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Matthew Scully

1. Introduction

1 The problem of form, which has haunted readings of Melville's "Benito Cereno" (1855) since its publication and belated reception, is perhaps rendered most obvious by the abrupt shift from third-person narration focused on Captain Amasa Delano's point of view to legal documents focused on Don Benito Cereno's testimony in the wake of the story's previous events. "Benito Cereno" famously represents a revolution of enslaved Black persons on Cereno's ship, the *San Dominick*, led by Babo and concealed from the naïve Delano, an American who encounters the Spanish ship off the coast of Chile. Babo's plot is ultimately suppressed by both Delano and the Lima court, which restores white supremacist order. Following the legal deposition, the narrative returns to the third-person narration for a final brief conversation between Cereno and Delano. While this conversation takes place before the court trial, in the final paragraph the narrative shifts forward in time to detail Babo's execution and Cereno's death.[1] As Dana Luciano argues, fragmentation and interruption thus constitute the narrative form itself, which responds disjunctively to the perceived threat of Black revolution and the disruption that it represents (47). Revolution is itself a problem of formal reinvention, aiming to break from the established order of things.[2] The doubled narrative of "Benito Cereno"—Delano's series of misrecognitions and Cereno's legal deposition—therefore proliferates rather than simplifies the text's discontinuities and disjunctions (Weiner 8-9).

2 Readers of "Benito Cereno" continue to be confronted with the question of how to make sense of the narrative's formal torsions, or whether such sense can be made at all. C. L. R James famously declares Babo "the most heroic character in Melville's fiction," but notes a "shallowness" and failure of form in "Benito Cereno": "It is a propaganda

story, a mystery, written to prove a particular social or political point" (119). While many critics have since praised "Benito Cereno" as one of Melville's masterpieces, a change in reception that Maurice Lee associates with the story's subversive politics (495-96), I return to these formal problems to argue that the narrative disjunctions constitute what I name Melville's obsessional form. This refers to the set of displacements that (dis)organize the narrative, and, as my readings will demonstrate, this obsessional form shapes the narrative's critique of anti-Blackness. Ultimately, Melville's narrative depends on a series of ironic disjunctions and formal displacements that encourage readers to recognize the shallowness of anti-Black ideological fantasies. Far from losing "his vision of the future" (James 119), in "Benito Cereno" Melville produces a literary text whose innovative formal critique of the anti-Blackness of its contemporary moment can perhaps best be recognized as legible in our own.

2. Obsessional Form

3 Lacan's theory of obsession as a psychic structure takes as its departure point Sigmund Freud's "Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis" (1909), and the importance of narrative becomes apparent as soon as we recognize that Lacan's act of reading Freud's study of the patient known as the Rat Man enables him to develop his own theory. In his discussion of obsessional neurosis, Lacan insists not on an Oedipal triangle, but on a logic of doubling in which the "drama" of the obsessional neurotic occurs on "two levels at once" that cannot be made to coincide. Yet by insisting on this impossible coincidence, the neurotic "makes a perennially unsatisfying turning maneuver and never succeeds in closing the loop" (Lacan, "Neurotic" 415). In Freud's theoretical discussion of the Rat Man case, he notes that "it is an inherent characteristic in the psychology of an obsessional neurotic to make the fullest possible use of the mechanism of *displacement*" (241). Viviana-Melo Saint-Cyr highlights the fact that "displacement" operates as a key mechanism of this obsessional structure, for the obsessional displaces their own constitutive void from one narrative level to another in order to avoid a direct confrontation. However, Saint-Cyr argues, "it is impossible for him to ignore the void because it is always his own void as subject of the signifier, that is, a void from which he cannot escape. Thus, the obsessional neurotic can only displace it each time, he can only avoid it, move away from it" (353, translation mine).[3] Obsessional structure thus organizes itself to evade a traumatizing confrontation with the void constitutive of the subject. Part of this avoidance depends upon the displacement of the void by means of transfer, a figurative and rhetorical substitution.

4 The possibility of reading obsession at the level of style and form is particularly generative in the case of "Benito Cereno," and the non-coincidence of multiple levels of narration that characterizes obsession offers a compelling way to reread Melville's socio-political allegory. As the next sections suggest, the gaps of the first part of Melville's narrative get displaced onto the second part and its legal accounts, which also work to displace competing images of Babo. Rather than a resolution, these displacements intensify the story's ambiguity. The insights of Lacanian psychoanalysis can help to explicate the formal and rhetorical movements of Melville's text, which, I argue, work to displace the void organizing the narrative's anti-Black ideological fantasies. The void that the two-leveled story seeks to evade has to do with the emptiness constitutive of anti-Black constructions of whiteness. In these dynamics, the

white subject comes to have being (and meaning) through their relation to the non-being (and non-meaning) attributed to Blackness.[4] Babo and his fellow Black revolutionaries are made to figure this void of non-being through their caricatured representations. Such a focus allows readers to go beyond ideological analysis—exemplified by a critic such as James Kavanagh—and consider the structuring fantasy, as well as the fantasmatic nature, of whiteness that organizes Melville's narrative, but which this narrative also works to expose and critique.

5 In psychoanalytic terms, fantasy is on the side of reality. As Slavoj Žižek argues in his discussion of the ideological fantasy, "[t]he fundamental level of ideology… is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself" (30). "Benito Cereno" demonstrates that the anti-Black fantasies constitutive of whiteness depend on a set of fundamental myths of Blackness. According to Lacan, "[m]yth is what provides a discursive form for something that cannot be transmitted through the definition of truth" ("Neurotic" 407). "Myth" names "a certain objectified representation of an epos" or "a chronicle expressing in an imaginary way the fundamental relationships characteristic of a certain mode of being human at a specific period" (408). In "Benito Cereno," Melville offers readers different myths of white/Black figures and relations, all of which participate in the same totalizing fantasy of anti-Blackness constitutive of the world of the story. Yet Melville also draws our attention to the fact that these myths do not add up: the competing images of Babo—stereotypes of the Black subject as either absolutely subservient or absolutely evil—appear as two irreconcilable sides of the same myth. The doubled, obsessional narrative of "Benito Cereno" therefore speaks to the desperation with which an anti-Black ideological fantasy works to preserve itself. In Lacan's analysis, the obsessional "is constantly occupied in maintaining the Other and making him subsist through imaginary formulations" (*Seminar V* 459). "Benito Cereno" offers different imaginary constructs of Babo that organize the subjective position of Delano and, in the second part, the position of the State and its Law. Anti-Blackness's obsessional structure thus appears in its symptomatic insistence on bringing these two discursive levels together, and Melville's own narrative insists on the failure of such a project. This proposes a more generative explanation for the abruptness and disjunctive nature of the fictional shifts: such disjunctions work to puncture the totalizing consensus of anti-Black fantasies both maintained and desired, in different ways, by Delano and the Lima court.

3. Revisiting the Babo Problem

6 This essay therefore returns to a formalist mode of analysis, but it does so in order to extend contemporary readings of the narrative's political and affective investments. This approach builds on recent work by Xine Yao, who, for instance, treats Babo —"instead of Bartleby"—as the exemplary figure of refusal in Melville's fiction. As suggested by the title of the first chapter of *Disaffected* (2021), "The Babo Problem: White Sentimentalism and Unsympathetic Blackness in Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno,*" Yao develops a reading that depends on the novella's conception—and uneven distribution—of feeling and unfeeling (29). Yao argues that Babo's staged performance in the narrative's first part, his silence during the trial, and his organization of a violent revolt turn him into a figure of "antisocial negation" from Delano's point of view; that

is, he embodies "the unfeeling specter of unsympathetic Blackness that seeks not inclusion into but liberation from the American's structures of feeling that are founded upon the violent subsuming of racialized affects" (33). In the novella's anti-Black world, "no expression of Black affect is deemed truly legitimate" (Yao 33). Despite such insights, however, Melville's narrative has a limit in its representation of "the totalizing negation of Black affects and, in turn, Black sociality" (Yao 67). One example of this limit, in Yao's reading, is the way in which "the centrality of Black women's contributions to resistance to the Atlantic slave trade on ships has been elided." In Melville's story, "Babo dies alone, denied any vestige of sympathy and sociality" (Yao 68). Without contesting Yao's reading, my own suggests that a turn to the obsessional—rather than the affective—reveals that this totality of anti-Blackness in the novella in fact reveals the fantasmatic nature of anti-Black ideologies, as well as their inconsistencies and limitations. In other words, the totality becomes legible as incomplete and its mythic structure begins to dissolve. The turn to the obsessional nature of anti-Blackness, then, does not psychologize the novella's characters, but explicates the structure of anti-Blackness that gets staged across the narrative. This means following the manifestations of anti-Blackness in "Benito Cereno," which become embodied by Babo's shifting positions.

7 As many critics have stated, "Benito Cereno" presents two contradictory images of Babo, both participating in racist stereotypes.[5] In the first narrative, Babo appears as the "docile slave," ever faithful to Cereno, with Delano ridiculously referring to their master/slave relation as a friendship: "'Faithful fellow!' cried Capt. Delano. 'Don Benito, I envy you such a friend; slave I cannot call him'" (Melville 45).[6] Following the (in)famous shaving scene, Delano nearly grants sympathy to Babo after it appears that Cereno has cut Babo in retribution for being cut "accidentally" by the shaving razor. Yet Delano ultimately (mis)reads their relation in terms of a "love-quarrel" (Melville 75; Yao 46). The narrative's second representation of Babo reverses the first. In the court transcripts, Babo appears completely reconfigured as an evil mastermind: "Babo was the plotter from first to last; he ordered every murder, and was the helm and keel of the revolt" (Melville 97). As Scott Henkel argues, especially in relation to Nat Turner's rebellion of 1831, this logic of the exceptional individual Black leader of revolution was more legible—and less threatening—to the white supremacist state powers than the possibility of collective revolt (86). For an exception can be treated in a way that preserves the norm, which is, in the case of "Benito Cereno," the insistence by anti-Black ideologies on the incapacity of Black people to collectively resist and overthrow the slave system. Both images of Babo—whether sympathetic or unsympathetic—work to intensify his "servitude and dispossession" (Hartman, "The Hold of Slavery").[7] In each case, Babo becomes a caricature that serves anti-Black designs.

8 Of course, the central irony of the first part has to do with the fact that Babo deliberately takes on the role of the "faithful" slave to deceive Delano. This calls attention to the ironic disjunction and reversal of the two stereotypes that Babo embodies—one by his own design and another imposed by the court. An ideological reading would stress that these contradictory representations exemplify the contradiction or blindness that constitutes every ideological narrative (Kavanagh 358). Louis Althusser's well-known first thesis of ideology explains this in terms of its multiple levels of mediation: "[i]deology represents the imaginary relationship of

individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162). According to Žižek, an ideological subject works to maintain their "blindness," that is, to avoid the contradictions covered over by the ideological narrative (45). The ideological fantasy allows them to avoid a traumatizing confrontation with their real conditions of existence, and in fact, it is precisely ideology's failure of consistency that enables the subject to do the work of reconfirming their position.

9 When Delano glimpses "the real conditions of existence" during the shaving scene, for example, he works to reinscribe himself within the "safe" ideological fantasy that positions Babo as incapable of such threats. As Melville writes in his characteristically labyrinthine syntax, corresponding mimetically to Delano's own contorted ideological labor,

> [a]ltogether the scene was somewhat peculiar, at least to Captain Delano, nor, as he saw the two thus postured, could he resist the vagary, that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white, a man at the block. But this was one of those antic conceits, appearing and vanishing in a breath, from which, perhaps, the best regulated mind is not always free. (Melville 72)

10 Delano's vision of the real relation between Babo and Cereno can only be framed as a "vagary" and an "antic conceit." The image of the Black headsman and the white at the block is thus preceded and followed by rationalizing language. Here readers see the machinations of ideological interpellation, for Delano actively—even painstakingly—reinscribes himself as a subject of an anti-Black ideology that cannot accept the reality of an enslaved Black person dominating and controlling a white captain. Melville demonstrates in such episodes how much work is involved for Delano to maintain his position of ignorance and ideological safety. Perhaps nothing exemplifies Delano's "regulated mind" more fully than the fact that, at the conclusion of the narrative, Delano can so quickly recover from his belated recognition and suppression of the revolt, an experience that leaves Cereno destroyed (Melville 100-02).

11 Where Delano maintains his view of Black subjects as inferior—an ideological position insistently undermined by the facts of the narrative—"Benito Cereno" presents readers with a second option in the deposition's treatment of Babo as "the plotter" and mastermind of the revolt (Melville 97). But the logic of displacement here—i.e., Babo's shifting positions—shows the obsessional structure of anti-Black ideologies, for Babo, who figures the Black subject more generally, appears as a 'floating' signifier that can be 'fixed' depending on the needs of the ideological context (Žižek 95). The faithful slave and the evil plotter of revolt fulfill analogous functions of positioning the Black subject acceptably and legibly within two different anti-Black ideological fantasies. The text also emphasizes two features of the overall structuring fantasy of anti-Blackness—the conjunction of political and libidinal economy—at the moment Delano sends his men to reclaim the *San Dominick*: "The more to encourage the sailors, they were told, that the Spanish captain considered his ship good as lost; that she and her cargo, including some gold and silver, were worth more than a thousand doubloons. Take her, and no small part should be theirs" (Melville 87). Yao notes that in this scene Delano "incentivizes" what was framed, in the era of the Fugitive Slave Act, as a "social duty" and "responsibility": "to recapture people as living property" (59). The consolidation of whiteness depends, then, on combining several ideological investments, all of which mask the inconsistencies of anti-Blackness as such. For anti-Black constructions of whiteness work by displacing the void at the foundations of whiteness—the fact that whiteness *is* nothing but a fantasy constituted via a relation to stereotyped

(mis)representations of Blackness. Calvin Warren argues, for instance, that "black ~~being~~ incarnates metaphysical nothing, the terror of metaphysics, in an antiblack world." The "function" of Black non-being, then, is to provide being for white subjects (Warren 5). Delano, as a "regulated mind," exemplifies the position of the "good" subject of such ideological fantasies. Where "bad subjects" designate those "inadequately interpellated subjects, who resist domination by deviating from the normative and whose misbehaviors" may require the intervention of repressive state apparatuses (Lowe 146), good subjects "work 'all by themselves,' i.e., by ideology" to ensure the persistence of the normative order of things (Althusser 181). Rather than repeating an ideology critique of Melville's fiction, however, a turn to obsessional form can be used to think more elaborately about the formal structure of Melville's text, as well as, by association, the formal structure of the anti-Blackness that it stages.

12 Despite Melville's possible, or possibly strategic, limitations—the fact that Babo can only be read as a "hero" by constructing a "third" position beyond the two caricatures presented in the narrative's main text—obsessional form calls attention to the narrative's profound critique of anti-Black racism, a structure dependent upon a logic of displacement and deferral, within which political and libidinal economy must be understood alongside one another. Lacan argues that the doubled levels of obsessional form produce a condition of diplopia, a medical term for double vision ("Neurotic" 415). Figuratively, something quite similar occurs in Melville's text, for Babo is doubled by the two levels of anti-Black fantasy: Delano's sentimental vision and the law's repressive vision. Yet neither appearance effectively represents Babo as such. In other words, the problem of misreading—or misperceiving, misrepresenting—is a problem for the "ultimate dupe" Delano as well as for the law, that supposedly objective structure (Ngai 61). Where Yao reads Babo as a figure of refusal, my argument shifts the focus to consider the implications that his misrepresentations have for the narrative form. Attending to the obsessional structure of the story reveals the way in which anti-Blackness emerges through the disjunctive linking of contradictory ideologies and enables a reading of the story as a refusal to reify these anti-Black fantasies.

4. Melville's Disjunctive Fictions

13 "Benito Cereno" announces its dependence on competing levels of meaning in an early spatial analogy between a ship and a house. This occurs the moment after Delano boards the *San Dominick*, where he is confronted "by a clamorous throng of whites and blacks" who, "in one language, and as with one voice, all poured out a common tale of suffering" (Melville 38). The narrative then interrupts Delano's encounter with a complex reflection on the nature of this experience:

> Always upon first boarding a large and populous ship at sea, especially a foreign one, with a nondescript crew such as Lascars or Manilla men, the impression varies in a peculiar way from that produced by first entering a strange house with strange inmates in a strange land. Both house and ship, the one by its walls and blinds, the other by its high bulwarks like ramparts, hoard from view their interiors till the last moment; but in the case of the ship there is this addition; that the living spectacle it contains, upon its sudden and complete disclosure, has, in contrast with the blank ocean which zones it, something of the effect of enchantment. The ship seems unreal; these strange costumes, gestures, and faces, but a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive back what it gave. (Melville 38)

14 I quote this passage in its entirety because it teaches us—quite precisely, if paradoxically—both how to read "Benito Cereno" and how any reading proves impossible. For what Delano encounters is, of course, "a shadowy tableau," an elaborate masquerade staged and orchestrated—or authored—by Babo. The passage ironically reveals to readers the mechanics of the story that they are about to read. Within the diegesis, the passage reflects Delano's inability to read the signs that he encounters, but at the same time it allegorizes the narrative itself. The analogy between house and ship first occurs because of a similarity—"Both... hoard from view their interiors till the last moment." However, the metaphoric relation of similarity shifts almost immediately to a catachrestic relation founded on difference or non-coincidence: ironically, the disenchanting revelation of the ship's interior produces an effect of re-enchantment. The ship's interior includes or contains a "living spectacle," a suggestive phrase that could be taken to signify both the sailors and, in the case of the *San Dominick*, its cargo of enslaved Black persons from Africa.

15 The (non-)revelation here emphasizes the fact that the occluded interior has to do with the character of these persons, both free and unfree. The entire trick of "Benito Cereno," at least until it shifts to the deposition, turns around the ironic gap between Delano's misreading of what he encounters on the *San Dominick* and what the reader can infer through the third-person limited narrator's distance from that perspective.[8] Because the two narrative positions often become entangled—or, to refer to another metaphor from the text, knotted—the difficulty has to do largely with the reader's uncomfortable alignment with Delano's point of view, one that the reader is entrapped by and yet encouraged to disidentify with. This sense of entrapment becomes emphasized by Delano's brief encounter with "an aged sailor" on deck who seems to be "making gordian knots" (Melville 63). "The knot" the sailor makes can only be undone if cut; this allusion to the Gordian Knot therefore offers yet another figure and allegory for both the narrative itself, including its focus on race, and Babo's constructed scenes in the narrative's first part. In these encounters and figures, the story invests itself in a destabilizing economy of doubling and displacement—ship/house, Delano/narrator, fictional narration/legal deposition—that, far from working toward a final synthesis or revelation that would untangle the various knots of the narrative, intensifies its occluding effects.

16 This early passage seems to be in direct contrast to a comment in the final section, one that follows the deposition. After Cereno's signature that authenticates the legal testimony, the third-person narration of the first part returns. This brief conclusion follows the events of the main narrative, but precedes the events of the trial, so—as many readers have pointed out—it appears temporally and narratively out of joint. Susan Weiner, for example, argues that "Melville's manipulation of narrative order increases our distrust of the illusion of the completeness and factualness of his own fictional account" (18). The discontinuity of this scene could be read as another form of displacement. For Freud, displacement distorts "causal connections," thereby confusing attempts at interpretation (246). The prefatory comment to this section, then, must be taken ironically: "If the Deposition have served as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it, then, as a vault whose door has been flung back, the San Dominick's hull lies open to-day" (Melville 100). The grammatical if/then structure encourages suspicion and a simple dismissal: for it is not the case that the deposition works "as the key" to the previous narrative and its complications. As many

readers have noted, while the deposition elaborates on the preceding narrative, it inaugurates a new set of questions and becomes part of Melville's critique of legal fictions.[9] Yet I am interested in the shifting metaphoric logic at this moment in the text, for somewhat strikingly, the ship and house of the earlier analogy have been replaced by a ship and vault. Melville performs a sleight of hand in this substitution—yet another form of displacement. Previously, the ship appeared as the problematic object in its resistance to the disenchantment possible in the case of the house. To stabilize the figure of the ship, however, Melville replaces the house with the vault, which promises, perhaps, a more fixed relation between inside and outside, between appearance and reality. In other words, the analogy is an attempt to manage the instability of the ship and its "living spectacle" by aligning it with a supposedly more straightforward figure.

17 Yet there seems to be no clear rationale for how or why this figurative substitution and rhetorical sleight of hand can in fact achieve what they promise. One response might be that the ship's "living spectacle" has been replaced by the dead contents concealed within a vault. Readers of the story know, however, that the relation between life and death is by no means stable. This becomes explicit with the afterlife of the slaveowner, Alexandro Aranda, whose skeleton—prepared by Babo's men after Aranda's execution—replaces the ship's figurehead. Eric Sundquist notes that Melville changes his source material's account—in which Aranda's body is "thrown overboard"—in order to produce a figurative substitution: the "seemingly cannibalized" (135) body of Aranda remains as a skeleton, which then becomes "substituted for the ship's proper figure-head, the image of Christopher Colon, the discoverer of the New World" (Melville 93). As Catherine Toal argues, "Babo's use of the skeleton to dramatize the terroristical rationale of racial identification creates a 'tautological' structure (already inherent in his device, which is at once an actual dead body's remnant and a hackneyed symbol of Death)" (56). Sundquist treats tautology as "the governing figure of Melville's narrative method," and it indeed offers one model for the variety of ideological contradictions and blindnesses in the narrative, for "tautology asserts the virtual equivalence of potentially different authorities or meanings" (Sundquist 155). The irony on display for the reader dissolves into the trope of tautology for Delano, precisely because as "a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature" and "a man of such native simplicity as to be incapable of satire or irony" (Melville 35, 51), he cannot recognize the doubled significance of signs confronting him. Melville doubles the figure of Aranda's skeleton at the close of the narrative in another analogy with Babo's decapitated head, but for now I will merely insist that Aranda's skeleton works as a warning to the whites defeated by Babo and the other formerly enslaved persons on the ship. In this sense, Aranda is subjected to a living death threatening the Spanish sailors who refuse to listen to their captors, and indeed, Melville's various rhetorical substitutions reveal that the literal referents and material grounds live on figuratively—an implication that reappears with Babo's execution at the story's conclusion.

5. Anti-Blackness and Its Failed Logic of Accounting

18 Before turning to this conclusion, though, more needs to be said about the narrative shift from a third-person limited narrative focalized on Delano to an account allegedly based on legal depositions. One explanation for the sudden shift in genre—from a

narrative constituted by the ironic difference between voice and character (Delano) to a translated account of the court case and Cereno's testimony—would be that the first narrative exhausts itself. Finally, in "a flash of revelation" (Melville 85), Delano sees what attentive readers will have seen for quite some time: Babo has led a revolt of enslaved Black persons and has orchestrated the preceding scenes, such as the shaving of Cereno, to deceive Delano and maintain control over the Spanish sailors. At this moment of recognition that cuts across the previous ideological misrecognitions, Delano, "with scales dropped from his eyes, saw the negroes, not in misrule, not in tumult, not as if frantically concerned for Don Benito, but with mask torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives, in ferocious piratical revolt" (Melville 85). In a very practical sense, the story cannot continue in the same mode because—according to the logic of the fictional diegesis—there is no plausible way for Delano to return to the position of the unseeing dupe in relation to the dynamic between Cereno and Babo. While his concluding exchange with Cereno reveals a persistent ignorance, the principle of ironic distance governing the story up to this point has nevertheless exhausted itself. In other words, the story has reached an impasse, and the shift in genre to the legal deposition offers one way to restart the fictional narration. The concerns of the first narration can now be displaced onto the second, and reconfigured.

19 This impasse of "Benito Cereno" also follows from Delano's failed account of Babo's character. From the vantage of whiteness, an accounting of Blackness is precisely the issue, and the court intervenes to offer another account of Babo's character that seeks to resolve the problems raised by the preceding narrative. In his explication of Lacan, Sergio Benvenuto writes that "the neurotic faces a logical *impasse*: he has to collect what Lacan calls a *symbolic debt*" (185). Benvenuto continues as follows:

> The neurotic often insists obstinately on books that do not balance. He is never sure he has the maths right, he suspects that there are shortages, that the others are cheating or that he himself is cheating. The need of the neurotic to check and double-check relentlessly—the *obsessional doubt*—gives voice to the fact that his life is built on a debt with, say, the law, which is a debt he will not be able to honour. (185, original emphasis)

20 While Benvenuto speaks here of the obsessional neurotic patient, this structure of obsession—the attempt to balance an account that cannot be balanced—explains the repetition compulsion of "Benito Cereno." In the court documents, readers are confronted with another story of the *San Dominick*. This story provides new information and the guise of a fuller accounting—despite the various elisions in the court documents—but Babo remains silent and silenced. We are given a second version of Babo's character as an evil mastermind of revolution, but this vision is equally erroneous.

21 The compensatory and explanatory functions of the legal deposition appear in several notable details. Firstly, the image of Babo as the faithful slave gets reconfigured by Babo's absolute mastery over the situation. When he and the other Black revolutionaries see Delano approaching, Babo threatens Cereno with death and "in every particular he informed the deponent what part he was expected to enact in every device" (Melville 95). The repetition of "every" speaks to Babo's absolute knowledge of the situation to come, a foil for Delano's near-total ignorance. Secondly, the legal deposition is an attempt to absolve the white subjects from blame and portray the Black subjects as those at fault. This appears in the construction of what was possible at the time of the revolt, for those offering testimony are at pains to show "that from the

beginning to the end of the revolt, it was impossible for the deponent and his men to act otherwise than they did” (Melville 98). The court aims in this sense to produce a consensual view of the situation that it could not have unfolded otherwise. Jacques Rancière helpfully aligns consensus with the “end of politics” because it designates “a return to the normal state of things” (42-43), which, in the world of “Benito Cereno,” is a state that precludes Black revolution and the possibilities of Black life. Extending this consensual project, the court seeks to absolve the Americans from the deaths of some of the Spanish sailors during the re-taking of the *San Dominick*. These are presented as “mistake[s],” but ones “impossible to be avoided” (Melville 98-99). Such logics should not be surprising given that the court is far from impartial; instead, these machinations of the legal testimony reveal more forms of displacement, in part through the reconfiguration of particular incidents according to a general set of laws. The court indeed works to shore itself up as the institution that reinscribes, through the enactment of laws, the ideological fantasy of the Law. Yet Melville’s narrative encourages readers to doubt the account of the law in “Benito Cereno,” and in this sense, the obsessional doubt constantly threatening and motivating anti-Black fantasies becomes tangible.

22 The threat to the State and its laws is obvious in Delano’s description of the Black revolutionaries’ last stand as a “ferocious piratical revolt” (Melville 85). The figure of the pirate positions their revolt as not merely illegal, but as antagonistic to the law as such. Daniel Heller-Roazen argues that the pirate figures “the original enemy of the human kind,” that is, “‘the enemy of all’” (9), because the pirate embodies a non-sovereign force against the sovereignty of nations and their laws. In this sense, and according to the anti-Black logic governing society, the revolt must be destroyed to prevent a new social order from emerging. While this descriptive statement could be attributed to the narrator, it seems more likely that it reflects Delano’s new perception of the scene; as such, it emphasizes how quickly he can reorganize his ideological positioning of himself and the Black subjects whom he encounters. In an instant, we shift from an anti-Black fantasy of the faithful slave to its symmetrical opposite: the image of the terrifying and “delirious” Black revolutionary (Melville 85).

6. Conclusion: The Politics of Refusal

23 Much has been made of Babo’s silence during the court testimonies, as well as the fact that we never hear Babo speak except in his skillfully staged performance.[10] The story ends with his execution by the state, and his head is displayed to serve as a warning. In the final paragraph, readers learn that Babo’s “body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites” (Melville 102). Readers are encouraged to recognize an analogy between Aranda’s skeleton and Babo’s decapitated head, yet the analogy, like the earlier one between ship and house, also appears catachrestic. Toal in fact notes that critics who merge Aranda’s skeleton with Babo’s head fail to recognize the differential relation between the two figures (54-55). Where Aranda’s skeleton does, in fact, deter Cereno and the other Spanish sailors, Babo’s head persists as a threat to the whites (rather than as a warning to enslaved Black people). In Sundquist’s reading, Babo’s “silent death... renounces power while at the same time reserving its volcanic energies in a radical shadow play staged within the legal theater of his own execution.... Babo

will not speak within the language of a law that does not apply to him" (182). The story concludes, however, not with Babo's death but with Cereno's. In another of Melville's labyrinthine sentences that joins a constellation of figures central to the narrative (with Delano notably absent), it is emphasized that Babo's defiant gaze persists even in death. It continues to meet,

> unabashed, the gaze of the whites; and across the Plaza looked towards St. Bartholomew's church, in whose vaults slept then, as now, the recovered bones of Aranda; and across the Rimac bridge looked towards the monastery, on Mount Agonia without; where, three months after being dismissed by the court, Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader. (Melville 102)

24 Even in death, it is Babo who maintains control over the scene, for this sentence tracks the movement and range of his gaze and all that appears within its field. Delano's violent suppression of Babo's revolt and, consequently, Babo's court-ordered execution conform with Saidiya Hartman's claim that "black pain is the substrate of national fantasy and white pleasure" (Interview). Yet "Benito Cereno" offers one final ironic inversion with regard to Babo's lingering gaze. Christopher Castiglia and Russ Castronovo argue that Babo is "not at all" disempowered in the end, for he "continues to meet the 'gaze of the whites,' his head a *memento mori* to mutinous collective agency" (433). While Babo fails to kill Cereno with the dagger after leaping into Delano's boat, in another, perhaps figurative sense, Babo does kill Cereno, after all.

25 In the final exchange between Delano and Cereno, the ever-cheerful and foolish American asks, "what has cast such a shadow upon you?" Cereno's response, "The negro" (Melville 101), remains ambivalent: does he refer to Babo in particular or to the Black race in general? Cereno's dissolution reveals the consequences of rupturing one's ideological position, as well as losing one's relationship to an imaginary Other. Babo's revolt disrupts Cereno's self-identity, as Babo's manipulation of his own image discloses its fantasmatic nature. Without the anti-Black stability of the master/slave relation, Cereno cannot "maintain himself as a subject," to borrow again from Lacan's terminology (*Seminar V* 459). Lacan argues further that the obsessional subject "could not subsist as a subject were this Other effectively undone" (459). That is, Cereno's character can no longer displace the void of being because he can no longer maintain the blindness of the symbolic-imaginary matrix organizing anti-Blackness; as a result, he cannot survive in the narrative. Babo's organizing gaze at the narrative's conclusion shows that "whiteness remains shot through with the image of blackness; rebellion persists within the scene of punishment." Cereno recognizes that "insurgent possibilities" persist, while Delano has ideologically evacuated such threats to his position as white subject (Castiglia and Castronovo 433).

26 In their provocation I cited earlier, however, Yao emphasizes an important limit to the narrative's construction of Babo's resistance and his embodiment of a practice of refusal: "who might be inspired by Babo's unsympathetic Blackness and, perhaps, be sympathetic?" (67). One response is that Cereno's death reveals that "the totalizing negation of Black affects and, in turn, Black sociality" (Yao 67) can figure the antagonistic forces within the anti-Black world. For despite—or because of—Babo's negation, his gaze persists as a remainder that undoes at least some of the logic of the anti-Black world that would not have him. If, following Sundquist, we accept tautology as the governing trope of "Benito Cereno," then we might also claim that the narrative disrupts the self-perpetuating, closed system of anti-Black violence, given that Babo's gaze and actions short-circuit the smooth functioning of anti-Black consensus. The

obsessional logic of anti-Black fantasies maintains the violent ontological schema that renders Black subjects as objects. Yet because this obsessional narrative fails to work seamlessly in "Benito Cereno," readers are able to see its distorting displacements *as* displacements. "Benito Cereno" confronts its readers, then, with the void that anti-Blackness works so hard to evade.

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NOTES

1. See Luciano and Weiner for more elaborate treatment of the temporal and formal discontinuities in "Benito Cereno."

2. Fanon warns that a repetition of the same undermines the revolutionary project, in which revolutionaries "must invent" and "must make discoveries" in order to "turn over a new leaf" and "work out new concepts" (315-16). For a reading of "Benito Cereno" in relation to its revolutionary context, see Beecher.

3. "Pourtant, il lui est impossible d'ignorer le vide, parce qu'il s'agit toujours de son propre vide comme sujet du signifiant, soit un vide auquel il ne peut pas échapper. Ainsi, le névrosé obsessionnel ne peut que le déplacer à chaque fois, il ne peut que l'éviter, l'éloigner en s'éloignant."

4. In less explicitly psychoanalytic terms, Dana Nelson might characterize this dynamic in terms of "altero-referentiality," by which whiteness as a positive, stable position generates its coherence through a relation to another position and space—Blackness as a negative, unstable figure—that can serve as its grounds. According to Nelson, this altero-referentiality describes how the self—in this case Delano and the white masculinity that he figures—"seeks stability (finds its supplement) through imagined and actual excavation of multiple others" (17).

5. For a recent review of these critical positions, see Avitzour.

6. Delano's various animal analogies reveal another contradiction in his (mis)reading of this relationship. In the following racist analogy, for instance, Delano's projection of inequality forecloses the possibility of any kind of friendship between equals: "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" (71). Ezra Tawil discusses this feature of "Benito Cereno" in the context of its contemporary publication and readership (40-41).

7. Hartman's phrase appears in her reflection on *Scenes of Subjection* twenty-five years after its initial publication. In this reflection, she begins by writing, "In the archive of slavery, I encountered a paradox: the recognition of the slave's humanity and status as a subject extended and intensified servitude and dispossession" ("The Hold of Slavery").

8. Kavanagh notes that "because the reader is usually 'deceived' along with Delano on first reading," a "second reading" is required; however, this second reading "is not so much a rereading of the text 'itself' as a reading of one's first spontaneous *relation to* the text. This second reading must be no less than an ideological analysis of one's relation to the text, and to the ideology it puts into production" (358, original emphasis).

9. For examples of such accounts, see Weiner and Eaton. For Eaton, "the various instances of narrative framing in *Benito Cereno*—embedded narratives, generic shifts (from story to court deposition, for example)—constitute a strategy of mediation between fact and fiction, or history and literature." Mobilizing this strategy, "Melville disputes the authority of historical narratives as well as legal discourse to account for the truth of slave rebellion" (214).

10. Valkeakari, for example, considers Babo's muteness as an expression of "the resistant silence of the silenced" (237). See also Sundquist and Goldberg for more expansive readings of silence in "Benito Cereno."

ABSTRACTS

"Benito Cereno" offers an exemplary text to consider obsession in relation to narrative form. Melville's tale operates on at least two levels: the first part, a third-person narration that exhausts itself when "Melville's ultimate dupe" (Ngai 61), Captain Delano, finally realizes there has been a slave revolt on Cereno's ship, and the second part, transcripts from legal depositions

in the court case that makes a sovereign judgment on Babo and the events of the preceding narrative. Yet this judgment does little to resolve the narrative's tensions. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, I argue for obsession as the governing formal principle of Melville's narrative. The necessary and yet impossible coincidence of multiple levels of narration that characterizes obsession offers a compelling way to reread Melville's representation and critique of the anti-Black fantasies that organize the society displayed in the story. The perpetual turning motion constitutive of obsessional form thus helps redescribe the competing narrative styles of "Benito Cereno," as well as the aesthetic and political implications of Babo's resistance to the anti-Black structures of Delano and Cereno's world. Reading "Benito Cereno" in terms of obsessional form reveals its profound critique of anti-Blackness and the anti-Black fantasies sustaining it.

INDEX

Keywords: Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno, " obsession, form, anti-Blackness, psychoanalysis, ideological fantasy

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