifest.

As a final note on the relations of power within *Benito Cereno*, Melville structures the relationship between Delano and Cereno/Babo within the context of the nineteenth-century proto-psychological understanding of insanity and rationality. Delano, in Melville's account, is structured from the beginning of the text as a stereotypically balanced and sane personage: a man "with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception" (*Benito Cereno* 37-8). Cereno however, maintains literally no control over his own actions, as they are dictated wholly by the mind of Babo. Thomas Cooley articulates nineteenth-century conceptions of sanity as a balance between the separate, but interconnected spheres of the brain (29). Insanity, in turn, was constructed as an imbalance of these demarcated spheres expressed as the body dispossessed of its mind, and literally under the control of that imbalance. The sane mind is displaced by its insanity: "Instead of the madman's taking hold of his obsession, or mania, it took possession of him or her. Thus freedom of the will became the ultimate measure of sanity in nineteenth-century America" (Cooley 41).

Melville literalizes this model of sanity in first constructing Delano as the identificatory "rational/sane" figure within the text, and second in literally displacing the control of Cereno's will/action from Cereno to Babo. A rhetorical gesture made very clear when Babo shaves Cereno (very much against Cereno's terrified will) in Delano's presence, thereby demonstrating literally the dispossession of Cereno's actions from his own control. Melville reinforces this point by having our rational man, Delano,

recognize in Cereno's tremblings the marks of a diseased mind: "Poor fellow, thought Captain Delano, so nervous he can't even bear the sight of barber's blood; and this unstrung, sick man, is it credible that I should have imagined he meant to spill all my blood, who can't endure the sight of one little drop of his own?" (*Benito Cereno* 75).

Delano, while failing to recognize who maintains control over Cereno's actions, does recognize that Cereno demonstrates all the markings of the bearer of a diseased mind. Melville deftly constructs the sanity/insanity binary between Delano and Cereno, and further, in demonstrating the failure of ocular proof in Delano's failure to correctly "see" what is going on before his eyes, demonstrates that the ocular fallacy is so pervasive that it controls the ostensibly sane mind of the American captain.

My paper has articulated Melville's construction within *Benito Cereno* of the fading of the ascendancy of Spanish imperialism, and hinted at the possibility of an American assumption of that mantle as conditioned at least in part by the maintenance of what I have called the ocular fallacy. What this next section of my text will briefly articulate is the manner in which that American assumption of expansionist proclivities appears in other aspects of *Benito Cereno*, specifically the Gordian knot, and the manner in which the Gordian knot is used to create a context of a succession of imperialist transfers over history dependent upon the misrecognition of the black body through the ocular fallacy. The Gordian Knot is inextricably a symbol of empire: the King of Phrygia presents the Gordian Knot to Alexander (later The Great), Alexander cuts it in half, Alexander rules Asia, Western Civilization ensues, et cetera... Consider the manner in which the knot is presented within Melville's text, an old tar presents the knot in a subversive attempt to clue Delano in to the state of rebellion aboard the ship, "looking

like an Egyptian priest making Gordian knots for the temple of Ammon” (66) (read “Mammon”). The credulous Delano, caught up in the illusions of his own seeing, does not solve the riddle the tar presents to him, while the mutinous slave who is ushering Delano quickly sees the meaning of the knot and throws it overboard. On face value, Melville’s Delano’s failure to read into the import of the knot would seemingly read as at least forecasting the failure of American expansionist intent (at least on an Alexandrian scale). However, Melville deftly constructs the terms of the incident in a manner which subverts that surface reading.

Melville subverts this surface reading in three ways. First, Melville debases the power nexus in framing the knot’s presentation not (bad pun) within regal terms, but in the terms of an Egyptian priest—more specifically a debased “priest.” The knot is not presented by a king, rather a sailor in abject relation to the actual power structure of the boat in question. Second, Melville articulates a plurality of Gordian “knots” which, in conjunction with the reference to priests, implies a succession of knots/priests as a legacy of the original symbolic structure. Third and perhaps tangentially, Melville furthers this idea of succession with the inclusion of specifically Egyptian priests. Melville, at the time of composition, was about to embark on a family mandated, purportedly curative Middle Eastern tour wherein he noted in his journal his terror of, and the progenitive nature (with regards to western culture) of the very Egyptian priests he cites here:

The Pyramid was ‘vast, undefiled, incomprehensible, and awful... I shudder at the idea of ancient Egyptians. It was in the pyramids that was conceived the idea of Jehovah. Terrible mixture of the cunning and awful.

Moses learned in the lore of the Egyptians. The idea of Jehovah born here' (Walker 118).

The knot symbolizes two things, first the literal reading of Delano's failure to read into the sailor's imputation of meaning for the immediate situation. Second, and less explicitly however, Melville articulates an American ascendancy over a Spanish imperialism *that yields itself up willingly to the American*. Melville recognizes the ur-meaning of the Gordian knot, establishes the knot as the symbol of successive imperialist moments, and finally removes the mytho-heroic agency of Alexander from conquest. Alexander won Asia, Delano, and consequently America, happens to be in the right place at the right time, and owes its predominance not to a heroic agency, but rather to a determinist vision of imperialism ceding itself to its emergent successor.

Melville's references to ecclesiastical and monastic structures within *Benito Cereno* are manifold, and not limited to this incident. He calls Cereno's ship a "whitewashed monastery" (38), and describes its occupants as clothed in "throngs of dark cowls; while, fitfully revealed through the open portholes, other dark moving figures were dimly descried, as of Black Friars pacing the cloisters" (39). Later, Melville describes Cereno as some sort of "hypochondriac abbot" (42). The above-cited succession of priests, the control of the ship as held by a seeming abbot, this utilization of ecclesiastical metaphors to describe Cereno's ship, and the transference of the command of that ship within the terms of those metaphors cannot be a coincidence. When Delano takes command of the helm, he assumes the role of abbot from Cereno and the (albeit marginalized) control of the Spanish "priests" who cede the helm to Delano willingly. The subtext of this transference is that Delano's control is not only over the ship, but also

over its “dark forms,” the slaves. The lineage of imperialistic domination that Melville constructs is not only comprised of similar such transferences over history, but that lineage implies control (and as we have seen, misrecognition) of the black body. Such transferences of ephemeral imperial powers over time are intrinsically linked not (as is arguably the case for Alexander) with a degree of heroic agency or vision, but are linked inextricably with the black body.

This point warrants some elaboration. What Melville repeatedly emphasizes through the many incidences of the Spanish sailors’ attempts to clue Delano in to their own marginalization within the power structures of the text, and further in Delano’s consistently repeated failure to interpret those clues outside the readymade conditions of his own racist “seeing,” is the very irrelevancy of individual agency within the transference of the Spanish colonial mantle to American control. There are only three acts which could (albeit with certain reservations) be considered “heroic” within Melville’s text.¹⁶ The slave mutiny which is the unstated originating moment of the narrative’s action can certainly be deemed heroic, but within the transference of power, that heroic agency maintains little relevance. Melville underscores this by using a Spanish ship named *San Dominick*, rather than a French ship, referencing the successful slave revolt in the colony of the latter and the lack of similar historical success in the former. While Babo and his confederates undoubtedly execute a daring and righteous action, within the context of imperial power transference their agency is moot.

The second possible instance of heroic agency occurs at the end of the text when Cereno leaps onto Delano’s whaleboat in order to warn Delano of the risk to his and Cereno’s lives, and the true character of Cereno’s relationship with Babo is unmasked.

This act however is less heroic than desperate, and merely illustrates the inability of the Spanish command to defend or sustain itself. The third possible instance of heroic agency occurs in the recapture of the mutinous slaves, an act of dubious heroism, and not solely for returning the slaves to a condition of servitude. Delano (not Cereno) at this point has already stated the Spanish had ceded their command and ownership, and so the attacking sailors proceed with more mercenary than merciful intent. Melville further emphasizes this mercenary intent through the deaths of virtually all of the Spanish sailors that are left on Cereno's ship, a circumstance very dubiously alluded to in the deposition which ends the text as having occurred because of the Americans' exceedingly suspicious assertion that the Spanish sailors had been enlisted to their captors' command.

By articulating the transfer of imperialist power as one of a lineage of such transferences over history, and furthermore in removing any element of heroic agency from such a dynasty of power, Melville destabilizes the nationalist presuppositions regarding the righteousness of such imperialistic ascendancies. The American Delano clearly does not assume command because of any greater moral rectitude than that the Spanish demonstrate, and further the precondition of the transference of power lies within the maintenance of the ocular fallacies which are to an extent necessary for such a position of control. At the end of the text, Cereno is killed by the specter of Babo's marginalized intelligence, the existence even of Babo's decapitated head proves too much for his fragile frame to bear. Whereas Delano refuses to even examine the possibility of the failure of his narratives of racist seeing, comfortably in command of Cereno's ship and goods, there is no need to question this fiscal success: "the past is passed; why moralize on it" (103). Expansionist rhetoric/policy following the Compromise of 1850,

while couched within rhetoric of ethnic stability and Manifest Destiny, merely masks the imperialist machinery within which American policy represents a phase. Success removes the possibility of self-doubt, the imperialist pendulum swings from one ephemeral power to another.

The significations of this phase for Melville are, to say the least, bleak, and are not, as for Delano, concluded through the revelation of the slaves' performed obedience. This final section of this presentation will briefly explore the manner in which the fallacy of ocular proof retains its hold on American expansionist aims through the black female body. Black women figure into Melville's text several times: 1.) Delano comes onto the ship and the "negresses" are the loudest voice of the *San Dominick's* tale of woe (40); 2.) Delano's suspicions are allayed by a naked black body and son (63); 3.) Delano's concerns are assuaged by impish children and their matrons (70); and 4.) finally in the depositions of white sailors' regarding the "negresses'" activity during the actual mutiny. It would be redundant to articulate how the first three representations of the black female body replay the structures of a coffee-spectacle within their relation to the racist ocular readings of Captain Delano. It would even be redundant to articulate the manner in which those structures are incorporated into the narrative/play the mutineers perform for the (albeit dubious) benefit of Delano. Indeed, at the narrative's conclusion, the performative aspects of the slaves' presentation of normative social relations seems confirmed within their duplicitous reinscription of obedience and docility within their own terms. Melville's resolution of his narrative of performed obedience seemingly ends with the warning that a similar incident is at least a latent possibility within an America of similar ocular weaknesses. However, here I am forced to ask why the failure of ocular

truth is couched within terms of surprise, unveiling, and shock? The success of *Benito Cereno* as a text hinges on the reader's surprise that the slaves aboard the *San Dominick* are not actually slaves at all, but successful mutineers. What the surprise over acted obedience masks is an underlying, tacitly racist assumption that the black barbarity in mutiny (described by the depositions of the remaining whites) does not represent as much of a performance as the slaves' supposed obedience. What the true surprise is, what the false obedience is only a cover for, is that when the "negresses" in the whites' court account "used their utmost influence to have the deponent made away with; that, in the various acts of murder, they sang songs and danced—" (99), they sing the songs of the coffle right onto the court's record. The negresses dance and sing while they and their compatriots savagely rip apart bodies. The violence is performed within the white court's depositions in the same manner as the obedience, but we accept all the terms of the white's accounts of the violence as the "true" account of the savagery of black bodies. Melville articulates the fading of Spanish imperialism within Cereno's inability to accept the depositional simplicity of the joyous performance of naked black bodies tearing white bodies limb from limb, and is haunted by the intelligence, the "hive of subtlety," through which the mutiny is distinguished from an orgy of naked aggression. Melville no longer needs the dupe, Delano. The success of Delano's and America's assumption of an imperialist mantle hinges on our acceptance of the depositional accuracy of the savage violence, reductively coding the black body in the animalistic performance of either violence or obedience without acknowledging the human intelligence scripting both actions. Melville starts by articulating the imperialist inheritance from Spain to America

within a determinist cycle, and ends by implicating that inheritance in our own inability to interpret what we see.

¹ “Yes, all is owing to Providence, I know: but the temper of my mind that morning was more than commonly pleasant, while the sight of so much suffering, more apparent than real, added to my good-nature, compassion, and charity, happily interweaving the three” (*Benito Cereno* 102).

² Melville himself conducted a tour of Palestine in his visit to the Holy Land over 1856-7.

³ “Publish” is perhaps a bit of a misnomer when describing the print version of *Clarel*. Melville managed to convince a very elderly uncle, Peter Gansevoort, to supply enough money so that Melville could publish the text privately (having no market value as a writer whatsoever at this point in his career). Melville’s uncle perished a couple months before the text’s publication, and, given the reception (or lack thereof) of Melville’s opus, perhaps his death spared him the sight of the total failure of his investment in his nephew. Again in dire financial straights, three years after Melville privately published *Clarel*, he authorized the pulping of 220 of the original run of 350 for a nominal reimbursement.

⁴ An American agency which, with its British counterpart, partitioned Palestine geographically for the purposes of eventual colonization.

⁵ While Ungar does not indeed turn out to be employed by the PEF—as his background and appearance suggest to the pilgrims who meet him—he is employed as a mercenary soldier for the Ottoman Empire.

⁶ This is in no way to suggest that criticism of these texts has not been read in terms of imperialism, but rather that the focus of criticism on such texts has been Melville’s treatment of a racial binary.

⁷ By “opaque intersectionalities of identity,” I mean simply to denote the presence of a character whose ethnicities are not explicitly coded through visual (mis)identification. I will elaborate on this construct below when I discuss the term “ocular fallacy.”

⁸ Tangentially, through Melville’s lifelong aversion to slavery, the text also responds to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, an act which struck close to Melville personally, as his father-in-law, Judge Lemuel Shaw delivered the first fugitive slave back to slavery under this law, Thomas Sims. Rogin notes that this action may have been justifiable to the otherwise moderate Shaw because the move was widely considered to have preserved the delicate balance of power the Compromise of 1850 relied upon (136).

⁹ The Compromise of 1850 was inherently both expansionist and racist, insofar as it presumed the acquisition of new territory into the corpus of the United States at the same time as it delineated the presence of slavery within those territories based on geographical considerations.

¹⁰ I will further define the significations of the term “ocular fallacy” below, suffice it here to say that the construct refers to the manner in which Captain Amasa Delano’s constructions of normative slave behavior condition his perception in so complete a manner as to blind him to the true going-on aboard Benito Cereno’s ship. Similar to the ocular disease, scotoma, Delano fails to “see” what is actually going on directly in front of him.

¹¹ Curiously, Melville—who altered Delano’s never-consistent spelling of “Benito Cereno,” conflated Babo/Muri to one character, and altered several other names—did not in any way alter the spelling of Delano’s first or last name, despite Melville’s near-wholesale plagiarism of Delano’s text. Thomas Cooley

suggests a pun on Amasa (a mas'a) that may serve as a possible reason for Melville's blatant copying of Delano's story.

¹² Gould is here utilizing the distinction made by J.L. Austin within a performative utterance between an illocutionary phrase (such as "I do") and the perlocutionary confirmation of the efficacy (or inefficacy in some cases) of such as phrase (such as "I pronounce thee legally binding life-partners").

¹³ This is a subtle distinction, but Delano controls Benito Cereno's helm, and Babo wields a knife behind Benito Cereno's back. Should the dubious Delano become aware of the true situation on the ship, the power dynamics might change, but as it stands, Babo only *potentially* holds power of Delano so long as Delano's credulity is maintained. The power dynamics only change after Cereno, Delano, and Babo *all* leave the ship. At that point Melville names no commander, and the ship lists precariously until Delano swiftly (albeit unheroically) reasserts his command a second time, though this time through force.

¹⁴ Perhaps Melville's anglicized spelling is intended to produce a re-birth pun, particularly considering Delano's presumed legal acquisition of the ship's property (human and otherwise) upon reaching Concepcion (actually the legal transference is not effected until the ships reach Lima, making the inclusion of Concepcion all the more striking).

¹⁵ emphasis mine

¹⁶ I do not mean in any manner to discount the doubtlessly valiant mutiny of the slaves, but rather to point out by contrast the lack of such valiancy in the context of Delano's assumption of command.