More Apparent than Real:

Benito Cereno, Jacksonian Imperialism, and the Ocular Fallacy

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Abstract

Benito Cereno reveals Melville’s nascent fatalism concerning the prospects of the resolution of the question of slavery, and further the anti-imperialist tenor of that issue for Melville. Benito Cereno, while most certainly a response to the Compromise of 1850—and in that manner the commingling of the tendencies towards imperialist and racist policy—reveals a Melvillian response to imperio-racist discourse that 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,”—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 imperialism Melville indicts on a national level. In Benito Cereno, Melville indicts the pervasiveness of the fallacy of ocular proof in a narrative which condemns the passage of the imperialist mantle from a Spanish to an American primacy.

Much recent Melville scholarship (Otter, Sundquist, etc.) 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, Benito Cereno 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 of the manner in which
hegemonic phenotypes of race are constructed and constrained by expansionist American proclivities. More succinctly, I suggest that Melville’s conflation of clearly and complexly intersectional constructions of racial and gender makeup, the characters’ failure to recognize the significations of those conflicting intersectionalities, and the manner in which *Benito Cereno* 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.

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 asserts the possibility of the ascendancy of American imperialism over that of the Spanish; 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 an imperialist mantle.

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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).