“Everything was mute and calm; everything grey;” Benito Cereno, White Authority and #BlackLivesMatter

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Herman Melville’s Benito Cereno presents the focalized perspectives of white authority figures in order to deconstruct different forms of racism, even from authority figures who exhibit sympathy for black slaves. I argue that Benito Cereno’s message resonates with the current efforts of activists to bring attention to the ways in which authority figures translate the activities of black citizens. America is increasingly debating the biases among our authority figures, specifically those involved in law enforcement. For instance, recent attention to law enforcement discrimination towards black Americans has spawned the group #BlackLivesMatter, which fights for justice in such cases. Benito Cereno is riddled with translations that create crises for the characters and readers forced to interpret ambiguous signals that serve to reveal prejudiced perspectives. I suggest that the text, especially in its deposition section, undermines the authority of law enforcement narratives by subtly revealing the cultural biases that guide them.

Introduction

Herman Melville’s Benito Cereno first appeared in 1855 as a serial story in Putnam’s Monthly, an American magazine featuring American literature and articles on topics such as science, art, and politics. The first edition of Putnam’s in 1853 featured a laudatory editorial on Uncle Tom’s Cabin which initiated the magazine’s “political force” as a vehicle for abolition (Mott 420, 423). The magazine’s political agenda was controversial yet influential in its time. Indeed, the pro-slavery magazine DeBow’s Review condemned Putnam’s as “the leading review of the Black Republican Party” (423). Melville was among several well-known authors to publish in Putnam’s. His work Benito Cereno recasts the true account of American explorer Amasa Delano’s encounter with a Spanish slave ship, the San Dominick, utilizing subtle literary devices such as an unreliable narrator and free indirect discourse to convey the irony of Delano’s American ignorance. Delano is not a southern American, but hails instead from New England, a center of abolitionist fervor. The story is written in third person but focalized through his flawed and inadvertently racist perspective, which indicates that the novel’s criticisms are chiefly directed toward the racism of abolitionist sympathizers, perhaps the very readers of Putnam’s.

So far may even the best man err in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted. (267)

–Benito Cereno, Benito Cereno

As Delano spends the day aboard the San Dominick, which has been taken over by its slaves, he is puzzled by the odd interactions he observes between the black and white passengers and cannot entertain the possibility that the slaves have revolted. Delano directs his doubts and suspicions primarily to the motives of the strange, frail Spanish captain and title character, Benito Cereno, who is in truth a mere puppet in the hands of the ship’s most cunning member, a slave named Babo who orchestrated the revolt. This complex narrative is followed by the legal deposition of Benito Cereno explaining the aforementioned odd interactions by revealing that the slaves, lead by Babo, had revolted and taken full control of the ship. The deposition does not include the voice of Babo, and we find out in the last few sentences that he was executed, meeting a “voiceless end” with his head on a stake. His decision to remain silent functions as his last form of resistance: a refusal to participate in the legal system of a place in which he is considered property.

I suggest that Benito Cereno, especially the deposition sequence, draws parallels to the manner in which today’s justice system misrepresents and/or fails to depict the voices of black Americans. In light of recent police brutality cases based on racial profiling and dangerous assumptions about black bodies, it is difficult to read the novella without recognizing how it voices crit-
icisms that still comprise movements for racial justices, especially the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Melville’s deposition in New England is to a large part one of whose voices are effec-
tively unheard in the legal examination of the events on the San Dominick, and thus to what extent the legal system accurately represented the events that occurred. With so many cases of police discrimination towards black Americans circulating the public consciousness it is easy to see how Melville’s critiques resonate with our present situation. Who holds the authority to interpret “criminal” actions? What biases govern these interpre-
tations? How can we be sure that all voices in a dispute are taken into account in the courtroom or during day-
to-day interactions with legal authority figures?

Benito Cereno uses instances of literal and figur-
ral translation, to lay out a hierarchy of authority which it then critiques. While on the surface this hierarchy is restricted to those aboard the San Dominick, the deposi-
tion uses specific legal prose that draws into question the author-
ity of the legal system and how effective it is at including all perspectives in the examination of events.

Because it is such a focal point of this paper, it will be productive to define exactly what is meant by “figurative translation.” Each language, and author for that matter, has its own subtleties and structure that make it unique, thus many texts require in-depth analysis in order for meaning to be successfully replicated in a new lan-
guage. The need for analysis is what creates a niche for the translator. With the understanding that translators are necessary for reproduction of texts, it becomes ap-
parently clear that the translator can also translate a text into another language. The need for analysis is what creates the need for interpretation. The San Dominick needs a Translator

Melville’s language introducing the San Dom-


incrk needs with a narrative voice critical of stereotypical authority such that a “value system comes to the surface that is at odds with that of the implied author” (Boyden 259). Instances of translation are used to show that Delano is forced to interpret signs aboard the ship and is thus being controlled by his surround-
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He chooses to ignore the incident altogether, mirroring the action of the slave who simply throw the knot overboard. Delano's dismissal is so prompt that the reader, dragged along in the same ignorance, may have difficulty interpreting the scene. Throughout the narrative the reader must see through Delano's confusion as well as the masquerade of the crew, which makes it difficult to understand the ship's dynamics. The theme of confusion persists even in moments of intended clarity in the text. For example, Boyden points out that in the critical scene of revelation Delano had to rely on a Portuguese crew member's translation to realize "[n]ot Captain Delano, but Don Benito, the black, in leaping into the boat, had intended to stab" (260). Even in the moment of supposed clarity, the text's language is knotted and translated from another point of view. The object-subject-verb (OSV) order makes the sentence choppy, effectively diminishing the climax. The sentence prefaces the deposition, which contains the "true" story of the San Dominick, and forebodes more confusion while prompting the reader to remain skeptical of clairvoyant textual moments.

The Deposition

Upon reaching the deposition, the reader is likely yearning for unification or is completely skeptical of the text's perspectival game, and therefore skeptical of the "official document" that is introduced. In the first sentence, the document announces its official purpose, objectivity, and the sworn verity of the following account; it is reminiscent of how Delano's narrative began with an acclaim to his "undistrustful good nature." The object-subject-verb (OSV) order makes the preface more confusing while prompting the reader to remain skeptical of clairvoyant textual moments. "An examination of the document reveals that Babo's voice is not included in the deposition un-

The sentence prefaces the deposition, which contains the "true" story of the San Dominick, and forebodes more confusion while prompting the reader to remain skeptical of clairvoyant textual moments. "An examination of the document reveals that Babo's voice is not included in the deposition unless it is his own decision of silence that caused his execution. However, in the context of the story it is clear that Babo's authority is limited by the way in which those like Delano perceived him. In her article, "Lead- ership and Authority," Catherine Zuckert asserts that Babo is a "natural genius destroyed by the inability of those around him to appreciate even the grounds for or the necessity of his deeds" (252). Zuckert's claim speaks to the way in which Babo silenced himself so that he could preserve his own authority: "since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words" (Melville 269). The deposition makes it clear that the court constructs its own figurative translation of an event by choosing whose voices are heard. Hence the system that is meant to be objective is influenced not only by the opinion of those in court but also public opinions.

Conclusion

Benito Cereno is a text with a powerful message about authority that has long outlived its intended audi-
ence: one cannot assume that authority figures are objective. By indicating the insufficiencies of a biased translator (Captain Delano and the court system), the novel critiques authority figures who use flawed prejudic-es to govern their perspective. Many Americans today are adopting the same concern about prejudiced authority figures in response to recent events of police brutality and discrimination against black Americans. As in the scene of the shooting of Tamir Rice in Cleveland, OH on November 22, 2014, the 12 year old boy, described as holding a pellet gun, was shot with seconds of police arriving on the scene, and died the next day. In a video of the shoot-
ing, the officer fired his weapon before his car came to a stop, and there was no evidence of warning given to
Rice (VladTV). It was the brief time frame between the boy's interaction with the police and his death that troubled many; why and how did the officer come to his decision so quickly? While neither case described is simple, in both the Rice and Brown shootings the figures of authority projected their beliefs and public-opinion stereotypes onto Brown and Rice, and unfortunately violence left them voiceless. While Babo's violence and cunning helped Melville form an argument for the complex subjectivity of blacks under slavery, the presumption of violence projected onto black lives is today a vehicle for subjection through force.

Melville's text emphasizes that a translator must shed the beliefs that govern his or her own perspective in order to form an objective interpretation, but doing so is nearly impossible. How then can we fix the problem of biased translators and authority figures? A judicial system that accurately represents the demographics of the population would be a start; a 5% increase in the number of black officers serving the Ferguson police force over 150 years is not an impressive increase. Now certainly not all people who hold stereotypes against black Americans are authority figures and not all authority figures believe said stereotypes, but an important point begs iteration: Delano was un-phased by Babo holding a knife to Cereno's throat because he only saw a picture of loyal obedience. In this way, the text critiques the supposedly "beneficial," even picturesque vision of blacks emanating out of New England, a center of advanced political beliefs which generated readers of abolitionist periodicals like Putnam's Monthly. While America today is often described as a post-racial and pluralistic society of tolerance and acceptance, many police officers feel uneasy and suspicious when they see hooded black teenagers walking with hands in their pockets. Melville's commentary on Delano's ignorance, which stems from Delano's "progressive" thinking, therefore challenges the prejudices of the abolitionist logic of his time, snipping the heart-strings tugged by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Should we also apply this critique to the prevalent notion that America today can be described as a "melting pot" in which #AllLivesMatter? The aforementioned shootings are examples of how the popular hashtag insistence remains a cultural fantasy. Whether or not current assertions that America is post-racial imply "more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine" (Melville 110).

References