

# Rhetoric of Silence in American Studies

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### Construction of Whiteness and Blackness in Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* Konstrukcja białości i czerni w *Benito Cereno* Hermana Melvilla

#### Abstract

Rather than resist slavery directly, the narrative world of *Benito Cereno* disperses the rejection of tyranny through the intricate construction of subject-object relations, the situational context, Benito Cereno's stifled, semi-articulated statements, the imagery of the narrative and its complex narrative structure. Through silences, multiple viewpoints, innuendos, refusal to solve certain issues definitely while being explicit about this indeterminacy, Melville's narrative not only inscribes itself in the Romantic questioning of historiography, but also gestures towards postmodernist inconclusiveness and the writerly text in which the reader is invited to be its co-author who fills out the gaps and silences with their own interpretation.

Zamiast otwartego potępienia niewolnictwa, świat przedstawiony *Benito Cereno* rozprasza sprzeciw wobec tyranii poprzez zawiłą konstrukcję relacji podmiotowo-przedmiotowych, kontekst sytuacyjny, stłumione, nie do końca wyartykułowane wypowiedzi Benito Cereno, obrazy oraz złożoną strukturę dzieła. Za pomocą przemilczeń, zastosowania różnorodnych punktów widzenia, napomknięć, czy wyrazistej nieookreśloności, dzieło Melvilla nie tylko wpisuje się w romantyczne kwestionowanie historiografii, ale również wychodzi naprzeciw postmodernistycznej nieoczywistości. Jest to utwór, w którym czytelnik zostaje zaproszony do bycia współautorem wypełniającym luki i przemilczenia własną interpretacją.

#### Key words

Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," whiteness, power, blackness

Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," białość, władza, czerni

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## Construction of Whiteness and Blackness in Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno"

In "Benito Cereno" (1855)<sup>1</sup> whiteness is the locus of misappropriated, abused and abusive power implicated in the death and exploitation of black people. The power at stake is both micro and macro power. Yet the narrator of "Benito Cereno" still reflects on the misappropriation and abuse of power often in covert terms, attributing it to both whites and Africans, stopping short of articulating overtly a different socio-historical context, different power positions and different power dynamics of respective white and black characters after power positions are temporarily reversed. "Benito Cereno" points to whites as responsible for slavery, despotism as well as dehumanization and carnage that slavery entails not only for Africans, but in the narrative world also for whites involved in the slave trade. Still, the naming of whiteness as responsible for the dehumanization stemming from slavery is not articulated directly. Rather than resist slavery directly, the narrative world of "Benito Cereno" disperses the rejection of tyranny through the intricate construction of subject-object relations, the situational context, Benito Cereno's stifled, semi-articulated statements, the imagery of the narrative and its complex narrative structure. Through silences, multiple viewpoints, innuendos, refusal to solve certain issues definitely while being explicit about this indeterminacy<sup>2</sup>, Melville's narrative not only inscribes itself in the Romantic questioning of historiography, but also gestures towards postmodernist inconclusiveness and the writerly text in which the reader is invited to be its co-author who fills out the gaps and silences with their own interpretation. "Benito Cereno" may be based on Captain Amasa Delano's 1817 *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the*

1. "Benito Cereno" was first published in the October, November and December issues of the 1855 edition of *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*. In 1856 it was published in the *Piazza Tales* collection (Simpson 1988, 149).

2. On the final pages of the text, shortly before a conversation between Cereno and Delano, the narrator explains why he chose this particular structure of the narrative: "the nature of this narrative, besides rendering the intricacies in the beginning unavoidable, has more or less required that many things, instead of being set down in the order of occurrence, should be retrospectively, or irregularly given" (313).

*Northern and Southern Hemisphere*; however, Melville is anything but slavish to the original account both in terms of structure and content.<sup>3</sup>

Before the story unfolds as the narrative of the African slave rebellion, of the following events and to some extent also of preceding events, the imagery introduces whiteness and blackness as major tropes interweaving throughout the narrative. Narrated in the third-person selective-omniscient point of view, the first section of “Benito Cereno” is focalized through Captain Delano’s point of view, Delano being a fictional character based on the afore-mentioned real-life Captain Amasa Delano. The focalization of the story through Delano’s viewpoint is foreshadowed by the fact that the opening images drawn for the reader appear as Delano perceives them through his looking glass. Seen for the first time from the distance, the San Dominick ship<sup>4</sup> resembles “a whitewashed monastery,” anticipating Benito Cereno’s withdrawal into the monastery. This anticipation is amplified through the image of black figures looming indistinctly enough to conjure up in Delano’s mind an association of “Black Friars pacing the cloisters” (240). Blackness recurs in the imagery again when Delano can see the engravings on the stern more distinctly, in particular “a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked” (241). The engravings foreshadow a performance staged and choreographed by Babo, chief mastermind of the African rebellion aboard the San Dominick. The performance that Delano, together with the reader, is about to witness also includes figuratively masked figures acting out a drama of dominance and subjection, a drama that involves a temporary reversal of power dynamics and subject-object positions, the domineering and the dominated roles. “A writhing figure” initially signifies Benito Cereno in the thralls of Babo’s captivity only to be reconfigured at the moment when Babo finds himself writhing in the boat under Delano’s foot.

Aside from introducing whiteness and blackness as the tropes of the narrative, the images emerging in the distance through Delano’s looking glass foreshadow the atmosphere of death, gloom and doom hovering over the San Dominick and over the whole story. The ship itself resembles a skeleton “launch[ing]” “from Ezekiel’s Valley of Dry Bones” (241). The skeleton-like frame of the ship foreshadows the eventual appearance of the slave owner Aranda’s skeleton at the head of the ship, not yet visible to Delano. All he can see is a piece of canvass wrapped

3. For example, H. Bruce Franklin notes that Melville changed the date of the events depicted by Amasa Delano from 1805 to 1799 in order to highlight the correspondence with the rebellion on Santo Domingo (Franklin cited in Simpson 1988, 149).

4. Charles Berryman traces the name of the San Dominick to the connections between slavery and religion, in particular to the fact that the order of Saint Dominick was founded in the early 13th century to preach against heresy (1990, 162-163). In a similar vein, Eric J. Sundquist attributes Melville’s monastic metaphor to the ignoble imprint that the Catholic church, especially the Dominicans, had in the launching of the New World slavery (Sundquist cited in Valkeakari 2005, 232).

around the bow and a chalked “follow your leader” inscription (241). The implicitly white chalk adds to the whiteness encompassing the San Dominick. Death-like imagery preponderates in other first glances of the ship, anticipating the revelation of the slaughter already unleashed aboard and violent events that are yet to come: “like mourning weeds, dark festoons of sea-grass slimly swept to and fro over the name, with every hearse-like roll of the hull” (242). Significantly, Delano and the reader see the concealed, wrapped figurehead during the tying up of the plot and the revelation of its macabre interior comes immediately after the moment of denouement, the unraveling of the mysteries hovering over the San Dominick and Benito Cereno’s enigmatic behavior. It is also then that death imagery rendering the ship as if it was a skeleton and a ghost recurs, just when the San Dominick is about to be taken over by the white crew: “its skeleton gleaming in the horizontal moonlight, and casting a gigantic ribbed shadow upon the water. One extended arm of the ghost seemed beckoning the whites to avenge it” (298). Ironically, immediately before recapturing and following the above cited passage, the white mate cries “Follow your leader,” reaffirming the original signification of the command and inverting the ominous meaning assigned to the words by Babo (298). While still in command, Babo goads Cereno about the whiteness of Aranda’s skeleton: “Babo asked [Cereno] whose skeleton that was, and whether from its whiteness, he should not think it a ‘white’s’” (305). Babo addresses the same question to each Spaniard, displaying a necrophilic bent and consciously playing upon racist theories. In line with the predominant imagery, even before learning the true state of affairs, Delano classifies the “history of the voyage” as “pale” (251), drawing upon the despicable state of the San Dominick, but assuming it to be solely the reason of inclement weather conditions, poor technical state and last but not the least poor management on the part of “pale face[d]” Cereno (251), whom he initially suspects to be a “paper captain” who is nominally in power, but who still “wink[s] at what by power [he] cannot put down” (253).

Cereno is often portrayed in terms of the shadow imagery, one of whose manifestations is darkness associated in the narrative with the subject of slavery and African slaves. The most crucial pronouncement of the text made by Cereno at the very end of the narrative is preceded with Delano’s question: “what has cast such a shadow upon you?” (314). Immediately after answering Delano’s query, Cereno “gather[s]his mantle about him, as if it were a pall” (314), a pall being a clear foreshadowing of Cereno’s death of which the reader learns in the final paragraph of the text. Although the term “shadow” is not used in the preceding deposition section of the narrative, Cereno is portrayed as a de facto shadow of a human being, a shadow of his former self: “He said that he is twenty-nine years of age, and broken in body and mind” (312). The statement anticipates his death articulated only

in the final sentence of the narrative, yet hinted at already in the first section when the narrator portrays Cereno as a man “worn to a skeleton” by “nervous suffering” (245). It is also in the first section focalized through Delano’s point of view that Cereno is depicted as a person who has a particular proclivity towards darkness and shadow. If he ever appears in light, it is because he has to: “to rush from darkness to light was the involuntary choice” (292). Immediately before Delano’s departure back to his ship, Cereno’s countenance is “eclipsed” (292). On the most immediate level, shadow and darkness signify an air of secrecy and mystery around Cereno as well as withholding the truth while being manipulated by Babo and later the truth that he may partly withhold after his experience of bondage comes to an end. On a deeper, more symbolic level, the shadow imagery signifies a twilight zone that Cereno occupies in his attitude to slavery and black people. On the one hand, the experience of slavery and subjection to slavery produces in him utmost revulsion, albeit only after being exposed to bondage himself. On the other hand, by being the captain of the slave carrier and a self-proclaimed friend of Aranda, the slave owner, he participates in the slave industry. It is true that he does not pull the strings in the slave enterprise, but he still remains a significant cog in the Middle Passage mechanism. The shadow represents both his guilty conscience and his ambivalent positioning on slavery and blackxploitation.

Melville’s narrative opens and ends with a riddle. Initially, it is a riddle that Delano and the reader need to resolve while being confronted with a strange ship and its bizarre, enigmatic captain. Ultimately, it is the riddle pronounced by Cereno in the final, shortest section of the narrative, in a concluding conversation between Cereno and Delano. In his lackadaisical approach to life, Delano does not care to ponder on the significance of Cereno’s words. The reader, on the other hand, has to unravel the meaning of Cereno’s words or the full import of the text will be lost. The abovementioned conversation between Cereno and Delano carries by far the most poignant, albeit not explicitly articulated, repudiation of slavery, the experience of subjection of human beings to other human beings and human vulnerability to evil, in the case of the plot presented in “Benito Cereno,” both as its victims and perpetrators: “You are saved,” cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; “you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?” “The negro” (314). The meaning of “the negro” (usually capitalized by African American authors) may be perceived as multi-tiered. It may indicate the generic use, representing all issues connected with black people and the question of slavery, not exclusively African slavery, from which Africans aboard the *San Dominick* are trying to break free, but also the very experience of bondage, which Cereno seems to at least partly comprehend only after being exposed to it. The other signification of “the negro” would pertain to a concrete black man – Babo himself, his plotting,

machinations and brainwashing to which he subjects Cereno. For Cereno Babo symbolizes human capability to manipulate, fool and trick other human beings. According to Allan Moore Emery, this is a “knowledge to die from” (2002, 315). At the same time Cereno’s rejection of slavery remains mostly organic, never being explicitly articulated. Characterizing himself as “innocent,” “the most pitiable of men,” a victim of “malign machinations and deceptions” (*Benito Cereno* 314), Cereno signs away his own earlier entwinement in the system of slavery even though he casts away his silver-mounted sword, identified as a symbol of “despotic command” (315). Ultimately, he clearly opts out of the Middle Passage machine by withdrawing to a monastery and refusing to return to sea or his home in Chile and presumably once again become a part of the system of slavery. Primarily, however, Cereno proclaims his humanity by clearly declaring his inability to forget and move forward. Therefore he retorts to Delano’s pleading to “forget,” debunking his claims that “the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves” (314). To all of this Cereno rejoins: “Because they have no memory ... because they are not human” (314).

Cereno’s “the negro” is parallel to Kurtz’s “the horror,” testifying in Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” to the realization of the horror of slave-trade and Western colonial despotism. In his 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison alludes to both works: to “Benito Cereno” explicitly in one of the two opening epigraphs and to “Heart of Darkness” and “Benito Cereno” in slightly more covert terms in the epilogue section. In the opening epigraph Ellison does not cite the whole conversation between Delano and Cereno, but only Delano’s statement and question, starting with “You are saved” and ending with “what has cast such a shadow upon you?” The text proper of *Invisible Man* provides the African American first person narrator’s, the Invisible Man’s, response to Delano’s question. A slightly more broached reference to both “Benito Cereno” and “Heart of Darkness” comes at the very end of the narrative, when the Invisible Man is “thrown back on [his] thoughts,” wondering “how had it all happened?” (437). The ponderous reflection comes after a chance metro encounter with the white trustee Mr. Norton, whom he sarcastically assures “There’s a guard down the platform there. You’re safe” (437). “You’re safe” is yet another version of Delano’s “You are saved” (314). Unlike Delano and like Cereno, however, the Invisible Man is aware that although one can be physically safe, it is difficult to be mentally safe for any fully conscious or sympathizing human being because there is always “the *mind*” (*Invisible Man* 438, original emphasis). Like Cereno, the Invisible Man cannot physically “return into that ‘heart of darkness,’” (437) in the case of the Invisible Man the American South, “across the Mason-Dixon line” (437). Neither Cereno nor the Invisible Man

can forget. Like Cereno, the Invisible Man withdraws, not to the monastery, but to his hole. Unlike the Invisible Man, Cereno cannot recover from his experience of oppression and put together a holistic, coherent picture of events, to remain divided yet whole. A man of his own times and socio-historical circumstances, with the study of psychology barely nascent, Cereno cannot reconcile himself to the complexity of human nature in order to declare in the Invisible Man's fashion: "So I approach it through division. So I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love" (*Invisible Man* 438).

Cereno's terse but poignant response, his inability to forget flies in the face of Delano's attempt to find a neat ending and move forward, to pursue his "design" (297), representative of the 19th century American Manifest Destiny under which the future progress was to be carried on irrespective of all victims on the way. It is significant that Melville closes the narrative by refusing, mostly through Cereno's words and his eventual death, to subscribe to the expansionist idea of progress and definitive redemption central to American literature and culture. By declaring "You are saved ... you are saved," Delano gestures towards the afore-mentioned trope of salvation and redemption only to be frustrated in his quest by recalcitrant Cereno, who knows that neither of them should declare themselves safe after everything that they have witnessed. That is why "Benito Cereno" can be classified as an anti-redemption narrative. Cereno feels anything but redeemed physically or psychologically, whereas the putative savior, survivor and victor, Delano, is a man of action, but of limited understanding and vision. Instead of catharsis or redemption, there is anagnorisis on the part of the eponymous character. The ending of Melville's narrative provides a sharp contrast to the endings of some of the other 19th century narratives centered around "race." Both narrators of the most famous slave narratives of the 19th century take pains to accentuate a positive ending to their life stories. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Frederick Douglass is emphatic about claiming success equivalent or surpassing that sought by white men, consisting in fame, fortune and matrimonial bliss. Douglass's female counterpart, Harriett Jacobs, underscores in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) that her narrative ends with freedom, not with marriage. Still, she is ecstatic about securing freedom for herself and for her children as well as significantly improving the material situation of her family:

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in my condition .... It has been painful to me, in many ways, to recall the dreary years I passed in bondage. I would gladly forget them if I could. Yet the retrospection is not altogether without solace; for with those gloomy recollections come tender memories of my good old grandmother, like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea. (Jacobs 1861, 5)

Both Jacobs and Douglass, like the above cited *Invisible Man*, speak from the position of survivors of oppression who played no role in inflicting it upon other people. None of them is prepared to negate or forget the past, but through their first-person narratives, through the act of telling, they show that they have exorcised the pain of the past to the extent of being able to share it with the broader audience. By being able to put together coherent life stories in writing without any amanuenses, they demonstrate that they control their lives whatever past and present hurdles they still grapple with. Unlike Douglass's or Jacobs's narrators, Cereno, himself implicated in the slave trade, a representative of the Spanish middle class, (passed by Babo as a member of the upper class), lacks mental or moral fiber that would allow him to transcend his experience of captivity and move forward, as he is encouraged to do by Delano.

The epilogue of "Benito Cereno" inscribes itself in what Oliver Scheiding classifies as a refusal of Melville's narrative to fit into Frank Kermode's definition of "concord fiction" – fiction that caters to the reader's craving for "ends," fiction that "covers 'disquieting gaps'" (Scheiding 1998, 124). Scheiding comes to such conclusions, drawing mostly on the middle, deposition section of the text. As illustrated above, similar conclusions can be reached on the basis of the epilogue. According to Scheiding, "Benito Cereno" "questions the dominant mode of historical understanding in the 1850s, a mode which passionately justified and interpreted America's imperial history in the light of Divine Providence" (121). Scheiding goes on to say that Benito Cereno, the Spaniard, may represent "the Old World empire," which is doomed to fail, while Delano, the American, may stand for the New World future (135-136). Considering Delano's shortcomings, the structure of the narrative and the fact that Melville gives the last word to Cereno, making him the eponymous character of the story, this kind of reasoning seems partly reductive. If Delano stands for America and the American progress, then Melville is highly critical of the foundations upon which America is built and on which the American Manifest Destiny is pursued. The epilogue is another example of the Romantic questioning of history and history writing in Melville's text. Carol Colatrella argues that by "resist[ing]" the conclusion in the form of a "comprehensive explanation," "Benito Cereno" puts into question "whether any definitive interpretation of historical event can be achieved" (1994, 244). Dennis Pahl expresses similar views, claiming that "the epilogue serves only to undermine the chronological order of the narrative and so to reduce an otherwise total, seamless history to fragments" (1995, 180).

If the imagery of the opening section of "Benito Cereno" sets the stage for the representation of whiteness and blackness in the narrative, the epilogue contributes to creating a kind of envelope structure, bringing together directly and

indirectly three major actors through whom most of the representation of whiteness and blackness takes place – the Cereno, Delano and Babo triangle. As has already been noted, Cereno occupies a middle ground in the slavery debate, which enters the text indirectly and features prominently in 1855 and 1856, at the dawn of the Civil War in the United States. Cereno never fully articulates his rejection of slavery. Recollecting the mutiny and following events, he focuses on the agony inflicted upon his white comrades and himself. Babo's plotting, machinations and brainwashing leave the most profound imprint on him, making him the ghost of his former self and feeding into his self-characterization as "innocent," "the most pitiable of men," a victim of "malign machinations and deceptions" (314). Black women aboard the *San Dominick* do not perceive Cereno as innocent because they want to kill him together with other whites on board (310). What saves Cereno is his sailing competence and shrewdness that allow him to navigate the ship in such a way as to possibly encounter another vessel. Whether black women's will to exact revenge is underlain by their proclivity to mentally cluster all white men together irrespective of those white men's direct share in atrocities perpetrated on them remains unarticulated.

What remains unarticulated as well is also the full extent of Cereno's experience during his captivity. The narrator indicates that certain parts of Cereno's story are unspeakable: "There was silence, while the moody man [Cereno] sat ... There was no more conversation that day. But if the Spaniard's [Cereno's] melancholy sometimes ended in muteness upon topics like the above, there were others upon which he never spoke at all" (314-315). Silence defines Cereno before his captivity comes to an end and afterwards, but in both cases for different reasons. Initially silence is thrust upon him by Babo. Therefore in the section focalized through Delano's point of view, the narrator associates Cereno with voicelessness, muteness and voice suppression, quite characteristic of the people suffering the suppression of freedom. For reasons inexplicable for Delano, Cereno's "voice was like that of one with lumps half-gone-hoarsely suppressed, a husky whisper" (245). Time and again his countenance is eclipsed by "sinister muteness and gloom" (292) and he is "too much overcome to speak" (293). After the liberation, he still remains at least to a certain extent "too much overcome to speak" (293), but for the reasons of the post-traumatic stress disorder. Cereno acts like victims of different kinds of exploitation or violence, not only by not being able to speak, but also through inability to look at Babo, his former captor.

Visual dynamics between Cereno and Babo reverse the power dynamics between white and black people. Black slaves and servants were not allowed to observe whites or look at them (hooks 1992, 166). Looking at whites was an act of visual trespassing, which could possibly incur severe punishment. In "Benito Cereno" the situation is inverted. It is the white man, Cereno that is afraid to

look at the black man, Babo. Even after Cereno claims back his freedom, Babo still holds a spell over Cereno, who in a sense remains loyal to him because he is unable to physically identify him before the tribunal: “Nor then nor at any time after, would he [Cereno] look at him [Babo]. Before the tribunal he refused. When pressed by the judges he fainted. On the testimony of the sailors alone rested the legal identity of Babo” (315). Like victims of different kinds of violence, including sexual exploitation<sup>5</sup>, Cereno consistently resists visual confrontation with his former captor. Only after Babo is put out of sight, does Cereno agree to board Delano’s ship, the Bachelor’s Delight (296). Even in death Babo challenges visual power dynamics established by whites as his head impaled on a pole “met unabashed the gaze of the whites” (315).<sup>6</sup>

What devastates Cereno the most is the fact that Babo managed to seize complete control over his life, turning him into a tool in the masquerade that he stages during the slave rebellion and foisting upon him the role of a tyrant and conspirator against Delano to whom he is profoundly indebted as his savior and the savior of other white sailors. Rather than display any reflection on the very institution of slavery, also in connection with African slaves aboard the San Dominick, Cereno is dumbfounded by the human ability to manipulate and to fool others as well as the human propensity to fall prey to other people’s treachery. Never visibly fathoming the drama of the African slaves, he shows utter dismay at the fact that even the slaves who were closest and seemingly faithful to their slave owner, Aranda, participated in the plotting and execution of the rebellion, including the murder of white people to whom they were ostensibly slavishly devoted. While Cereno is the moral compass of the story and the eponymous character with the most profound sensitivity and comprehension, his rejection of slavery and his understanding seem to be never fully complete. After witnessing the atrocities perpetrated by African rebels on whites, he is startled at what a human being is capable of. Still, there is no evidence in the text that he has a similar reflection in the context of the cruelties that Africans were subjected to. Pleading with Delano to abandon the pursuit of the San Dominick after his own liberation and liberation of his white fellow-sailors, Cereno is afraid of the “massacre” of “whites” by ferocious “negroes” (296-297).

5. There is no mention in the text of any subjection of Cereno to physical violence, but it is never defined what constitutes the unspeakable that Cereno can never utter, whether it pertains to the killing of Aranda and the skinning of his skeleton or whether the unspeakable refers still to other events that the reader never becomes a privy to. If during the rebellion the African slaves invert the atrocities perpetrated on black people by white slave owners and supervisors, then one of them, albeit not so frequent as the sexual abuse of black women, was the sexual exploitation of black men. Nikki Taylor recounts such instances in her 2018 paper “Wounded Bodies; Wounded Spirits: Margaret Garner’s Family as a Site of Collective and Compounded Violence.”

6. Dennis Pahl interprets this particular positioning of Babo’s head and the fact that the head faces the cemetery on which Cereno and Aranda are buried as “the gaze of the past” that “cannot easily be denied” (1995, 181). Pahl notes that the displaying of Babo’s head is “at once a warning to the Other to keep in his place, and yet also a warning to the supposedly more ‘advanced’ cultures that the enslaved Other cannot be completely repressed” (181)

The telling of the story may potentially elicit more sympathy and pity for Cereno and other whites than for Babo and other Africans. The cruelties perpetrated on Aranda and members of the white crew are revealed, whereas those committed on Africans are mostly only hinted at. The narrator underscores that Babo personally ordered all the murders. Delano, on the other hand, although intent on capturing the rebellious San Dominick black crew, is portrayed as a magnanimous man doing all in his power to prevent the murders of black rebels by white sailors (312). Despite being defeated, Babo resembles a victor even in death. He remains standing even after death, while Benito Cereno falls prostrate “borne on the bier” to the cemetery on Mount Agonia (315).

Babo’s signifying, mimicry, his manipulation of appearances, putting on various exteriors make him akin to the African trickster figure, who in Henry Louis Gates’s words signified “nothing on the x axis of white signification, and everything on the y axis of blackness” (1989, 47). Like other signifying figures depicted by Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*, Babo rejects the Western horizontal signification of travelling towards success in a straight line, instead opting for the vertical signification of travelling “up *and* down, in retreat as well as in advance, crabways and crossways and around in a circle” (Ellison 1952, 385, original emphasis). In his masquerade Babo also fits Homi Bhabha’s definition of mimicry and slippage. Impersonating the role of Cereno’s faithful servant mistreated by his master, he exaggerates his performance, living out Bhabha’s definition of mimicry as repetition with a difference, “*almost the same but not quite*” (1994, 88-89). When Babo overplays his own performance of an obsequious servant by excessively attending to Cereno’s details of clothing, he is at the same time responsible for Cereno’s mimicry of an aristocrat. Even though Cereno’s mimicry is forced on him by Babo, Nicola Nixon goes so far as to call Cereno a “confidence man” because, in her view, Cereno is a middle class upstart who passes for an aristocrat (1999, 369). Various operations performed by Babo on Cereno’s head in the climactic shaving scene of Babo’s masquerade render metaphorically the control that he exercises over Cereno’s mind: “the negro seemed a Nubian sculptor finishing off a white statue-head” (282-283). Rather than commiserate with Babo who initially cuts himself in order to malign Cereno and elicit Delano’s sympathy, Delano is sorry for Cereno, concluding that “this slavery breeds ugly passions in man” (283). Dumbfounded as Delano is by Babo’s crafty performance, he has a momentary flash of mind in which he perceives Babo as a headsman and Cereno as a “man at the block” (280). Another flash of mind visits Delano when Babo cuts Cereno. The fright on Cereno’s face makes Delano think that Delano “looks as if [he] himself were to be done for” (282). Cereno’s subjection to Babo is visible when the latter molds himself into a kind of “crutch” on which Cereno leans

immediately before Delano's return to his own ship (293). Babo can also be seen as a "crutch" in broader narrative terms because the whole plot rests on him as the chief puppet master who pulls all the strings. Ironically, immediately after the above-mentioned scene the cord that tethers him to Cereno is about to be broken by Cereno, who breaks free by jumping into Delano's boat.

The reader never gets an insight into Babo's thoughts or can hear him speak spontaneously, outside the context of the masquerade involving Cereno as an unwilling actor and staged before Delano as a puzzled, somewhat dubious observer, who still cannot decipher the significance of what unfolds before his eyes. The words uttered by Babo during the first section of the narrative focalized through Delano's point of view are mostly snippets of his veiled commands issued to Cereno, explanatory comments to Delano on Cereno's bizarre behavior and words of complaint against his master, Cereno, after Babo deliberately cuts himself in order to simulate Cereno's ungratefulness and austerity. When Delano momentarily takes over the command of the *San Dominick* in order to steer the ship, Babo "faithfully" repeats his orders to the sailors, which reinforces his role of a mime (288). The deposition section of the narrative does not cite Babo's words directly, merely informing the reader that during the presentation of Aranda's skeleton to all white crew members, Babo spoke to each of the white sailors individually, goading them about the white color of the bones and uttering a clear threat of following in Aranda's footsteps in case of any insubordination. Babo utters the same threat with magnified force to Cereno because it is Cereno that as a captain is expected to shoulder responsibility for steering the ship in the direction indicated by Babo, that is, Senegal. After being captured, Babo refuses to speak since, as the narrator explains, "His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words" (315). Babo uses the spoken language before and during the rebellion, only until he can employ it to his own ends. Yet the above mentioned instances of the use of language by Babo show that he is not exactly a silent schemer or a silent plotter as he is often perceived by critics and as he is characterized by the narrator himself at the moment of his death: "the black met his voiceless end" (315). No access to his thoughts and fairly limited examples of direct communication exemplify Toni Morrison's statement on an "always choked representation of an Africanist presence" (17), making Babo also akin to a figure that Toni Morrison terms as a "cipher," ("rendered voiceless") (24), an enigma, an inscrutable, impenetrable persona.

That Melville does not grant the reader access to Babo's thoughts does not mean that he does not accentuate Babo's outstanding mental capabilities. Following the brief description of his death the narrator calls Babo's head "that hive of subtlety" (315), on the one hand, rendering unique mental prowess, but on the other

suggesting the impossibility of deciphering his thoughts. Babo represents outstanding mental power locked in an uninspiring physique, being an antithesis to Delano's preconception of black people as mainly physical, performing exclusively menial jobs and with limited mental capabilities, unable to scheme, plot or potentially assume the positions of power, as Babo does. Reflecting on the African "contentment of a limited mind," Delano casts all Africans as "serving men," "Barber" and "Fletcher" (279). The narrator debunks these claims by calling Babo "the plotter from first to last" (310) and being emphatic about the fact that Babo led the rebellion, ordering all the murders, but refraining from performing them personally: "he ordered every murder, and was the helm and keel of the revolt" (310). The only murder that Babo impromptu tries to execute, prevented by Delano, is that on Cereno. Considering Babo's and Cereno's dyadic, dichotomous relationship in the text, it remains barely surprising that Cereno becomes the target of Babo's futile attempt. Delano emerges as Cereno's savior and a major disruption of Cereno-Babo dichotomy. Featuring on the last page of the narrative, in the penultimate paragraph, the narrator's assertion that Babo's "brain, not body had schemed and led the revolt with the plot – his slight frame, inadequate to that which it held" (315) gains the semblance of an obituary to Babo.<sup>7</sup> Appropriately, the closing paragraph is dedicated to the eponymous protagonist, closely related to Babo, Benito Cereno.

As a black character of a puny, uninspiring posture and unique, mental powers, Babo can be perceived as an antecedent of another black character, an African American protagonist of William Melvin Kelley's *A Different Drummer* (1962), Tucker Caliban, who launches a non-violent rebellion in the American South by covering his small plot of land with salt and migrating North. Significantly, other African Americans of the South also leave their Southern households and start heading North. Caliban is depicted as a puny, short man with an exceptionally large head. Like Babo, he is also a man of deeds and few words. Like "Benito Cereno," *A Different Drummer* also includes a lynching of an African American man Pastor Bennett Bradshaw, who travels from the North to the South in order to probe the mass migration of African Americans to the South. However, unlike in the case of "Benito Cereno," the selective-omniscient narrator of *A Different Drummer* enters the mind of Reverend Bradshaw immediately before his death, not describing the event in detail as it is the case in other narratives by African American authors: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), or

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7. I would side with the critics who stop short of identifying Babo as "the leader" of the narrator's statement closing the narrative: "Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader" (315). Carol Colatrella wonders if we really know who the leader is: "Whose authority can be trusted?" (1994, 257). In a parallel way, Oliver Scheiding notes that Cereno becomes aware of the diffuse nature of power (1998, 131). Ellen J. Goldner points out that "the San Dominick is a ghastly ship of state that bears as its figurehead the shrouded skeleton of a murdered man: the owner of the slaves on board" (1999, 62).

James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man" (1965), but still showing the event in two different perspectives, through the viewpoint of the victim of the upcoming lynching, who reflects on racial relations in the South and through the perspective of a small boy, who can hear the drunken cries of the white lynchers, assuming that they are involved in an innocent celebration. In comparison with the above-mentioned narratives, Melville's description of Babo's execution, sanctified by the verdict of the court, but still strikingly resembling a lynching, is brief, terse and to the point, yet still very telling, especially in the context of Babo's head "[meeting], unabashed, the gaze of the whites" (315) and facing Aranda's and Cereno's burial places: "Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites" (315).

The lack of insight into Babo's thoughts and his relative silence in the narrative invite various critical responses. Eleanor E. Simpson argues that the construction of Babo as a black character shows that Melville, unlike some of his contemporaries, was aware that black people were capable of manipulating the Sambo doll stereotype (1988, 153). Babo fits into Captain Delano's stereotypical perception of black people as happy-go-lucky individuals suitable for menial jobs. John Haegert claims that Babo's silence after the crushing of the rebellion can be seen not only as an act of resistance against his colonial masters, but also resistance against an "imperialist author who would appropriate him further" if he spoke (1993, 37). Rather than concentrate solely on the trope of Babo's silence, Gavin Jones shifts the focus to the silence of whites during the rebellion. Jones notes that Africans render the Spaniards mute, silencing any potential divulgence of the revolt (1995, 44). He also observes the Africans' linguistic competence, claiming that Spanish may be the lingua franca used by the Africans in order to plan the rebellion, which makes Spanish "a weapon turned against whites" (46). Jones bears out his claim further by pointing out that the phrase "Follow your leader" is written in Spanish by Babo, spelling out the doom for the Spaniards. Unlike whites, the Africans aboard the *San Dominick*, unattached slavishly to their own discourse, can employ the language of slave masters to effectively silence them during the rebellion (Jones 1995, 49). The deposition section of the narrative, summarizing the court proceedings, renders the African rebels very explicitly as speaking subjects through the following assertion: "all this is believed, because the negroes have said it" (Melville [1855] 1969, 310).

In the preceding, opening section focalized through Delano's point of view the major benchmark through which the Africans are evaluated is "docility" or the lack of it. Before the revelation of the rebellion Captain Delano approaches all Africans with an expectation of docility and is grossly disappointed when they are

not. Convinced of the “docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of the limited mind” (279), Delano proves astounded whenever he observes “less good natured qualities of the negroes” (244) or “the noisy indocility of the blacks” (245), all of which undermine his presumption that “God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune” (279). Delano’s supercilious attitude to black people is best encapsulated in the narrator’s statement that he “took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, as other men to Newfoundland dogs” (279). An animal metaphor also occurs when Delano can see Babo for the first time. Observing Babo’s attitude to Cereno, he concludes that Babo is “like a shepherd’s dog” (244). The reader does not find out to what extent Cereno subscribes to the above cited presumptions about black people before he is confronted with the rebellion. Yet one may assume that he must at least partly share in the discourse because after claiming back his freedom he defines himself as a man who is gravely betrayed by the people whom he would never suspect of the loyalty breach. The rebellion jettisons Cereno from his expectations of unquestioning loyalty at least on the part of the slaves who are Aranda’s personal servants, an equivalent of the slaves of the house, usually juxtaposed with the slaves of the plantation. In his reflections on human propensity to deception and treachery that he never expected, Cereno does not devote attention to the fact that people by whom he feels betrayed were in chains and that the deceptive plot against their masters was to bring them back to freedom. The narrator underscores in the deposition section that the afore-mentioned personal servants, eighteen-year-old José and biracial Francesco, referred to as a mulatto, made the most die-hard revolutionaries, personally executing murders that they were not ordered (309). The narrative presents black people as vicious killers of whites, either by portraying them as those who revel in death as Babo seems to do while showing off Aranda’s skinned skeleton or by capturing them in very naturalistic descriptions like the one during the confrontation with white sailors: “Their red tongues lolled, wolf-like, from their black mouths” (299). The narrator also mentions that “the pale sailors’ teeth were set” (299) and that upon retaking the San Dominick, they wish to exact revenge on the surviving African rebels, yet the killings perpetrated by whites never reach the intensity of those committed by the Africans.

A special place is devoted to the viciousness of black women aboard the San Dominick, noting that they would have tortured the white crew to death rather than just kill them:

that the negresses of age, were knowing to the revolt, and testified themselves satisfied at the death of their master, Don Alexandro [Aranda]; that, had the negroes not restrained them, they would have tortured to death, instead of simply killing, the Spaniards ... in the various acts of murder, they sang songs and danced – not gaily, but solemnly. (310)

It is silenced over why black women would have tortured to death rather than just kill white sailors. As already stated, no sexual violence is ever mentioned explicitly or even alluded to in the recount of the events on the San Dominick. Considering the socio-historical context of the Middle Passage, it is only to be surmised that the suffering of the black women aboard the San Dominick surpassed that of the black men and hence their greater incentive to engage in the torture of white men. Gloria Horsley-Meacham proposes a slightly different explanation, noting that “Melville’s deposition barbarizes [African women] by stressing that they ‘would have tortured to death, instead of simply killing’” (1991, 229-230). Horsley-Meacham’s observation that Melville alters certain factual details and the characterization of the original Captain Amasa Delano’s 1817 *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemisphere* dovetails with Allan Moore Emery’s observations that Melville embellished on the brutality of black people depicted by Captain Amasa Delano in his *Narrative*. In the original *Narrative* Delano claimed that black people forbore murders after Delano promised them in writing to deliver them safely to Senegal (306).<sup>8</sup> Emery argues that Melville deliberately made black people on board the San Dominick more violent than in Delano’s original *Narrative* in order to undermine the stereotype of black “docility” discussed above and propagated in the United States in the 1850s, when Melville wrote “Benito Cereno” (2002, 308).

The rhetoric riddled with various “race” connected, pseudo-scientific stereotypes circulating in Melville’s day can be traced in the exchanges between Delano and Cereno before the revelation of the rebellion, when Delano is still in the dark.<sup>9</sup> It is evident that Delano clearly rates whites above black people, identifying them as a putative source of the improvement of the black race, both its internal qualities and the skin color as well. Therefore he is surprised to hear the stories of “mulatto” viciousness and their duplicitous, insidious character: “For it were strange, indeed, and not very creditable to us white skins, if a little of our blood mixed with the African’s, should, far from improving the latter’s quality, have the sad effect of pouring vitriolic acid into black broth; improving the hue, perhaps, but not the wholesomeness” (284). Aside from denigrating black people, Delano treats “skin” and “blood” as an essence. The application of the term “white skins” to Spaniards in order to distinguish between white people and people of biracial origin is interesting, considering that quite often there was no difference in the skin color between both or some biracial individuals were lighter skinned than

8. Emery also notes that the name of the ship, the San Dominick, evoked the violent rebellion of 1799. Delano’s original ship bore the name Tryal and there were no Ashantee warriors on it, brandishing their hatchets (2002, 307).

9. Delano’s state of awareness is figuratively rendered through the imagery of darkness and light. This is how the narrator pictures the moment of the recognition of the true state of affairs: “across the long-benighted mind of Captain Delano, a flash of revelation swept, illuminating, in unanticipated clearness, his host’s whole mysterious demeanor” (295).

Spaniards and Americans. Upon hearing Delano's remarks, Cereno does not entirely reject them, but he classifies them as "the planter's remark," implying their racist, eugenic nature (285).

Ostensibly, Delano avows opposition to slavery, but his verbal denunciation does not interfere with his pursuit of the slave rebels on the San Dominick in order to inflict revenge, recapture white people's property, effectively throw black rebels back into slavery or at least in some cases bring about their execution. There is no impulse in Delano to explore the seeds of the rebellion or try to exonerate it in any way, although he defines himself as all goodness and benevolence, observing that "this slavery breeds ugly passions in man" (283). The chase after the San Dominick shows that appreciative as Delano claims to be of certain qualities of black people, most of them stereotyped, they still present a chattel value to him. He reportedly gouges the value of the ship to encourage his fellow-sailors to launch the pursuit. Yet it remains questionable if he really does exaggerate the value of the San Dominick, considering the value of the human "cargo" aboard. Ultimately, Delano pursues his "design" (297). This is how the narrator comments on Delano's determination to chase the ship against Cereno's pleading to abandon the pursuit: "the American did not give up his design" (297). The term "design" resonates with the concept of the Manifest Destiny, or its more transnational, colonial variations, considering that the Africans belong to the Spaniards and upon the capture they are transported to Peru, while their "design" clearly articulated in the text through the same label is to sail in an altogether different direction, back to Senegal: "they discussed what was necessary for their design of returning to Senegal" (303). Delano acts as an intermediary, a seemingly accidental agent of the expansion, who is still determined to help in the completion of the transaction that he did not initiate. To some extent, Delano's engagement anticipates the future American engagement in the propagation of the Manifest Destiny outside the borders of the United States. The term "design" exemplifies a recurrent application of the term in American literature to illustrate various manifestations of the Manifest Destiny. In his 1936 novel *Absalom, Absalom* William Faulkner also reaches for the term "design" in order to speak about Thomas Sutpen's private Manifest Destiny in the context of the American South.

In Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" both whiteness and blackness are constructed in such a way as to evoke close associations with power and disempowerment. Still, both are also the sites of semiotic struggle and contestation characteristic of Melville's other works. While white people emerge as responsible for slavery, their responsibility is not clearly articulated, but becomes attenuated by the intricacy of the narrative structure, the telling of the story, the plot construction and subject-object relations. Blackness, on the other hand, does not emerge

unequivocally as the site of victimhood. For a substantial part of the narrative the Africans are cast as subjects of power, even though their power needs to remain to some extent covert. Melville shows what happens when the positions of oppressors and the oppressed are momentarily switched. The picture of humanity ensuing from this transition is a gloomy one, even if the reader takes into account what the text does not fully articulate – the fact that the Africans aboard the San Dominick operate from the position of original disempowerment, responding with violence to violence that was originally unleashed against them. Considering the atrocities committed in the course of the narrative, yet recounted with a measure of narrative restraint, there are no clear victors or vanquished. The black mastermind of the uprising intrigue seems at least partly victorious in his defeat, while the eponymous protagonist is too aware of the debasement of humanity in the process of everything that has occurred to be able to relish his apparent success or even perceive it as such.

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