

“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 is largely a comment on whose voices are effectively 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 interpretations? 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 figurative 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 deposition uses specific legal prose that draws into question the authority 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 language. 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 apparently clear that the translator can also translate a text with the intention of altering the meaning. In a figurative sense, then, translation is the act of changing from one form of thought to another. Figurative translations recreate the author's voice and yet can betray or criticize the author's intended purpose. The result of a figurative translation is a double-voiced narrator consisting of the original author and the voice at odds with him. Benito Cereno is rich with figurative translation of the real Amasa Delano's Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, and the way that Melville orchestrates his translation of Delano's narrative in literary form gives complexity, eeriness, depth and, most importantly, a strong political critique to the tale.

Melville as a Translator

Benito Cereno is a double-voiced text that em-

plains the perspective it seeks to critique. In his article "Voiceless ends: Melville's Benito Cereno and the translator in narrative discourse," Michael Boyden examines the effect of a Dutch translation on the delivery of the double-voiced narrator in Benito Cereno (255). While my paper does not examine Benito Cereno in another language, Boyden's conclusion that every translator anchors their text to their prospective audiences is directly applicable to Melville's construction of the story through figurative translation (256). Melville uses Delano's story as a platform for his abolitionist message by infusing Delano's words 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 surroundings. Because he is constantly being controlled by outward signals Delano is low in the hierarchy of authority on the ship, and yet Delano's perspective is nonetheless highly influential to the reader. The way that Delano interprets the signs aboard the ship reveal the limitations of his "progressive" views against the slave trade and the racism inherent in his interpretations of black action.

The San Dominick needs a Translator

Melville's language introducing the San Dominick is rife with dark and mysterious imagery that creates the need for interpretation. The San Dominick appears in fog as a stranger; its figurehead is covered and "it seemed hard to decide whether she meant to come in or no—what she wanted, or what she was about" (Melville 112). Delano, in all his good nature, is the one compelled to investigate. Stepping foot on the ship, Delano searches for the one in command, unaware of just how complex a question this will prove to be. Delano finds the Spanish captain Benito Cereno standing with Babo, and subsequently acts as the principle translator of all events on the San Dominick. Focalized through his worldview, the text seems to reveal more about the prejudices of Delano than the realities of the San Dominick's dramatic situation.

In his article "The Gaze of History in 'Benito Cereno,'" Dennis Pahl examines the manner in which Delano interprets the behavior and interactions of others on the ship. He summarizes that Delano comprehends the world in binary; he looks for signs that dictate the confines of his identity and the identity of others.

For example, in the scene where Babo is shaving Cereno with a sharp razor, Delano sees nothing but a scene exemplifying the master-servant relationship (Pahl 175). It is evident that it would be unnatural in Delano's mind to witness a black man holding dominion over a white man. The brilliance of Babo's decision to shave Cereno is that he can hold this dominion while enacting the role of subservient slave and benevolent caretaker. Pahl's analysis emphasizes that "Babo is only too aware of the artifice of language and of how power really lies with those who control the social signs and who have the ability to make these signs appear absolutely natural" (178). However, while Babo is very intelligent and orchestrates the mutiny on the San Dominick, the reader's understanding of his power is confined by the manner in which he is interpreted by Delano. Babo knows that Delano views him as naturally subservient, thus Babo uses Cereno—a white captain with whom Delano would identify—to learn and convey information. Upon revisiting the shaving scene, we see that Babo holding a knife to Cereno's throat is a show of dominance, especially since Delano is unsuspecting of the friendly servant. However, only those who know the true power dynamic can see through the subservient mask that Babo wears to misguide Delano without suspicion. Babo tries to ensure that Delano misinterprets the true dynamics of the ship by catering to his expectations of black submissiveness and simplicity. Melville uses Delano's narrative perspective to lead the reader askew and question whether or not one can comprehend the San Dominick outside of Delano's limited perspective that denies black subjectivity.

Undoing the Knot

Melville exerts a dual effort that on one hand confuses the reader, but on the other hand encourages the reader to disentangle his or herself from Delano's account. Melville misleads the reader through the use of free indirect discourse, which conflates the perspectives of the ironic narrator and Delano's own racist perspective. Delano practices "benevolent racism" towards the slaves, that is to say racism without cruel intentions. He underestimates the slaves on the ship because of his predisposition to see them as "devoted companion[s]" (Melville 124). Although he is against slavery because it "breeds ugly passions in man," Delano demeans the slaves, thinking of them as animals "too stupid" to do anything involving complex thought (Melville 211,

180). Delano's glaring racism in parallel with his opposition to slavery is one indicator that Melville is criticizing the "benevolent racist" perspective of the liberal New Englander, through his use of narrative voice and stylistic choices.

Melville's exaggerated account of the original narrative does not favorably portray the perspective of Amasa Delano. The narrator immediately calls into question Delano's "undistrustful good nature" and "[w]hether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine" (Melville 110). Here Melville prompts the reader to think critically about the text as focalized through Delano's perspective. The use of the double negative word "undistrustful" has a more abstract meaning than simply using "trustful" with the effect that the reader does not have a complete understanding of Delano's character. Melville's subtle messages eat away at Delano's assumed authority and identity begging the reader to question the trustworthiness of the interpretation delivered during the narrative.

The narrator comments specifically on Delano's intelligence as it relates to perceiving the truth aboard the San Dominick, and, by subtly acknowledging his limited perspective, therefore asks the reader to gauge his or her own powers of perception. Several textual moments seem to directly challenge and provoke the reader's abilities. In one scene a sailor throws an entangled knot at Delano, muttering in English "Undo it, cut it, quick." Delano is confused, "knot in hand, and knot in head" (Melville 182). But, before Delano has much time to think, a slave offers to take the knot from Delano and upon receipt promptly throws it overboard. This scene is included as another subtle message to the reader to draw them out of Delano's entangled perspective; it also hints that the slaves are supporting and enacting Delano's confusion. The sailor's words mirror the narrator's urge to the reader, the necessity of seeing past Delano's dismissal and figuring out what he is misinterpreting. Of course the natures of this necessity within the plot and for the reader of the plot are markedly different. The sailor wants to escape the ship alive, while the narrator wants the reader to understand the submissive slave, sold as property, as the complex black subject fighting for his life. The metaphor relating the knot to the situation aboard the ship is too complex for Delano because it does not fit within the boundaries of his perspective.

He chooses to ignore the incident altogether, mirroring the action of the slave who simply threw 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 clarification 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, objective authority, 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." An examination of the document reveals that Benito Cereno had to narrate his tale to a judge as a clerk wrote out the summary, thus filtering the story through an "official perspective." In addition, the deposition was "selected from among many others, for partial translation..." from Spanish, meaning that another translator influenced Cereno's words (Melville 247). With these two translations of Cereno's account, it is fair to say that the deposition has been adjusted to reflect a court official's perspective of what occurred on the San Dominick. While the deposition aims to justify the fatal sentencing of the slaves on the San Dominick, it is seeded with hints which again suggest that Melville is mimicking the language he seeks to critique.

Just like the reveal scene, the deposition is delivered in a confusing, choppy manner that belies its mat-

ter-of-fact tone. The object-subject-verb word ordering reappears and a series of italicized sections interrupt the paragraphs to inform the reader what is being "extracted" from the original deposition (Melville 261). The use of the word "extraction" several times boasts the idea of selectivity in the official document. A series of semicolon delineated clauses all referring back to "he said" have the cumulative effect that "the deponent," Cereno, is actually the object of the statements he is supposed to be delivering (Boyden 265). This effect creates empathy for Benito Cereno which is consistent with an authoritative white male's translation of the events on the ship. The document, which is supposed to illuminate the reader, is confusing because of its syntax, ultimately making the "truth" even harder to understand than the misinterpreted narrative.

While the legal prose may be perplexing, it is more problematic that the official perspective of the court seems to hold a certain bias in allegiance with the good Captains of the story. We learn that Babo is in command of the ship, but comparing the actions of the slaves to the Americans' makes it clear that the deposition does not exemplify his leadership. The deposition highlights that Babo killed several members of the crew, including the captain Alexandro Aranda, to ensure that his power was accepted. Babo asks the white crew (referring to the deceased Aranda displayed as the figurehead) "whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it is a white's" (Melville 254). Babo's calculated actions serve a purpose: to intimidate and establish his authority outside of the bounds of a submissive servant. These actions are then summarized to be out of Cereno's control and that it was impossible for he and his crew to act any other way.

In comparison, the actions of the Americans are ill purposed and sloppy. The Americans want to reclaim the ship with the promise of rewards from the cargo. They accidentally kill two innocent Spaniards, and after the battle they torture the shackled slaves until stopped by "the noble Captain Amasa Delano" (Melville 263). The attack on the slave ship is a violent response to Delano's injured pride and authority; it is only after he realizes that he has been fooled that he alters his perspective to seeing the slaves as a threat. Boyden points out the jarring fact that Delano is described as generous no fewer than six times in an "otherwise dry-as-dust legal prose" (265). The descriptors "generous" and "noble" show the hypocrisy of a legal document displaying

such favor toward one party. From the differences in the actions of the two groups it is clear that, although the actions of the slaves are more justifiable, it is the Americans and Cereno who are pardoned by the court, which was to be expected by public opinion of the time.

The deposition serves as a larger commentary on the biased authority of the legal system. In the time of Benito Cereno, public opinion, as evident by the brutal murder and silencing of Babo, held that blacks were content as submissive loyal servants. In addition, slavery was still legal in Peru (where the trial took place) in 1805, meaning slaves were legally property. The dilemma of the slaves is mirrored in the words of Amasa Delano in his first impression of Benito Cereno when he states "nothing more relaxes good order than misery" (Melville 122). The statement refers to the agitation of slaves on the ship due to lack of food and water but also foreshadows how the "natural" order where slaves are content to be submissive is upset by Babo and was indeed changing when the story was written in 1855. The deposition gives flesh to Babo's character, showing his power as a leader and will to gain freedom, but removes his only means of communicating his perspective, thus reminding the reader that at the time Babo did not and could not legally have a voice.

Babo's voice is not included in the deposition under the pretense that he decided not to testify. Some may argue that the court gave Babo a fair chance to testify so 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 perceive him. In her article, "Leadership-Natural and Conventional-in Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" Catherine Zuckert asserts that Babo is "a natural genius destroyed by the inability of those around him to appreciate either the grounds or the nobility 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 audience: one cannot assume that authority figures are objective. By indicating the insufficiencies of a biased translator (Captain Delano and the court system), the novella critiques authority figures who use flawed prejudices 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. An infamous case is that of the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9th, 2014, in which Brown's death was spurred by Darren Wilson's interpretation of his actions as threatening. The shooting has been the subject of much debate over the past year, leading to an in-depth examination of the entire judicial system in Ferguson, including its demographic composition. Alarming, the Ferguson police force is 95% white and 5% black, a stark contrast to the population which is 66% black and 29% white (Firozi 1). But what does this have to do with Benito Cereno?

As Greg Grandin described in *The New York Times*, Melville showed that the black body was a "blank screen" on which Delano, as well as figures of authority, projected their beliefs about black identity while simultaneously leaving no room for the voicing of black perspectives. Many cases of discrimination today are strongly influenced by a deeply rooted stereotype that black males are inherently more violent than white males, and therefore require increased policing. The stereotype lies in contrast to the predominant pre-Civil-War assumption in *Benito Cereno* that blacks were docile and submissive, but the assumption of violence is just as limiting as the presumption in the novella of the lack thereof. Captain Delano claimed that he "took to negroes...genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs" (Melville 201). Presently, it's as if Delano's loyal "Newfoundland dogs" have become savage wolves poised to attack; each perspective is grossly flawed and dehumanizing, denying black subjectivity through projections of natural servility on the one hand and natural violence on the other. A vivid example of questionable authoritative judgment in our present moment is 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 within seconds of police arriving on the scene, and died the next day. In a video of the shooting, 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).

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