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Ironizing Identity: Cosmopolitanism and Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” as Critique of Hispanic Exceptionalism

Readers of Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” (1855) who are sensitive to questions of identity and race have tended to focus on Amasa Delano’s view – funneled through free-indirect discourse – of black slaves (e.g., Karcher 109-59; Tawil 191-208). However, such studies are now supplemented by acknowledgement that Delano’s response to Benito Cereno reflects Anglo-American prejudices against Catholic Spain (Emery; DeGuzmán 47-67; Nelson, Word 112-14; Sundquist 143, 148). Such views emerged in the colonial period as the “Black Legend,” the common Northern European belief that Spanish colonizers were bloodthirsty conquerors whose stated aim of spreading Catholicism in the Americas was a pretext for exploiting indigenous peoples. These views toward Spain were replayed in the racialist atmosphere of the antebellum United States, when US Americans construed Spain as a quaint but despotic nation whose (by now waning) power in the New World had to be curtailed by US expansion and influence.

My essay makes two points that shed light on these issues. First of all, as Allan Moore Emery and Eric Sundquist indicate, the stereotypes upon which Delano relies do not simply construe Spaniards as the Black Legend’s violent despots. In Delano’s view, the Spanish are also languorous and inefficient (Emery 50-53; Sundquist 148). These characteristics were not as pronounced in the colonial typologies. I contend that Delano’s perspective thus reflects a nineteenth-century US evolution of Anglophone attitudes toward the Spanish. In what I describe as an exceptionalist discourse of Hispanicist,

1 I presented earlier versions of this essay at the University of Rochester Graduate Colloquium in 2010 and the 2012 meeting of the American Studies Association. I would like to acknowledge those in attendance for their thought-provoking feedback, with particular thanks to Melanie Hernandez, Donald Pease, and Russell Sbriglia. The essay is a product of my dissertation, and I would also like to thank my dissertation advisors, John Michael and Ezra Tawil, whose guidance shaped the project. Lastly, I would like to thank the editors of LIT and the two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions, which were invaluable in helping me finalize the essay.

2 The term “Black Legend” was coined by Spanish journalist Juderías in 1914, but it refers to a much older tradition. It was originally only vaguely tied to race, but with the rise of more systematized racialist views in the antebellum period, it took on specifically racialist overtones that emphasized the Iberian peninsula’s history of racial intermixture and pervasive intermixture in the colonies (50). On the Black Legend, see further DeGuzmán; Gibson; Greer, Mignolo, and Quilligan; and Retamar. On the evolution of racial understandings of difference in the nineteenth century, see Horsman; and Jordan.
Delano self-reflexively imagines himself against Cereno as a US American who is particularly well-fitted for a managerial role in an emergently capitalistic, liberal-democratic world. Delano thus voices antebellum imperialist beliefs that Hispanophone peoples – whether “off-white” Spaniards (DeGuzmán xxiv, xxvii) or Spanish Americans of mixed Hispanic, African, and/or indigenous ancestry – were racially incapacitated for the duties of sovereignty. My use of the term “Hispanicism” is extrapolated from Ed White’s discussion of “[t]he growing [antebellum] literary fascination with Latin America – an Hispanicism analogous in ways to European Orientalism” (77-78). White describes a fascinated exotification of Hispanophone peoples through which US Americans self-reflexively constructed US identity. Although Delano’s views might seem to lean toward Hispanophobia more so than the patronizing part-aversion, part-romanticization suggested by “Hispanicism,” Hispanicist romanticization is indeed evident in Delano’s attitudes. Moreover, as a conceptual legacy of Orientalism and as comparable to Toni Morrison’s “Africanism” (the latter to which I will often refer in this essay), “Hispanicism” evokes the exceptionalist, self-reflexive quality of Delano’s views.

Delano’s attitudes toward Spaniards and Africans are distinct but interrelated. In both cases, the views are self-reflexive: contemplating Spanish and African difference, Delano imagines himself to be racially superior as an Anglo-American. Delano’s understanding of blacks as subhuman, though, specifically bolsters his sense of himself as possessing basic human capacities of free will, reason, and aesthetic sensibility. Such views, refracted through romantic-racialist tropes regarding blacks, reflect what Morrison terms “Africanism,” the pervasive US discourse through which US Americans imagine cherished self-perceptions against a mysterious, demonized black presence (5, 17). On the other hand, in perceiving Spaniards as despotic and inefficient, Delano views himself as a member of a benevolent racial and national community that is exceptionally endowed to forge liberal-democratic social, economic, and political institutions. He thus believes himself entitled to usurp management of Cereno’s ship and slaves.

My second point regards how Melville interrogates such discourses by writing literature. Some have described Melville’s approach, while good-intentioned, as overdetermined by the racialism pervading Melville’s white US American culture. Dana D. Nelson claims that while “Benito Cereno” subverts how Delano views blacks and Spaniards according to static types, the tale fails to imagine alternatives to these typologies (Word 109-30). More intent on examining the tale’s depiction of Spain, María DeGuzmán, too, contends that while Melville denaturalizes how Delano confirms his whiteness through reflection on the “off-white” Spaniard Cereno, this critique is undermined by what DeGuzmán reads as the tale’s damnation of Cereno and Babo (47-67).

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3 Compare Emery, who argues that “Benito Cereno” is more concerned with expansion and its relationship to slavery than with slavery per se; and Sundquist, for whom historicizing Melville requires recognizing that “slavery was hemispheric” and that it must be interpreted in terms of “several cultures, several nations” (136).
These claims inform my view that by ventriloquizing Hispanicism through Delano, Melville emphasizes how Hispanicism informs US exceptionalism. In doing so, Melville ironizes Delano’s sense of himself as the benevolent representative of an exceptional nation. Melville reveals how Delano’s perspective occludes the in fact rapacious Delano’s ability to realize that he and Céreno share much in common. However, I also part ways with Nelson and DeGuzmán; inspired by neo-formalist arguments for literature’s socio-civic power,¹ I champion Melville’s efficacy in thinking beyond exceptionalism. Proposing grounded alternatives to racist and imperialist policies was not Melville’s aim, but his tale suggests formal alternatives to racialist exceptionalism by calling attention to the qualitative differences between manners of telling stories about relationships and identity. These opposed manners can be described as forms of cosmopolitanism. On the one hand, in contrast to the self-absorbed Spaniard Céreno, Delano self-reflexively identifies as a gregarious cosmopolitan who good-naturedly navigates the differences between cultures. Delano’s cosmopolitanism thus reflects his Hispanicism. However, Melville implies another, non-exceptionalist form of cosmopolitanism, one premised on skepticism toward identity categories; the ability to revise preconceptions about identity; and sensitivity to context. The evocation of this more rigorous cosmopolitanism is a major achievement of the tale.

**Putnam’s Monthly, “Benito Céreno”, and Hispanicism**

The Hispanicist contexts Melville commented upon through his depiction of Delano are exhibited in articles about Spain and Spanish America appearing in *Putnam’s Monthly* around the time of the journal’s 1855 publication of “Benito Céreno.” Such articles exhibited fascination with and prejudice against Hispanophone peoples. Melville’s engagement with *Putnam’s* is well-documented, particularly regarding the journal’s slavery politics (Post-Lauria; Robbins). Melville’s engagement with the material on Spain and Spanish America has also been noted (Emery 50; Post-Lauria 5). While such scholarship attests to the articles’ broadly imperialist dimensions, I here emphasize their reflection of nineteenth-century US views about Spanish-ness. Anglophone prejudices toward Hispanophone peoples had always posited the moral superiority of British over Spanish colonialism, traditionally emphasizing Catholic Spain’s cruel, duplicitous exploitation of indigenous peoples. Latter-day Hispanicism – referring both to Spain and Spanish America – had additional focuses. In the *Putnam’s* pieces (typically ethnographies or travelogues reporting on the landscape, customs, politics, and wealth of Hispanophone locales), Hispanophone peoples are not only vicious and despotic but also lazy and lacking in economic individualism. This characterization contrasts with the author’s identification with what he construes

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¹ For an overview, see Levinson on “activist formalism” (559). For specific approaches, see, e.g., Castiglia and Castronovo; and Levine *Dislocating*; Otter.
as modern US values of entrepreneurship in a liberal-democratic, capitalist world. Such texts comprised a stock Hispanicist narrative that informed the general nationalism of Putnam's.5

Articles such as “Annexation,” which favorably compares US expansionism to prior forms of empire-building, attest to the demonization of Spanish colonialism. Attention to two other texts, though, will illustrate especially nineteenth-century US views of Hispanophone peoples. The second issue of Putnam’s includes “A Glance at Havana.” In this unsigned travelogue, the author narrates his trip into the exotic Cuban port city, reporting on his entrance into the harbor on board a steamer and his experiences after landfall. He writes in the first-person plural, evoking identification with his readers. As such, the article reflects how these texts construe consensus between author and US reading public regarding a Hispanophone world whose difference confirms the author’s sense of US superiority. The article focuses on the inefficient management of human and natural resources in Cuba, a flaw construed as a product of the Spanish economic and political aversion to liberalism and the concomitant backwardness of its people. Upon arriving in the harbor, the author is immediately approached by a lethargic pilot, even though “[t]he entrance to the harbor of Havana is the plainest possible sailing.” “Were it an American or an English port,” he continues, “the offer to pilot a vessel into it would be regarded as a patent swindle.” In Havana, though, things work differently, as “a corps of pilots has been established by the Spanish government, and a neglect to employ one is sure to be resented as a slight offered to the authorities” (186). Indeed, “The Captain of the Port … has absolute power over every vessel that enters it. … The vessel, therefore, which should enter the harbor unpiloted would be pretty sure to find herself ordered into the most inconvenient position which his ingenuity could possibly discover” (186). The situation affronts the author’s free-market sensibilities. He views the Captain’s arbitrary power as indicative of the invisible operation of power in Cuba in contrast to the transparency favored by US liberal democracy.

This piece continues in the following issue under the title “How They Live in Havana.” Picking up where he left off, the (presumably same) author walks the reader through Havana. As the title suggests, this article describes Havanese social and domestic customs – what the hotels and food are like, what the inhabitants do at their leisure, what social etiquette is expected, etc. Although not explicitly focused on economic and political matters, the discussion again self-reflexively represents Cubans as less fitted for life in a liberal democracy than US Americans. Nineteenth-century US liberal discourse assumed a separate-spheres model in which the wife, hearth, and home provided the moral suasion necessary to cultivate men’s virtuous behavior in a market-driven public sphere that encouraged cut-throat behavior. The article is at pains to show that this is not happening in Cuba. The hotels are “nothing more or less than … boardinghouse[s]”, the author puns that in them “bed

5 See Robbins 548-51 on the magazine’s (literary) nationalism.
and board” become one, “the bed being in fact a board” (288). More to the point, he comments that in Havana, “The man whose volante and harness have a thousand dollars’ worth of silver worked into their decorations, and whose calesero (coachman) carries enough of bullion about him to purchase his freedom, will not have so much, or so expensive furniture in his house as the New-Yorker who considers himself in very moderate circumstances” (289). The passages ridicule the contrast between exterior and interior, construing a telling inversion between the customs of Havana and the United States: in the States, the home space welcomes and refreshes, while the exterior is rugged, enterprising, and productive; in Havana, the exterior is foppish and wasteful, the interior inhospitable and enervating. A similar equation is implied in passages noting the lack of privacy in Havana (290). While privacy might seem a simple matter of etiquette, separate-spheres ideology accorded it great importance, positing that a safe haven from the outside world was necessary for the moral suasion offered by the private sphere. The author’s perception of Cuba’s failure to maintain this necessary division further suggests his view of Cuba’s illiberality.

“Benity Cereno” as Metafictional Commentary on Hispaniscist Inconsistency

These and similar Putnam’s articles offer warrant for a discourse of US imperial management that “Benito Cereno” examines. As Nelson explains, the tale stages a drama of managerial identity in which Delano seeks recognition of his prerogative as a white, managerial man through identification with fellow captain Cereno. When Cereno does not provide that recognition (National Manhood 2), Delano becomes suspicious that Cereno is some form of imposter to his captaincy and decides to appropriate Cereno’s ship (National Manhood 16). Delano fails to recognize the true state of affairs – black revolt – because he blindly believes that white men of the managerial class monopolize power. However, as Nelson briefly acknowledges elsewhere, Delano’s perception is complicated by his sense that Cereno is not exactly white (Word 112). Cereno is Spanish, an important distinction given that Melville added to the real-life Delano’s account a number of details playing up Delano’s attitudes regarding Spaniards (Emery 51-52, 53, 57-59, 61, 66). As DeGuzmán elaborates, Delano’s ambivalence toward Cereno reflects the equivocal place of Spanish-ness in Delano’s Anglo-American perspective. White and not white, modern and medieval, representing a nation that tried to build an empire in the New World but failed, the Spaniard limits exceptionalist Anglo-American self-conception. As such, Cereno’s behavior triggers Delano’s wariness about Spaniards (Nelson, Word 112). Indeed, Delano has as much riding on believing that Cereno is not of his caste as he does on believing that Cereno is – if,

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6 The real-life Delano’s account reveals little regarding Anglophone attitudes toward Spain (318-53). See Newman 98-100 for a breakdown of Melville’s alterations to the original.

7 See Norton 4 on the function of the liminal figure in national identity construction.
per Nelson, Delano confirms his managerial aptitude when he condescends toward blacks, he also does so through interactions with Cereno. The following section recounts the self-reflexive, obfuscating roles played by Delano’s Hispanicism and Africanism, emphasizing how they exhibit complementary but particular functions.

Melville begins to reveal Delano’s Hispanicist perspective from the moment Delano sees the ship, a sight that reminds him of “the lawlessness and loneliness of the spot, and the sort of stories, at that day, associated with those seas” (47). The stories inflecting Delano’s perspective here may be romances of Spanish pirates, narratives commonly associated in the Anglo-American imagination with the seas off South America even though pirates were typically Northern Europeans plundering Spanish gold. These associations trigger apprehension in Delano, although he characteristically sheds his fears by power of his “good nature.” As he gets a closer look at the boat, he continues to view it in light of his attitude toward Spain. Emery describes the boat as “symbolizin[g] ... a ‘tottering’ Spain” and “stand[in]g ... for Spain’s Western empire” (52). In this sense, the boat’s decrepit appearance reminds Delano of what he imagines to be its romantic, illustrious past. Delano sees in it what was “in its time, a very fine vessel” that “under a decline of masters, preserved signs of former state” (48). He fixates on an exotic “ster-piece, intricately carved with the arms of Castile and Leon, medallioned about by groups of mythological or symbolical devices; uppermost and central of which was a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked” (49). Here, Spanish and gothic figures articulate in Delano’s eyes: “the arms of Castile and Leon” are juxtaposed with a frightening mythological image. These impressions color Delano’s engagement with the San Dominick. What thus emerges is a metafictional demonstration of how such stories shape experience.

As should already be clear, in addition to Spanish piracy, tropes regarding Spanish aristocratic languor also underpin Delano’s perspective. (Although these tropes are conjoined, an analytic distinction will prove useful.) As Delano offers assistance to Cereno, he notes Cereno’s “grave and ceremonious ... national formality [which is] dusted by the saturnine mood of ill health” (51). Delano further perceives a “sour and gloomy disdain ... not unlike ... his imperial countryman’s, Charles V” (52-53). Delano’s attitude toward Cereno here hearkens back to the traveler’s appraisal of the inefficiency of Havanese aristocratic trappings in Putnam’s. To Delano, Cereno’s “ill-health” marks Cereno’s incapability to command, which Delano generally associates with Cereno’s Spanish identity. Viewing Cereno as “at once a genteel courtier ... and an impotent master” (Sundquist 148), Delano, while contemplating “Don Benito’s small, yellow hands” (note the perception of racial difference), “easily inferred that the young captain had not got into command at the hawsehole, but the cabin-window; and if so, why wonder at incompetence, in youth, sickness, and gentility united” (58). This ready inference reflects Hispanicist perceptions of Spanish aristocratic languor. Delano eventually becomes pre-occupied with the notion that Cereno is a poor
manager. Delano’s particular concern is the apparent disorder of the blacks, which he ascribes to Cereno’s “strengthless style of command” (Emery 52) but which, of course, reflects successful mutiny. Although Delano acknowledges that “long-continued suffering seemed to have brought out the less good-natured qualities of the Negroes” (51), he believes the central problem is that the “San Dominick wanted … stern superior officers,” as “not so much as a fourth mate was to be seen” (54). Delano thus frequently patronizes Cereno with advice regarding proper command, for instance suggesting that Cereno “keep all [his] blacks employed, especially the younger ones, no matter at what useless task” (59) after witnessing a black boy attack a white one.

Melville uses Hispanicism as an aesthetic mechanism to produce the suspense experienced both by Delano and by the first-time reader who sees through Delano’s eyes without knowing the tale’s conclusion. (Accounts of this suspense, such as that of Edward S. Grejda [136], typically neglect the pertinence of Hispanicism.) Delano eventually becomes uncertain regarding what is happening on the San Dominick, sensing that something is amiss but unable to discern what. As he regards a seemingly stereotypical Spanish ship, Delano perceives himself to be embroiled in a gothic romance with an ambiguous captain and crew. Rather than recognizing black rebellion, Delano, as Sundquist explains, “vacillates between dark suspicion and paternalistic disdain for the Spaniard” (148). Is Cereno a piratical Spaniard who will betray Delano, or a languorous, inefficient Spaniard who needs direction?

It must here be mentioned that Delano is blind to black rebellion partly because he sees blacks as inevitable servants. As Nelson observes, Delano persistently “denies the slaves Subjectivity” (Word 112) – he is unable to recognize their desire for freedom. Delano, after all, takes “to negroes ... genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs” (84); this human-animal analogy betrays Delano’s belief in innate African childishness and fawning sub-humanity. This view’s impact on his perception is frequently apparent. For instance, in one passage, Delano contemplates a Spanish sailor’s attempt to give Delano a hint about the mutiny, an attempt which Delano mistakes as a possible sign about Cereno’s treachery. Delano speculates that Cereno and the blacks are working together, but he quickly concludes, “But they were too stupid. Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguing in against it with negroes?” (75). Here, Delano’s racist view of black intelligence (note the polygeneticist reference to “species”) makes it impossible for him correctly to read the sailor’s attempted signal. The state of affairs on the boat – a brilliantly orchestrated slave mutiny – is, indeed, unfathomable to him.

Compounding his inability to recognize black rebellion, Delano finds the interpretations suggested by Hispanicist tropes preferable to what he views as the impossibility of black humanity. As Sundquist puts it, when Delano confronts black revolution, that reality is “conceal[ed] ... behind the shadow play of the contest between the American and the European” (151). For

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8 Compare Fiedler on how Delano’s stereotypes of Spaniards and blacks work hand in hand (400).
instance, in the well-known Gordian knot scene, when the sailor gives Delano the knot, one of the blacks comes to them, tells Delano the sailor is a fool, and takes the knot and inspects it, clearly suspicious (76). Despite witnessing this evidence of black rebellion, Delano ponders Hispanicist alternatives. Upon seeing his whale boat returning to the *San Dominick*, he complacently says to himself, “I to be murdered here at the ends of the earth, on board a haunted pirate-ship by a horrible Spaniard? – Too nonsensical to think of!” (77). Shortly afterward, Babo returns and bids Delano go to speak with Cereno, who has recovered from a coughing fit. Delano decides he has been mistaken in his suspicions, laughingly thinking to himself, “What a donkey I was. This kind gentleman who here sends me his compliments, he, but ten minutes ago, dark-lantern in hand, was dodging round some old grind-stone in the hold, sharpening a hatchet for me” (77). In rejecting the signs of black rebellion because of his Africanism, Delano first decides that Cereno is not the piratical, vicious Spaniard. Then, given evidence by Babo that Cereno was simply ill, Delano comforts himself in the belief that Cereno is a “kind gentleman” who is physically incapacitated to manage a ship. Robert S. Levine claims that Delano ascribes the ship’s disorder to how Cereno is “deficient as a leader because he is not ‘Spanish’ enough” (*Conspiracy* 204). Delano is certainly preoccupied with Cereno’s managerial capacity, but the despotic Spaniard is not the only Hispanicist trope available to Delano. That of the languorous, inefficient Spaniard is just as, if not more, appealing to him. He prefers both options, in any event, to the *San Dominick*’s reality.

In the deposition, it becomes clear that Babo orchestrated affairs on the *San Dominick* in order to deceive Delano (109). Babo does so, in part, by playing upon Delano’s Hispanicism. Babo relies on Delano’s Africanism, too, of course, by acting the part of the faithful, submissive servant that Delano finds appealing, as well as by correctly gambling on Delano’s inability to see black capability (Nelson, *Word* 111). Babo also, though, stages the inefficient Spanish ship to Delano. Babo has instructed the Spanish sailors to occupy themselves with odd, useless tasks, oftentimes undertaken by more men than necessary. He has also apparently instructed Cereno to fake sick anytime there is a need for Cereno and Babo to conference in private, playing to Delano’s proclivity to believe that Cereno is not fit for the hardships that have supposedly occurred. (Certainly, Cereno’s actual fear and debility figure here, too.) Particularly telling is how Babo has Cereno dress in a gaudy outfit that Delano perceives as typical of South American aristocratic, despotic trappings (57). In the conclusion, it is revealed that Cereno finds it particularly distressing that this “dress ... had not willingly been put on. And that silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command, was not, indeed, a sword, but the ghost of one. The scabbard, artificially stiffened, was empty” (116). Cereno is horrified at the memory partly because Babo has made a “travesty of Don Benito’s former Subject-status by forcing him to assume the role he once commanded” (Nelson, *Word* 120). However, Cereno’s feelings likely also reflect his recognition of having been forced to lower himself in Delano’s sight by performing a stereotypical form of Spanish mastery. Delano views the scabbard as a sign of
lawless Spanish despotism, but Babo has made Cereno simulate this form of virility while symbolically castrating him. In any event, Babo presents Delano with a state of affairs conforming to Hispanicist tropes, tropes Babo correctly hopes Delano will prefer to the truth.

That Delano holds tightly to his views until the truth is forced upon him during the tale’s climax reflects those perceptions’ centrality to his sense of self. Crucial to that self-perception is the difference between how Delano understands blacks and Spaniards. When observing blacks, Delano confirms what he perceives as the humanity that undergirds his “singularly undis-trustful good nature” (47). In one illustrative example, Delano, during one of Cereno’s absences, comes upon “a slumbering negress … lying … like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock”; upon waking, the woman “delightedly … caught [her] child up, with maternal transports, covering it with kisses.” The “sunny sight” pleases Delano, and he thinks to himself, “There’s naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love” (73). This passage does not appear in the real-life Delano’s narrative; Melville invented it to exhibit Delano’s racial views. Coming shortly after Delano has had an equivocal encounter with a sailor that has aroused his suspicions, the sight helps Delano conjure up his “undistrustful good nature” and to become confident in his safety. As Andrew Delbanco explains, “Melville knew that in America the dignity of whites depended on the degradation of the blacks” (156). In this light, Delano perceives the woman through an animalistic simile to a “doe.”

Delano’s Hispanicism informs his self-conception differently. A commonality must first be noted, though: Delano is comforted whenever the blacks and Cereno conform to his preconceptions. For instance, in an early passage in which Delano and Cereno pace the deck, “Don Benito, with Castilian bows, solemnly insisted upon his guest’s preceding him up the ladder leading to the elevation.” Delano experiences a twinge of fear as he ascends the ladder after seeing that “two of the ominous file [of blacks] … one on each side of the last step, sat for armorial supporters and sentries.” However, “when, facing about, he saw the whole file, like so many organ-grinders, still stupidly intent on their work, unmindful of everything beside, he could not but smile at his late fidgety panic” (59). Delano’s fear of a potentially treacherous Cereno and crew, which he figures as medieval “armorial supporters” and “sentries,” is assuaged as he comes to believe that the two blacks are “stupidly intent on their work.” Delano is calmed by what he perceives as characteristic black

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9 On Melville and romantic racialism, see Robbins as well as Tawil (191-208), both of whom view “Benito Cereno” as responding to Stowe.
intellectual inferiority combined with the typical inefficiency of Hispanic management; the “stupidity” in the work he thinks the blacks have been instructed to perform points him to both stereotypes. Such moments that adhere to his prejudices bolster his sense of security as a man who controls his situation.

The difference between the roles Hispanicism and Africanism play for Delano is that whereas he confirms his humanity through Africanism, he confirms his aptitude for liberal management through Hispanicism. In viewing Cereno as nationally incapacitated to lead his ship and slaves, Delano projects his own capacity to do so. A particularly illustrative passage occurs shortly after Cereno asks Delano how well-armed Delano’s ship is. Babo has put Cereno to this task in consideration of possibly overtaking The Bachelor’s Delight, and it puts Delano on guard. Delano, though, decides the questions are just further evidence of Cereno’s weakened mind, “good-naturedly explain[ing] away [his fears with] the thought that, for the most part, the poor invalid scarcely knew what he was about.” This realization convinces Delano that “for the present, the man was not fit to be entrusted with the ship. On some benevolent plea withdrawing the command from him, Captain Delano would yet have to send her to Conception.” Delano believes that “the sick man, under the good nursing of his servant, would probably, by the end of the passage, be in a measure restored to health and with that he should also be restored to authority.” Musing upon the wisdom of this “tranquillizing” plan, Delano self-congratulates himself with the thought that “[t]here was a difference between the idea of Don Benito’s darkly preordaining Captain Delano’s fate, and Captain Delano’s lightly arranging Don Benito’s” (69-70). Delano’s decision that Cereno’s odd behavior is a product of Cereno’s incapacitation coheres with the general tenor of Delano’s Hispanicism. Delano believes that Cereno’s ostensibly aristocratic, Spanish initiation into his captaincy has not prepared Cereno for the hardships of his voyage. This decision prompts Delano’s feelings of prerogative as a man upholding liberal, capitalist values, feelings through which he presumes the duty to commandeer the San Dominick until Cereno can do so himself.

Just as Delano considers undertaking this duty, “‘With pleasure’ would Melville’s confident countrymen have similarly taken upon themselves the responsibility for a ‘spellbound’ Spanish America” (Emery 53). Delano’s Hispanicist feelings of prerogative embody the nationalist imperialism of Putnam’s, which construed self-interested imperialism as beneficence. As Louis A. Pérez, Jr., explains, the United States “was singular in the degree to which it so thoroughly obscured the distinction between selfless purpose and self-interest” (174). In this vein, Putnam’s articles such as “Annexation” suggested that due to political and economic illiberality, Spanish America was incapable of achieving on its own the modernization the United States could bring. As such, the United States should feel not shame but pride in its

10 Compare Pérez’s claim that “the efficacy of metaphor” in the context of US-Cuban affairs “resided precisely in its capacity to obscure its function” (37).
imperial ambitions. US imperial discourse thus provided cover for the territorial and pecuniary benefits produced by US expansion and the concomitant terror experienced by Spanish America.

Melville scrutinizes the Hispanicism of *Putnam’s* by revealing Delano’s motivations to be complicated and equivocal, despite his sense of innocence and entitlement.\(^{11}\) Although Delano thinks of himself as “lightly arranging” the affairs of the *San Dominick* out of altruism, his offer of assistance is after all a “business transaction” (Melville 91), and the final counter-revolt “is prompted not by any wish to ‘redeem’ the oppressed but by a simple desire for material gain” (Emery 54). After deciding in light of the advice of his officers that he should not personally participate in the attack, Delano appoints his chief mate to lead the charge, and “[t]he more to encourage the sailors, they were told, that the Spanish captain considered his ship as 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” (100-01). Far from being disinterested, Delano and crew are willing to make capital of their deeds, significantly on pretext of a self-interested interpretation of Cereno’s plea that they leave the ship to its fate.\(^{12}\)

These passages suggest another inconsistency: Hispanicism construes the United States as exceptional to Hispanophone nations when that exceptionality is equivocal. Delano understands his managerial aptitude against that of Cereno, but Melville not only shows that Delano is not exactly what he thinks he is but also that Delano is much like what he views Cereno to be. As Delano commands his men to retake the *San Dominick*, he “appoint[s] his chief mate – an athletic and resolute man, who had been a privateer’s-man, and, as his enemies whispered, a pirate – to head the party” (101). The mention of piracy recalls that Delano’s perspective on Spain is conditioned by tales of the Spanish Main. Confirming this point, at the narrative’s climax when Cereno desperately leaps into Delano’s whale boat, a frenzied Delano, still unaware of what is actually happening, yells to his men to “give way for your lives … this plotting pirate means murder!” (98). Through his Hispanicist lens, Delano misinterprets Cereno’s actions as piracy in contrast to his own self-conception as a benevolent captain. Yet Delano’s chief mate is a reputed pirate, which undermines Delano’s self-differentiation from Cereno. Delano’s failure to disarticulate himself from Cereno suggests their

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\(^{11}\) Robbins views Melville’s engagement with *Putnam’s* as tacit acquiescence to its slavery politics (547, 548-51, 551-52, 555). *Putnam’s*, Robbins points out, distanced itself from the romantic-racialist antislavery espoused by *The National Era* and Stowe, instead preferring a more hard-nosed, ironic mode of engagement. Melville published in *Putnam’s* partly because “Benito Cereno” fit *Putnam’s* vision, with the depiction of Delano serving as an ironic denunciation of sentimental antislavery. However, while racially progressive, *Putnam’s* often took nationalist stances, including on the issue of US imperial prerogative in the Hispanophone world. Here, I argue, Melville parted with the magazine. I would also disagree with Post-Lauria, who argues that Melville joined forces with *Putnam’s* on both its critique of slavery and imperialism (5). *Putnam’s* regularly published pro-imperialist work, as seen with “Annexation.”

\(^{12}\) See further Nelson on Delano’s pecuniary motivations (*Word* 116-17).
shared guilt as exploitative, violent, racist captains. More broadly, as Emery explains, Melville “was … conscious of America’s mimicry of Spain” as a nation that sought through appeals to religious and racial hierarchy to impose a moral order on the Western hemisphere (56). What Delano and the US Americans Delano represents take to be different and particular to Spain is, in fact, common to both the United States and Spain.

Ironic, Cosmopolitanism and “Benity Cereno”

Melville’s depiction of Delano serves to comment not only on how imperialists constructed US national identity as liberal and managerial but also cosmopolitan. What did “cosmopolitanism” mean in Melville’s world? The Oxford English Dictionary defines “cosmopolitan” in its adjective form as follows: “1. Belonging to all parts of the world; not restricted to any one country or its inhabitants. 2. Having the characteristics which arise from, or are suited to, a range over many different countries; free from national limitations or attachments.” These definitions were established by the antebellum period. As John Bryant explains, in Melville’s day, the cosmopolitan was “an easily recognizable cultural type. For eighteenth-century European philosophers, the cosmopolitan ideal had expressed the liberal longing for a political, economic, and spiritual communion of all races and nations. Thus, the true cosmopolite was ‘at home’ wherever he traveled – London, Paris, Rome, Leipzig, even Philadelphia” (“Citizens” 21). The cosmopolitan, Bryant writes elsewhere, “is a ‘man of feeling,’ a humorist, a gentleman traveler and a ‘citizen of the world’” (“Nowhere” 276). As Bryant elaborates, this figure was at times viewed suspiciously in the antebellum United States. The line between a genial cosmopolitan and a rootless confidence man appeared narrow; a cosmopolitan might seem more a “chameleon than a gentleman, more a satirist than a humorist” (“Nowhere” 279). For the moment, I will work with the first sense in which Bryant discusses the concept, but I will later touch on the latter.

Although cosmopolitanism ostensibly promoted questioning national traditions and identities, some US nationalists paradoxically figured the United States as an exceptionally cosmopolitan nation. The second Oxford definition listed above gives as an example a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson that attests to this view. In “The Young American,” Emerson stated that, considering the influx of immigrants into the United States and their dispersal over the nation’s expanses, “it cannot be doubted that the legislation of this country should become more catholic and cosmopolitan than that of any other. It seems so easy for America to inspire and express the most expansive and humane spirit; new-born, free, healthful, strong, the land of the laborer, of the democrat, of the philanthropist, of the believer, of the saint, she should speak for the human race” (217). Emerson, elsewhere, expressed qualms about cosmopolitanism, for instance in his contrast between traveling and self-culture in “Self-Reliance” (277-79).
listeners to build a cosmopolitan nation with the most “generous sentiment, whose eminent citizens [are] willing to stand for the interests of general justice and humanity” (226). Emerson’s exhortation reflects a broader nationalist view of a progressive, inclusive United States. In Hispanicist texts, this cosmopolitan national identity was celebrated against what was perceived to be a provincial, exclusive Spanish identity. For instance, the Putnam’s articles “Cuba” and “Annexation” posit that the United States, in contrast to Spain and Spanish America, offers benevolence to all, regardless of identity and history. “Cuba,” indeed, states that US “nationality” is “the practical realization of cosmopolitanism” (16). As such, US empire-building projects such as the annexation of Cuba promise a time when “all the nations of the earth shall be as one people” (16), a utopia in which petty prejudices will no longer impede the individual’s pursuit of happiness.

Several aspects of Melville’s characterization of Delano signal Delano’s self-understanding as a cosmopolitan. Delano exhibits bourgeois sympathy and racist benevolence in his reaction to the scene aboard the San Dominick, expressing paternalistic concern for those he perceives to be his racial and social inferiors. These attitudes intersect with cosmopolitanism as forms of cross-difference sentiment. What particularly distinguishes Delano as a self-imagined cosmopolitan, though, is his sense of himself as a congenial man of the world who is at home anywhere he goes. He takes heart in his “singly undistrustful good-nature” (47) and sees himself as “benevolent” (47) and “humane” (52). He is “genial,” with a “good, blithe heart” (84). Delano views himself as well-traveled, as revealed by the confidence he feels at being able to “converse with some freedom” in Spanish, and more generally by his assumption of familiarity with African and Spanish natures. He is a man of ready “sympathies” (51) and “charity” (53) toward members of cultures other than his own. To an extent, he even makes an effort to see himself in Cereno; while pondering how “the very word Spaniard has a curious, conspirator, Guy-Fawkish twang to it,” he concludes that “Spaniards in the main are as good folks as any in Duxbury, Massachusetts” (79).

As his associations with the term “Spaniard” suggest, though, Delano construes his cosmopolitanism not only through fellow feeling for but also through self-differentiation against Cereno. A man who enjoys making “gay and humorous expression[s]” (67), Delano frequently takes offense to what he views as Cereno’s unfriendly affronts to Delano’s own gregariousness. Delano’s resentment is most evident after Cereno refuses to join Delano for a pleasant visit aboard the Bachelor’s Delight shortly before the tale’s climax (94). Earlier, Delano perceives in Cereno an “unhealthy climax” of the need for captains to at times manage their ships with a cold lack of “sociality” toward their crews (53). Delano, in turn, thinks of himself as having balanced sociability and authority. Delano’s assumption of a sympathetic outlook also reflects this tendency to construe his cosmopolitanism against Cereno. He frequently expresses pity for Babo, whom he believes Cereno does not properly appreciate. Delano, here, takes pride in extending his sympathy to the downtrodden slave (Tawil 200). What becomes apparent is that Delano’s
cosmopolitanism takes shape within the Anglo-Hispanic-African triangle that informs Delano’s perspective. The power relationships he perceives in that triangle limit his cosmopolitanism; identities are not truly level in his view. Delano’s benevolence toward Babo only persists while Delano believes Babo is a willing slave. Once that belief has been exploded, Delano loses all good will toward Babo, leading a brutal counter-revolt. Delano’s cosmopolitanism does not go so far as including a willingness to recognize the legitimacy of Babo’s desire for freedom, to see the world through Babo’s eyes. Delano’s cosmopolitanism is hierarchical, too, in that Delano defines himself as a cosmopolitan in contrast to Cereno. His sociable regard for Cereno is counterbalanced by his sense of superiority. As we have seen, though, Delano’s sense of difference is mistaken.

Here again, Delano’s disavowal of Spanish identity blinds Delano to his failure to measure up to the standards he sets for himself. Delano, thus, exemplifies what Donald E. Pease terms the “structures of disavowal” of US exceptionalism. As Pease writes, “the relations between US citizens’ belief in US exceptionalism and the state’s production of exceptions to its core tenets might be best described in psychosocial terms as structures of disavowal.” These structures, Pease argues, “enable[d] US citizens to disavow … measures … which violated the anti-imperialist norms that were embedded within the discourse of American exceptionalism” (19). The United States, in exceptionalists’ view, is on the one hand exceptionally benevolent, on the other the bearer of exceptional duties that make its violations of its norms somehow different than similar actions performed by other nations. To extend Pease’s claim to “Benito Cereno,” through Hispanicist- and Africanist-funded exceptionalism, Delano disavows the rapacity of his actions and confirms his identity as a benevolent American. Delano represents a US type whose chief characteristic is his reflexive ability to employ exceptionalism to refashion questionable actions as innocent, his opportunism as disinterestedly volunteering his managerial expertise. As Melville depicts Delano as representative of pernicious tendencies in US politics and life, Melville’s position reflects that of Pease in that Melville suggests that exceptionalism makes it difficult for US citizens to face up to the nation’s guilt.

However, DeGuzmán and Nelson express dissatisfaction with the tale as a critique. While Nelson acknowledges the work’s subversive insight into racism’s “dehumanizing force” (Word 110), she points out that it offers “neither explicit criticism nor alternative action” (Word 128). She further argues that “the narrator participates in the sentence and the gaze of the Lima Court at the same time he makes it possible for his readers to do the same” (Word 128) – as DeGuzmán summarizes Nelson’s point, “the narrator dehumanizingly turns Babo into an art object” (50). Despite seemingly good intentions, the tale’s irony is an end in itself rather than a means of change, a phenomenon Nelson finds typical of socially engaged writing by authors from privileged backgrounds (Word 127-28). DeGuzmán echoes Nelson. Melville has a “keen sense of the inhumanity of monomaniacal whiteness,” she explains, but “[t]he fact that all the characters are typed (and most definitely in a racializing,
Ironizing Identity

if not overtly racist, manner) and that the typing is configured in ... a way ...
that ... leads to not only re-cognizable but pre-cognizable doom for certain
characters [Babo and Cereno] and, if not salvation, then survival for others
[Delano] constitutes the real ... dead end of the story” (52). As such, the tale
presents no “serious critique” of racism or imperialism (52).

There is a basis for such arguments. Melville was not particularly con-
cerned with advocating specific policy proposals such as anti-imperial for-
eign relations (Delbanco 155). His concerns are intertwiningly epistemologi-
cal and literary as opposed to political per se. Hispanicism and Africanism
interest Melville, in part, as fertile aesthetic grounds, as the blinding qual-
ity of such discourses offers an engine for suspense. To the extent that his
work has an ideological import, I would describe that import as pre-political.
Melville is interested in what happens before political proposals are made.
He focuses on the frame as much as on the content, on how stories told about
political issues are structured by assumptions about identity as opposed to
what such stories tell regarding how to judge specific political programs. He
asks readers to engage political questions with an attitude between reflec-
tion and activity. Instead of answering political questions related to liberal-
ism and imperialism, Melville’s ironic, perspectival commentary on how im-
perial socio-political forms structure (and obscure) Delano’s perception is an
injunction to slow down and linger on how such questions are approached.

To say that the tale engages the pre-political, though, is not to say that it
is not politically valuable. Indeed, in subverting Delano’s perceived certain-
ties, the tale opens a space for discussing political alternatives. Melville’s tale
highlights how Hispanicism convinced the US expansionist that his impe-
rialism was just, the chauvinist that he was cosmopolitan, the exploitative
manager of his benevolent liberality. In a milieu in which such discourses
seemed natural, it was impossible to judge the relative validity of political
proposals because assumptions about identity clouded such discussions.
How could a proposal be judged when the evidence in favor of it was an
obfuscating notion of US-Hispanic hierarchy? Focusing on the pre-political,
in such contexts, is of as much political importance as evaluating specific
policy options. Sacvan Bercovitch illustrates this challenge when he explains
how, when writing The American Jeremiad, he was motivated by his sense that
in American traditions of dissent, “the remedy for American abuses was the
American promise.” The problem here is that “nay-saying ... framed within
the America-story ... close[s] out alternatives to the culture” (xix). Options
outside the consensus around liberal democracy are off the table. As such,
recognizing one’s entrapment within the culture is “the indispensable first
step in opening vistas of political transformation” (xxiii). Melville may not
advocate for the radical, non-liberal-democratic measures Bercovitch pon-
ders, but the two concur in suggesting that political dialogue is limited if
structured around questions of what is most American, most Spanish, most

13 Compare Herbert on how Typee emphasizes how Americans experience encounter
with Marquesans more so than anything concrete about Marquesans themselves (21).
African. Such structures divest dialogue of substance, inhibit innovation, and uphold rapacious power relations. Realizing the limitations set by these structures is thus a precondition for discussing policy alternatives.

In this context, Melville's artistry is a powerful tool. One senses in dismissals of Melville's politics a dissatisfaction with high literature's distanced complexity. “Benito Cereno,” indeed, exhibits memorable literary complexity by raising perspective to the level of a multilayered, ironized verbal texture. However, Melville's construction of literature out of how political questions are framed by perspectives comprises precisely his tale's pre-political import. Literary complexity is thus Melville's political point of entry. It is as a literary work of art that “Benito Cereno” devastatingly defamiliarizes Hispanicist exceptionalism. What is more, just as Bercovitch calls for “a scholarly-critical enterprise that might eventuate in a different frame-story for the national narrative” (xxiii), Melville, while offering no policy alternatives, provides alternative narrative frames, alternatives premised on the kind of literary complexity valued by perceptive critics. Revealingly, T. Walter Herbert claims that in Typee, “Melville's treatment … preserves critical ambivalences that draw him into deeper and deeper efforts to fathom what his own position truly is. … he finds the concept of civilization coming to pieces in his hands; yet he has no alternative concept with which to replace it” (156). An analogous point can be made for “Benito Cereno”; in examining Delano's viewpoint, Melville draws attention to US exceptionalism's instabilities and misperceptions. Yet in “Benito Cereno,” a mature Melville offers a radical reconception of how stories about identity and relationships can be told, of how answers to such questions can be approached. This reconception is seen in the pre-political, literary aspects of the tale, which are distinguished from the simplicity of the stock narratives upon which Delano's self-conception relies.

This alternative frame is cosmopolitan, but not Delano's blinding, exceptionalist cosmopolitanism. Another non-hierarchical cosmopolitan manner of describing relationships among identities is available, one that contests how identity-based discourses violently sever human commonality in their construction of types that are, in the end, fictions, even if fictions that tangibly effect our world. This more rigorous cosmopolitanism is premised on a sense for irony, here understood as the ability to denaturalize identity. As Bryant elaborates, Melville's texts and his writing process exhibit a “cosmopolitical awareness” that entails using writing to put identities into play against one another, to be always aware that there are multiple perspectives (“Cosmopolite” 122). With such awareness, one recognizes that one's identity might be viewed differently by someone else than it is by oneself. This nose for irony involves recognizing that things are not always what they seem, that meanings vary with perspective. While this view might seem to threaten an anarchical groundlessness, it in fact grounds a revolutionary process of identity constitution. In this process, rigorously considered change and revision are always on the table when interactions suggest that one's identity does not work. As Bryant writes, cosmopolitical awareness “is a form of critical thinking designed to familiarize ourselves with three fundamentals: 1)
identities evolve … 2) texts also evolve because writers and readers revise them; they are fluid texts; and 3) we revise cultural identities as we revise textual identities” (“Cosmopolite” 124). “Revision” here is key. For the skilled writer, a text is never final, as another perspective can always provide a fresh view on the writing. Similarly, for the cosmopolitan, identity is conditional; frictions of identity can demonstrate the need for reflection on one’s beliefs, customs, and attitudes toward others, potentially demonstrating that they need alteration. The cosmopolitan, as such, has an ear for productive dissonance that signals a need to revise.¹⁴

As said, to many antebellum US Americans, a radical cosmopolitan seemed suspiciously rootless, perhaps because such an individual’s orientation to the world upset stock perceptions of US superiority. Melville, though, found this aspect of radical cosmopolitanism appealing. He perceived that a cosmopolitan in this sense “challenges our apathetic being. … He confronts us with an invitation to trust and yet reminds us of the necessity to doubt” (Bryant, “Citizens” 30). The cosmopolitan, in this sense, is a far cry from Delano, whose “singular guilelessness” makes him “a man of such native simplicity as to be incapable of satire or irony” (Melville 47, 63). Delano has abundant evidence that suggests that his perspectives on identity – his belief in inefficient Spanish despotism, black irrationality and servility, and his own benevolence – warrant doubt. For instance, Delano often nearly recognizes that the roles of master and slave have been reversed with Céreno and Babo. Yet, Delano is unable to think outside his stereotypes. So inured is he in his self-understanding that he is “oblivious to the end of the meaning of Babo’s terror and to the murderous satire contained in Melville’s symbolic gesture” (Sundquist 137). Indeed, in the concluding exhortation to Céreno, he brushes off his experience with clichés: “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” (116). Such failures to learn from experience exemplify a complacency that is antithetical to cosmopolitical awareness.

A major aspect of cosmopolitical awareness is skepticism. Some readings of skepticism and “Benito Céreno” suggest that, through Delano, Melville thematizes humanity’s inability to escape its benighted, limited ability to know.¹⁵

¹⁴ Compare Herbert on how “Melville’s art reanimates the self” by “prompt[ing] interpretative efforts and reveal[ing] new qualities as the identities of interpreters shift” (179); and Michael’s discussion of Frederick Douglass’s frictive cosmopolitanism (201-34).

¹⁵ Halpern argues that “Melville’s irony riddles any ground that we might have hoped to stand on” (559) as readers, which means “we cannot assume even the most basic thing about it, such as its status as an antislavery text” (561). Going a step further, Arsić writes that The Piazza Tales “all relate something about the possibility of leaving the [platonic] cave. More often than not this possibility will turn out to be a failure. … Captain Delano will remain a hostage in his cave, reading only what is written ‘black on white.’ By the force of the law, Babo will be turned into the absolute silence of the beheaded body” (9). While these stories, Arsić argues, may ironize the natural and reveal the constructed character of the epistemological orders they investigate, they also thematize the impossibility of escaping the cave.
As such, does Melville present cosmopolitical awareness as a pretense? If such awareness involves recognizing the flexibility of identity, skepticism may deny the possibility of recognition per se. However, “Benito Cereno” presents skepticism not as an aspect of the human condition embodied in Delano but as an orientation to the world opposed to that of Delano. A man whom Melville implies has less “than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception” (47), Delano is characterized by a Hispanicist-and Africanist-funded complacency at odds with the skeptic’s rigorous attention to context and contingency. If Delano was less self-satisfied and had more of the skeptic’s drive to self-question, he might have reacted differently while on board the San Dominick. The falsity of his self-understanding as cosmopolitan is cast against a skepticism that shares much with cosmopolitical awareness. Far from being paralyzed by epistemological limitations, the skeptic can put her/his acknowledgement of those limitations to work. That self-awareness can lead to a willingness to revise one’s identity and one’s conceptions about others.16

The relevance to “Benito Cereno” of this more rigorous, skeptical cosmopolitanism is exhibited by the fact that the narrative relies on its existence. Delano’s Hispanicist- and Africanist-funded complacency in his self-conception as a benevolent, optimistic cosmopolitan propels the suspense that forms part of the tale’s aesthetic interest by keeping him from seeing what has happened on the San Dominick. In that “Benito Cereno” more concerns a man with such an incapacity than it does slave mutiny per se (Tawil 197), there would be no “Benito Cereno” if Delano were capable of cosmopolitical perception. The tale thus highlights such perception’s relevance to Delano’s experience.

Melville’s literary, pre-political approach here becomes most apparently political. Uncomfortably experiencing suspense while inhabiting Delano’s perspective, readers are invited to realize that perspective’s dangers by comparing what the story is to what it might have been. As such, in tethering US exceptionalism to Delano’s point of view and questioning that perspective’s interpretative validity, Melville promotes cosmopolitical awareness as an approach to the world that is qualitatively superior to exceptionalism. For one thing, skeptical cosmopolitanism is more practical than Delano’s complacency. The reader is apprised of the usefulness of being the absent skeptical cosmopolitan in a “perpetually immigrant world” (Bryant, “Cosmopolite” 120). The ability to rethink one’s self and how one relates with others would likely have served Delano well aboard the San Dominick. Being willing to see Cereno as something other than a despotic, inefficient manager and to see Babo as something other than a slave might have helped Delano understand what had happened aboard the ship before that knowledge is forced upon him. Of course, Cereno has reason to suggest that more precise knowledge

16 Compare Herbert’s assertion that Melville champions a “tolerance for ambiguity sufficient to permit anomalous experience to be made available to consciousness, however inconsistent the resulting attitudes and feelings may appear to be.” His work teaches that in “social interactions we do not find an unchanging absolute logos,” but rather “an inexhaustible discourse, a drama without conclusion” that requires constant attention to context (207-08).
would have killed Delano (Melville 115), but perhaps the inability to revise preconceptions is more dangerous. Delano nearly dies many times while on the San Dominick – for instance, when he threatens discipline to the unruly blacks as they attempt to take the food that Delano’s crew has brought aboard. As usual, both Africanism and Hispanicism inform how Delano reacts to this situation; both suggest to him that the blacks need the discipline he threatens, his Africanism because they are infantile servants, his Hispanicism because of Cereno’s failures in management. Luckily for Delano, his preconceptions do not cost him his life, but cosmopolitical awareness might have braced him with the wariness necessary not to leave the case up to chance.

In highlighting how Delano might have taken a more active role in protecting himself in the tale, Melville may be warning his audience about the dangers of Delano’s imperialistic attitudes. DeGuzmán suggests that as a “morality tale” regarding what Melville “envisioned as the potentially horrific consequences of becoming an empire,” the tale emphasizes in particular “the part played by slavery as a stain on the aspirations of Anglo-American manifest destiny” (66). Yet whereas DeGuzmán sees a US American author fretting over whether US imperialism is sufficiently exceptional, I would suggest that the tale’s pre-political, cosmopolitical aspects comprise a critique of US imperial attitudes per se. Melville shows how complacent manners of understanding identity hinder recognition of “the unoriginality of American expansionism” that portends “its nonsuccess” (Emery 63). His cosmopolitical frame is an alternative to thinking about questions of empire that suggests not that US Americans seek to build an exceptional empire but rather that they recognize the distorting, insidious nature of seductive calls to do so.

The most salient value of cosmopolitical awareness, though, is that it is just. Delano’s misconceptions regarding US liberality and benevolence, Hispanic despotism, and African servility inhibit his ability to treat others justly. Here, Babo’s role is illustrative. Babo may seem to pose a problem for my reading. If Melville is suggesting an identity of non-identity, an identity in which identities are always at play against one another, is Babo not the limit case of this logic, in that he is void of identity? And is a silenced slave really what Melville wants to propose as a model? I would contend, though, that rather than presenting Babo as a model for what an identity of non-identity looks like, what is most notable about Babo’s identity is how he serves as a blank slate. For Delano, Babo serves as a proving ground through which Delano can self-construct his cherished fantasies about what it means to be a cosmopolitan, managerial US American. Through paternalistic sympathy with Babo, Delano imagines himself as a man of feeling in contrast to what he views as the heartless, despotic Cereno. Through suppression of the slave revolt, Delano leagues with Cereno against Babo to act out his self-conception as a stern, if genial, commander against savage disorder. In both cases, Delano interprets Babo’s actions in terms of Delano’s self-conceptions, misperceiving Babo by unjustly treating him as a means to an end of self-construction rather than as an end unto himself.
The fact that Babo is void of identity figures large in Nelson’s reading; she suggests that the narrative “objectifies Babo as fully as the sentence of the Lima Court,” offering no insights into “Babo’s motives and goals, and ultimate humanity.” This “necessarily limited portrayal” is a product of Melville’s privileged, benighted vantage (Word 130). Leaving aside the fact that Melville seems to have identified with Babo as much as any character in the tale (both, after all, are storytellers), I conclude by asking, would Babo be void of identity if he was not part of a world in which rigid notions of identity played such a dominant, oppressive role? What if Delano – who treats not just Babo but everyone as a tool of exceptionalist identity formation – took a more skeptical attitude toward identity categories and sought to view others outside his own cherished self-conceptions? In such a world, Babo would not serve as a blank slate through which Delano could act out his desires and preferences for self-identification. He could offer Babo an authentic form of sympathy. In this sense, Babo’s identity of non-identity is a limit case not so much in that Babo serves as a negative model, but in that this identity exemplifies the results of how Delano views others. The value of cosmopolitan awareness and skepticism toward identity categories, the tale suggests, is that such literary sensibilities provide the basis for making a different world possible.

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