

# IN THE SHADOW OF THE NEGRO: MINSTRELSY, RACE AND PERFORMANCE IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *BENITO CERENO*

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Herman Melville's novella *Benito Cereno* is a peculiar retelling of the historical account of a failed slave uprising onboard a Spanish ship, as documented by Amasa Delano in *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres*. Melville recasts the stunning events onboard the *Tryal* and emphasises the role of the rebellion's leader, Babo. Babo's beguilement of Delano is painstakingly dramatised. The captain of the mutinied ship, Benito Cereno, appears as a caricature of himself, an amalgamation of the Spanish stereotypes Amasa Delano embraces. These changes, along with others that Melville makes, help to stress the performative nature of race. By emphasising the artifice of blackness and the theatrical aspects of the slaves' rebellion, Melville's *Benito Cereno* subverts and critiques nineteenth-century racial discourse. This treatment of Delano's *Narrative* is as textual as it is theatrical. Brought to the forefront are questions of race that are traceable to the works of influential Enlightenment figures and which provide a barometer for nineteenth-century American literary culture.

Author and literary critic Toni Morrison has written that 'the literature of the United States, like its history, represents a commentary on the transformations of biological, ideological, and metaphysical difference' (66). Her thesis can be expanded to include other forms of American cultural production, including theatre. Morrison has also explained that a deep-seated sense of racial division and otherness across a colour line became fundamental to the workings of popular forms of black minstrelsy, so that

a layer of blackness applied to a white face released it from law. Just as entertainers, through or by association with blackface, could render permissible topics that otherwise would have been taboo, so American writers were able to employ an imagined Africanist persona to articulate and imaginatively act out the forbidden in American culture. (66)

Morrison's claims echo similar ones made decades earlier by Leslie Fiedler in his seminal work *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Fiedler writes that 'down through the history of the minstrel show, a black-faced Sambo (smeared with burnt cork, whether Negro or white, into the grotesque semblance of the archetypal nigger) tries to exorcise with high-jinks and ritual jokes the threat of the black rebellion and the sense of guilt which secretly demands it as penance

and purge' (Fiedler 400). Minstrelsy thus emerges as a puissant example of the way in which politics and art commingled during the nineteenth century. At the same time, the tropes of minstrelsy, and the very act of performing race through versions of minstrelsy, offered nineteenth-century American authors and artists a method of cultural critique and political subversion.

Writing about post-Enlightenment English colonialism, Homi Bhabha has carefully highlighted the relationship between artistry and power. In *Of Mimicry and Man* Bhabha claims that colonialism 'often produces a text rich in the traditions of *trompe l'oeil*, irony, mimicry, and repetition' (211) and that mimicry itself is 'one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge' (212) because it is 'the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal' (212). There is much to be learned from the application of Bhabha's work to the problems posed by blackface minstrelsy in nineteenth-century America. Bhabha's work specifically addresses the way in which subjugated peoples take on images of power found in dominant culture. Mimicry is a satirical impersonation of colonial power and authority. It is a tool that provides a means of political expression for subjugated people by allowing them to mock manners, mores and behaviour. Blackface minstrelsy is closely related to mimicry in that it can allow subjugated people to take on images of themselves that have been created by the dominant culture: black minstrels mimic the images of themselves that occupy the imaginations of their oppressors. In addition, the forms of satire created by black blackface minstrels are highly complex. Minstrelsy is a form of mimicry whose locus is found on the black body. Black blackface minstrelsy calls attention to slippage, the identity between stereotypes, which is transformed through repetition. The slippage between the real body of the black actor and the burnt cork mask is different to the slippage that occurs when white actors put on the cork mask. The falseness of the mask is even more heightened by the proximity of the black body to the black mask which is certainly not of themselves. Like mimicry, black blackface minstrelsy offers its performers a means of critiquing both the abstract and the concrete: the racist thought that engendered theories about blackness as well as the social practices and legal discourses that emerged from those theories.

The literary significance of black blackface minstrelsy is one that has seldom been commented upon by scholars. But when we read *Benito Cereno* we can see processes similar to mimicry being enacted. Blackface minstrelsy performed by black actors, as occurs onboard the San Dominick, functions in a way that is similar to mimicry. In *Benito Cereno*, Babo and the slaves he directs are black minstrels. To Delano's uninitiated eye the performance of these black minstrels goes undetected. And yet, during their performance the knowledge of blackness gleaned from empirical evidence provided by eighteenth-century scientists in the burgeoning fields of anthropology, ethnology and criminology is constantly disavowed. Thus the concept of blackness is also rejected. Therein lays the

dilemma for the black blackface minstrel's audience and for Delano-like readers. Their spectatorial position makes them allies in a war being waged against them. Ultimately, what emerges from black blackface minstrelsy is a 'double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority' (Bhabha 214).

Minstrelsy has the ability to directly challenge colonial epistemologies. For what does it mean to have a black body perform blackface minstrelsy if not to fully negate the concept of blackness altogether by highlighting that category's gross inadequacies of the category? Melville's Babo not only repeats and represents the dominant culture's racial stereotypes, he launches these repressive racial stereotypes against his oppressors. His ability to utilise those stereotypes in a politically charged artistic performance proves their fallacy. Babo's performance, which is itself a stage play, underscores the oppressively encompassing nature of racial binaries and the dialectic between his body and the world. There arises out of his performance 'a question of authority that goes beyond the subject's lack of priority (castration) to a historical crisis in the conceptuality of colonial man as an object of regulatory power, as the subject of racial, cultural, national representation' (Bhabha 216). Certainly, 'the minstrel mask mediates and silently complicates the institutionalised dynamics of black and white through a form of cross-cultural signifying' (Chude-Sokei 26). The black male body that performs blackface minstrelsy speaks to the hollowness of Enlightenment rhetoric and colonial discourse. The peculiar nature of Babo's performance means that *Benito Cereno* can be read as a direct challenge to colonial authority; it undermines European epistemologies (and therefore authority), and thus whiteness itself.

The dramatic action of *Benito Cereno* takes place upon fictional and historical planes. During the American Enlightenment, the written word was not simply a vehicle for personal, artistic expression but a symbol that was intimately connected to one's humanity. Art was raced and, as Emmanuel C. Eze posits, philosophical treatises by figures like Hume and Kant 'played a strong role in articulating Europe's sense not only of its cultural but also racial superiority' (Eze 5). American philosophers and intellectuals latched on to this sense. In the real Captain Delano's lifetime there was a vigorous philosophical debate as to the nature of the black imagination. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. explained in *Figures in Black*, Thomas Jefferson was a leading proponent of American Enlightenment philosophy and his writing fomented Enlightenment-era attitudes toward race and art in America. Put forth primarily to debunk the exaggerated claims of the abolitionists, Jefferson's remarks on Phyllis Wheatley's poetry, as well as on Ignatius Sancho's *Letters*, provided a model for future criticism of black literature for many years. Jefferson claimed that he had never been able to 'find a Black that had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never seen even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture' (Jefferson 196). Jefferson took his cues from prominent European philosophers

such as Immanuel Kant, whose writings on race are also crucial to understanding the curious relationship between art and race during the Enlightenment and well into the nineteenth century. Kant was one of the earliest European philosophers to associate colour with intelligence. In *Of National Characteristics, as far as They Depend upon the Distinct Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Kant first claims that ‘so fundamental is the difference between [the black and white] races of man, and it appears to be as in great regard to the mental capacities as in colour’ (Kant 111). In *Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful*, the philosopher also claimed that the correlation between stupidity and blackness was self-evident (Kant 113). Kant considered refined aesthetic sensibilities to be solely the domain of Europeans. For Kant, the very act of acting or creating art became potent and was proof of one’s humanity.

This racist vein of philosophy spanned two continents, North America and Europe, and helped shape America’s political and economic structure. Paul Gilroy explains ‘that the universality and rationality of Enlightened Europe and America were used to sustain and relocate rather than eradicate an order of racial difference inherited from the premodern era’ (Gilroy 49). That relocation was crucial to the success of a slave-based economy. The extremely profitable (racial) framework Melville worked within was part of a continuum that originated well before and extended far beyond his time. It is a framework that Melville acknowledges and confronts in *Benito Cereno* by illustrating the inherent fallacies in race-based epistemologies.

Melville’s portrayal of Babo, and other characters who are slaves, is a critique of the Enlightenment obsession with race and the effort to define man. Delano’s preoccupation with empty signifiers is closely related to his reliance on Enlightenment forms of knowing, such as ‘physiognomy’ (Melville 219) and other forms of racial classification. Indeed, Henry Louis Gates has written that ‘race and reason, ethnocentrism and logocentrism, together were used by the enlightenment to deprive the black of his or her humanity’ (Gates 25). Certainly, the trajectory of Melville’s narrative proves the folly of relying on the racial schemata of the Enlightenment, which are proven to be illogical, and of the very attempt to create order from these theories. For Melville, the connection between *Benito Cereno*, philosophy and the racial issues that circumscribe the narrative were attained close to home. Melville’s family ties placed him in an ethos in which the logic of race based slavery was always being tested. Melville’s father-in-law, Judge Lemuel Shaw, was theoretically opposed to slavery but he was also a key proponent of the 1793 Fugitive Slave Law. As a lawyer, Lemuel Shaw also worked on the contract for the second edition of Amasa Delano’s *Narrative of Voyages and Travels*. He may also have been the first person to bring the narrative to Melville’s attention (Wallace, ‘Fugitive’ 43). It seems no accident then that *Benito Cereno* is not only set against the backdrop of the American Enlightenment, it engages with

Enlightenment philosophy and sits in opposition to some of its most influential ideas through an examination of the performative nature of race.

Melville's exposure to African American culture and performance traditions, and the extent to which he incorporated those traditions into his work, is not always obvious. However, in recent years Melvilleans have done significant work to establish such ties. We know now that as a young man, Melville could not have been unaware of the rich examples of African cultural influences that surrounded him. Sterling Stuckey was among the first to write about Melville's early exposure to the subversive potential of black performance. In 'The Tambourine in Glory: African Culture in Melville's Art' Stuckey explains that in the era in which Melville was born 'slave music and dance enjoyed brilliantly ironic expression in public and private, North as well as South' (37). Melville's family 'was wonderfully placed, residentially, to be exposed to black celebrations in nineteenth-century New York City' (Stuckey, 'Tambourine' 38). Melville certainly witnessed large public displays of black culture, like the Pinkster Festival and Wilberforce Society parades. As with those displays, in the minstrel show Babo directs 'the appreciation of irony allowed slaves to conceal, beneath a protective covering of improvisation, that which was unpalatable to whites, thereby preserving what was proper to them by almost endlessly changing its face' (Stuckey, 'Tambourine' 37). In spite of impossibly rigid social boundaries there was a fluidity of cultural exchange in that milieu which allowed Melville to deepen his knowledge of various aspects of American culture and broaden his own writing.

Sterling Stuckey also claims that Herman Melville read 'travelers' accounts of African culture, which gave him special insight into how blacks were affected by life in America, and how their values affected others' ('Tambourine' 43). In reference to *Benito Cereno*, Stuckey says that 'African values are crucial to the formation of the novella's finest art' ('Tambourine' 51). Stuckey was the first to broach this subject but he is not alone in his analysis. In her introduction to *Benito Cereno*, Wyn Kelley writes that 'the scenes on the San Dominick show the deep majesty of African drama' (24) and the "'communication environment" of dance, song and acting sustains [the slaves] throughout their ordeal, something that European and American observers cannot fathom' (25). Kelley cites Iyunoulu Folayan Osagie, who says that 'drama or theater is prevalent in African cultural performance. Cultural performance, as employed here, embraces the participatory practice of African drama' (103). This observation is certainly in keeping with the inclusive nature of the performance onboard the San Dominick: 'from the merest boy to the elders, from the warriors to the women and their babies, every African plays an active role in *Benito Cereno*' (Kelley 25). Thus, in its treatment of black performance *Benito Cereno* is an example of Melville's penchant for incorporating the vast knowledge gleaned from his encyclopedic reading and worldly experience into his writing. Black culture became so deeply embedded in the fabric of

Melville's narrative that 'in *Benito Cereno* there are aspects of African culture, including music and dance, so elusive and abstruse that we may never know why Melville made them so' (Stuckey, 'Tambourine' 51).

In Melville's narrative Delano is almost immediately confronted with the artifice and theatricality of slave life. *Benito Cereno*'s omniscient narrator tells us that at first glance the San Dominick 'seems unreal; these strange costumes, gestures, and faces, but a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive back what it gave' (Melville 166). Indeed, many of the goings-on onboard are described as spectacles (Melville 176). This marks a direct link to minstrel traditions. James Weldon Johnson wrote that as 'minstrelsy flourished it was developed and elaborated to such a degree that it became less and less an imitation of Negro plantation life, and towards the end of the last century it provided the most gorgeous stage spectacle to be seen in the United States' (Chude-Sokei 32). Scenery and props were significant parts of minstrel shows. But what did it mean for slaves to use everyday dress as costume, for objects to objectify? References to theatrical elements like costumes in Melville's black-on-black minstrel show demonstrates a uniquely African American method of cultural synthesis and critique which could be described in those terms used by Louis Chude-Sokei as a cross between 'DuBoisian 'double-consciousness', modernist 'fragmentation'' and 'post-modern performativity' (25).

Mary Chapman has explained the centrality of theatricality in nineteenth-century American popular culture (Chapman 150), writing that theatricality was located 'in the literal theatrical spaces of urban theatres, the metaphorical theatrical spaces of public life, or the hybrid space of the parlor whose residents frequently performed . . . for their guests' (Chapman 150). Theatricality was present in all levels of society and could be launched for a variety of purposes. The clothing that slaves wore as a part of their festivities is an example of this kind of theatricality. In *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1760-1890*, Steeve O. Buckridge argues that clothing, especially fancy dress, offered slaves many potential forms of subversion. Buckridge writes:

Some slaves used the occasion of carnival to plan armed revolts and to celebrate aspects of their African heritage. This type of subversive activity was not limited to Jamaica but was widespread throughout the Caribbean. In Antigua in 1776, whites were shocked to learn that a slave masquerade had been the organising opportunity and the means of concealment for an attempted overthrow of white rule. (Buckridge 107)

This too was a reality of which many of Melville's readers would have been aware. Fancy-dress balls and costume parades among slaves were a vital part of

many slave-based metropolises in America, including New Orleans. While these festivities could be imputed to the Negro's 'love of bright colors' (Melville 213) they were also clearly a vital part of the resistance against colonial power.

Babo's use of costume in the diversion that he stages for Delano is deeply linked to the everyday theatricality and forms of resistance Chapman describes. There is a discrepant awareness, or 'slippage' (Bhabha 216), created by Babo's performances in *Benito Cereno*; a literal space between what he pretends to be and what he actually is, which fosters creativity. It is in that space that we find the nuts and bolts of his performance—those elements of the minstrel show that have been perverted. In point of fact, while the theatrical elements of *Benito Cereno* are Babo's brainchildren, they display some of Melville's strongest re-workings of Delano's original narrative and an overt connection between Melville's short story and theatre and the minstrel tradition. If *Benito Cereno* is Melville's version of the minstrel show, then costumes are an important part of that show and places *Benito Cereno* firmly within a specific cultural context.

Babo's use of costumes to indicate hierarchies onboard the *San Dominick* also underscores costume's ability to represent bankrupt authority. Indeed, toward the end of *Benito Cereno*, it becomes apparent that *Benito Cereno* is Babo's puppet, a straw man clothed in symbols of authority that have been divested of their meaning. Delano eventually realises that Don Benito's costume,

so precise and costly, worn by him on the day whose events have been narrated, 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. (Melville 258)

*Benito Cereno*'s clothing is elaborate but ineffectual, like his display of power. His costume and the hollow scabbard are comments upon the artificial nature of colonial authority. The hollow scabbard is a phallic symbol emptied of meaning; it speaks to the ineffective patriarchal authority of colonial power. Babo uses costumes to separate signs of authority from actual sites of power in a way that is both satisfying and misleading for his audience: it confirms mistaken notions about the nature of whiteness and authority while subverting power. Thus, a clearer picture of the important role that costumes, textiles, and clothing play in Melville's narrative begins to emerge. These elements represent one of the clearest ways in which Delano fails as a reader of signs and symbols. Woven textiles, the product of practical knot tying (Melville 201), fail to rouse Delano's suspicions.

For most of the narrative, Delano's sartorial suspicions centre on *Benito Cereno*, Babo's front man. Throughout the narrative, we see that Delano places

his faith in signs which seem to offer him a sense of assuredness because of their common meaning. He notes that Benito Cereno ‘wore a loose Chile jacket of dark velvet; white small-clothes and stocking, with silver buckles at the knee and instep; a high crowned sombrero, of fine grass; a slender sword, silver mounted, hung from a knot in his sash’ (Melville 176). Delano reads the rich costume as evidence of Cereno’s ‘Spanishness’ and authority. And yet, while Delano does sense that there is something ‘incongruous in the Spaniard’s apparel’ (Melville 177) and that it is ‘curiously at variance with the unsightly disorder around’ (Melville 176), he never attributes his misgivings to a lack of power on Don Benito’s part. Similarly, the sight of a Spanish sailor wearing a ‘voluminous frock, or shirt of coarse woolen, much spotted with tar’ used to cover a ‘soiled undergarment of what seemed the finest linen’ (Melville 189) does not trigger a sense of alarm for Delano. Instead he is left only with questions: ‘How come sailors with jewels?—or with silk-trimmed under-shirts’ (Melville 190). A keener eye, and mind, would read the possibility of theft at the sight of this incongruous dress. The clothes the Spanish sailors wear are also costumes chosen by Babo. Clues to theft, murder, and forced labor are all present in the sartorial signs that Delano misreads.

Absent clothing is also significant in Babo’s staged play. The African slave’s lack of clothing suggests a certain ‘naturalness’, humility and even piety to Delano. The ‘stark naked’ infant nursing at his mother’s breast (Melville 198) reminds Delano of John Ledyard’s accounts of Africa. Babo himself wears

nothing but wide trousers, apparently, from their coarseness and patches, made out of some old topsail; they were clean, and confined at the waist by a bit of unstranded rope which, with his composed, deprecatory air at times made him look something like a begging friar of St. Francis. (Melville 176)

It is, of course, a show of false piety. Indeed, from a distance we are told that all of the slaves seem ‘like Black Friars pacing the cloisters’ (Melville 163) to Delano. Despite the fact that they harbour murderous tendencies, once stripped of clothing the slaves appear to have been made submissive and are thus stripped of their power. Noting Atufal’s royal heritage, Babo tells Delano that ‘those slits in Atufal’s ears once held wedges of gold; but poor Babo here, in his own land, was only a poor slave’ (Melville 183). Atufal is made to seem humble through his apparent lack of costume. Their near, and full, nakedness makes Atufal and Babo’s shucking-and-jiving all the more believable. Clothing represents another form of artifice, a barrier between man and nature, which is incongruous with the slave’s Africanness. As stage director, Babo preserves the illusion of the black’s enslavement by ensuring that they are minimally clothed.

Delano’s obsession with clothing and the way in which he hones in on sartorial details signifies his larger obsession with material goods and human



chattel. But Melville's emphasis on clothing and costume is especially significant in light of the fact that such details are omitted from Amasa Delano's *Narrative*, save for a brief mention of his donation of clothes to the Spanish sailors (Delano 121). It is Melville who imagines the significant power of their presence and the danger of their omission. In this context, Babo emerges as a master of semiotics, conversant in European and African languages and the building blocks of the theatre.

Much information about one's social status could be gleaned from one's clothing in antebellum culture. Buckridge explains that 'the distinctly European dress of the planter and mistress in the great house reflected their status as coloniser, controller and oppressor within the plantocracy. To attack the dress of the planter and mistress was to attack the oppressor' (80). And yet for many slaves, clothes also contained a religious and spiritual dimension. Buckridge also writes:

The slaves' act of wearing their oppressor's clothes was reminiscent of the belief among some Africans that clothing had potency and that dress was strongly connected to the spiritual world. Hence, clothing could be used to defeat the enemy. (80)

For some slaves, using dress as a form of protest against one's master was a form of resistance against colonial authority in slaveholding cultures. African and Caribbean slaves were probably

aware of this notion of the potency of dress and sought to wear and destroy their enslaver's clothes to weaken his spirit. Only when the planter's spirit was weakened could the planter/slave-owner class be defeated, and slaves be freed. (Buckridge 80)

In this context, it is not difficult to imagine that Babo was aware of the potent nature of dress, if not a direct subscriber to such beliefs. Some of his most gruesome acts, including the display of Aranda's bones on the bow of the ship in place of 'Christopher Colon, the discoverer of the New World' (Melville 245), seem not only threatening but evoke a sense of the occult.

Sartorial details add another dimension to the scene in which Babo shaves Benito Cereno. The 'great piece of bunting of all hues' Babo tucks beneath Benito Cereno's chin is the Spanish flag. Tucking in the flag is not at all representative of 'the African love of bright colors and fine shows' (Melville 213); rather, it is an act of aggression. Even Delano remarks that it is fortunate that 'the King' (214), was not present to witness Babo's use of the flag as a towel, lest they be punished. There is also a certain metonymy associated with flags. In the nautical tradition, flags are literal representations of one's country. According to the practices Buckridge describes, Babo's gesture could represent

an attempt to ‘weaken’ Cereno’s spirit. Although the flag is a symbol of Spanish power it is firmly within Babo’s grasp and subject to his manipulations.

In his portrayal of black performance, Melville is uniquely situated among his contemporaries. In ‘Cheer and Gloom: Douglass and Melville on Slave Dance and Music’, Stuckey explains that ‘slave songs and much of his own experience convinced Douglass that the soul is the final theater of resistance to slavery’ (Stuckey, ‘Cheer and Gloom’ 74). For Douglass, black music may have been a form of resistance, but this resistance was inwardly directed. Slaves used spirituals as coping mechanisms and celebratory frenzies could numb the pain of life’s hardships. In his writing, Frederick Douglass ‘depicts slave song and dance against a backdrop that is a near constant in slave life, the tragedy of the slave experience for young and old alike’ and for him, there was ‘no greater mistake than to think slaves sang because they were happy’ (Stuckey, ‘Cheer and Gloom’ 71–72). Indeed, Melville’s characterisation of Delano demonstrates the consequences of such folly and Melville’s sensitivity toward the significance of black music and slave festivities may have been informed by Frederick Douglass. There is strong evidence that Melville read Frederick Douglass’s 1851 *Narrative* and developed Douglass’s insights about black music in *Moby Dick* (Stuckey, ‘Cheer and Gloom’ 71). Yet Melville’s views differed from Douglass’s. Douglass saw plantation holidays as ‘among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection’ (70). In *Benito Cereno*, the pageantry of slave festivities does not tamp down mutinous sentiments, it does the reverse. Melville imagined a space in which the sights associated with typical plantation ‘sports and merriments as playing ball, wrestling, running footraces, fiddling, dancing, and drinking whisky’ (Douglass 70) served a decidedly subversive purpose. For Melville, black performance was rebellion.

Paul Gilroy writes that ‘art was offered to slaves as substitute for the formal political freedom they were denied under the plantation regime’ (56). Such is the case in Martin Delany’s *Blake; or the Huts of America*, which was published only four years after *Benito Cereno*, and has been described as a ‘much more complex (and truthful) rendering of mid-nineteenth century black experience’ than even *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Miller xxi). In Delany’s novel, ‘the celebration of the nativity of the Infanta Isabella’ in Cuba, which culminates in a ‘grand national fete at the palace of the Captain General’ (Delany 240), also results in a holiday for slaves and free blacks. The ‘grand national fete’ is paralleled by a lavish party at the home of Madame Coradora, the widow of a wealthy mulatto merchant. Madame Coradora’s party provides an opportunity for large groups of blacks to meet without suspicion. It is during this grand, national fete that the Captain discovers that ‘a grand scheme’ for the ‘general rebellion of the Negroes’ is being planned at Madame Coradora’s house (Delany 265). El Dia de los Reyes, or King’s Day, also provides potential opportunities for slave rebellion (Delany 299). El Dia de los Reyes is a festival in honor of the three

Magi which is held on Epiphany, twelve days after Christmas. In the nineteenth century the celebration included a costumes parade put on by slaves at which whites were also spectators. The remnants of similar traditions can be found in today's Mardi Gras and Caribana parades. In *Blake*, the costume parade allows slaves from the same tribes, Gazas, Lucumis, Congoes, and Mandingos, to gather and interact with one another in a relatively free way. It also provides fertile ground for potential insurrections. The lavish shows were akin to the show Babo stages for Delano. Both demonstrated an advanced awareness of the potential uses of costumed displays in the fight for freedom. Like minstrel shows, these parades and carnivals were forms of 'everyday' theatricality that were intimately bound to the concept of blackness and shaped the legacy of slavery.

Babo perverts this tradition by representing traditional master/slave dialectics via costume and performance. Yet his staged show highlights another example of slaves' heightened awareness of the power of costume and dress and the ability of clothing to be used as a weapon. Buckridge says that 'behind the mask of fancy dress, slaves could act freely and sometimes even mimic their owners' (Buckridge 107) and that 'this was a conscious symbolic inversion of the plantation and colonial hierarchies, placing African slaves in a position of prominence and subordinating the planter class' (Buckridge 107). Because of the potentially subversive aspects of these festivals, we can also consider them to be an ironic commentary on 'the peculiar love in negroes of uniting industry with pastime' (Melville 167). The work of revolution was being done. A clear ability to manipulate the signs and symbols of theatre not only helped black minstrels to perfect a political commentary on the artificial nature of race, but allowed them to assert their mastery of the stage.

The inversion of power onboard the *San Dominick* is one of the most interesting aspects of Melville's tale. This inversion is also tied to theatre. Babo's direction marks a shift in power. His seeming helplessness belies his actual mastery and role as master on the *San Dominick*. The behaviour that seems most striking to Delano, Cereno's seeming disinterest with the conduct of the blacks onboard the ship, is the result of Babo's promptings. Delano muses that 'the Spaniard, perhaps, thought that it was with captains as it was with gods: reserve, under all events, must still be their cue' (Melville 171). Here the word cue has a double meaning: reserve is not only a quality that must guide him, it is an attitude he is forced to display by Babo, his director.

The attention called to the artifice, and artificial nature, of racialism marks an interesting convergence between abolitionism and minstrelsy. In point of fact, many of the stereotypes that typified minstrelsy's versions of blackness were translated into the racist philosophy that informed abolitionist melodrama. Connections can and have been made between Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and minstrel shows. In Stowe's narrative, Uncle Tom's Christian humility identifies him as a creature worthy of being rescued

from the evils of slavery. Paradoxically, these same stereotypes were used by advocates of slavery to justify the institution of slavery. Like Delano, occasionally Stowe seems to celebrate ‘the beauty of that relationship’, which results in spectacles of ‘fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other’ (Melville 176). Many scenes in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* are very similar to Delano’s meditations on race in terms of their use of racist language in their descriptions of black Americans. Indeed, several of Melville’s scenes seem to be specific parodies of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The presence of many of the tropes of minstrelsy in *Benito Cereno* suggest that the story may also be a parody of ‘Tom’ shows, the wildly popular stage adaptations of Stowe’s novel which sometimes took in the guise of minstrel shows.

Indeed, the popularity of ‘Tom’ shows signalled not so much an alliance with Stowe’s abolitionist politics, but a strong appetite for the performance of racial stereotypes. As Saidiya Hartman observes, ‘abolitionists’ politics allied with blackface techniques created an ambivalent portrait of slavery that denounced the institution as it supplemented minstrelsy’s range of darky fare’ (Hartman 27). Eric Sundquist has illustrated the way that Melville’s tale satirised the attitudes of Northern abolitionists who took comfort in depictions of blacks as benevolent and non-threatening (Sundquist 154). Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Melville’s *Benito Cereno* share many commonalities, including the subversion of race-based economic systems and the status quo. Herman Melville, however, rejects the flat caricatures of the minstrel shows so closely associated with Stowe’s work, choosing instead to interrogate the very notions that informed racialism through the performance of racial stereotypes.

In Melville’s tale, the ocean and the slave ship are depicted as liminal, mutable spaces. In one of the opening paragraphs of *Benito Cereno*, Melville describes ‘shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come’. Those shadows indicate darkness but not blackness. Colour signifiers like black and white, and their contingent binaries, are unreliable indicators in *Benito Cereno*. Melville’s emphasis on greyness tells us this. On the morning Delano spots the San Dominick off the coast of southern Chili, ‘everything was mute and calm; everything gray’, ‘the sky seemed a gray surtout’, and ‘flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters’ (Melville 161). Readers are given an indication that not everything in this story will be black and white, or straightforward, as words printed on paper initially appear to be. This greyness, or mutability, marks the ocean as a place of becoming, a place with the potential to slide further into either darkness or lightness or simply against which one can place blackness in relief. In this way, the ocean is like the backdrop on a stage. This aspect of *Benito Cereno* clearly delineates the ocean as a space in which race can be put in relief.

Contiguities between the narrative and the stage are further highlighted in the opening of the tale. Powers of observation are given a special prominence in

Melville's drama. Melville makes mention of the dangers posed to sailors by 'the spectacle of thinly mannered or vacant decks' (Melville 191). An inattentive viewer, Captain Delano is frequently distracted by and from 'the spectacle of disorder' placed before him (Melville 194), and is thus unable to perceive immanent danger. If the *San Dominick* is a stage, keen readers are meant to be enraptured by the dramatic tension displayed there. In addition, the mainly African passengers of the ship form a sort of Greek chorus; we are told that 'in one language, and as with one voice, all poured out a common tale of suffering' (Melville 165). In retrospect this line becomes sinister. Readers know that their 'common tale', or line, has been fed to them. In fact, in as much as being a slave must have necessitated the acceptance of that role and the performance of certain actions that must have been alien to them, they were all always already playing the role of slaves.

The diversions performed for Delano by the African slaves parodied those minstrel shows that demeaned blacks and allowed white audiences a feeling of racial superiority and insulation from insurrection. The 'clamorous throng' of Africans (Melville 165) who stage ethnicity for Delano's beguilement also encourage his narcissistic and solipsistic tendencies: the group of older black men picking oakum 'seem to act the part of old dominies to the rest' (Melville 180); Babo performs 'the office of an officious servant with all the appearance of submission of the humble slave' (Melville 249). Delano notices that

sometimes the negro gave his master his arm, or took his handkerchief out of his pocket for him; performing these and similar offices with that affectionate zeal which transmutes into something filial or fraternal acts in themselves but menial; and which has gained for the negro the repute of making the most pleasing body-servant in the world. (Melville 169)

A striking intertextual connection follows, which places Babo alongside some of the most 'celebrated' slaves in literary culture, Barber and Fletcher, Samuel Johnson and Lord Bryon's slaves (Melville 212). This ironic comparison calls into question Barber and Fletcher's devotion. Melville's repetition of words like perform, stage and scene point to a muted awareness on the part of Delano as to the theatrical aspects of race. The 'natural sights' (Melville 198) Delano sees onboard ship reinforce his racist schema of the world. An 'unsophisticated' mother nursing her 'fawn' confirms his view of African women as animal-like in their simplicity. Like Stowe's Aunt Chloe, they are also natural nurturers and sentimental, full of family-feeling. The gigantic and mute Atufal, enchained for an unnamed offence and forced to beg for Don Benito's pardon, bolsters Delano's notion of white authority and masculinity. Atufal's excessive restraints are themselves a mockery of the conventions. His subservience belies his rebellious intent.

Opera provides another striking connection between *Benito Cereno* and the theatre. William J. Mahar has outlined the relationship between minstrelsy and the opera, saying that ‘blackface adaptations of operas, operatic scenes, and other stage works were an important part of the minstrelsy repertory’ (101). Minstrels were known to have ‘invested their creative energies in burlesques of contemporary English theatre pieces’ from which ‘they borrowed scripts and costumes’ (Mahar 101). Jennifer Jordan Baker argues that ‘in Antebellum America, minstrelsy and other forms of working-class entertainment posed a direct challenge to the bourgeois theatrical establishment by parodying Shakespearean drama, Italian opera, and other elite drama forms’ (103) and that Melville’s infamous shaving scene is actually a ‘grim version of the shaving scene in Pierre August Caron de Beaumarchais’s *The Barber of Seville* (*Le Barbier de Seville*, 1775)’ (92). In Baker’s reading, Babo is paralleled to Figaro, a servant who participates in a plot to deceive and ridicule his former master. In the third act of Beaumarchais’ opera Figaro performs an elaborate ruse and ‘undertakes the pretense of shaving Bartolo, preparing the blade and purposely overturning crockery in the next room’ (Baker 95) in order to allow two lovers to meet. Like Babo, ‘Figaro possesses an intellect that threatens to overturn the social status quo’ (Baker 92). Similarly, Babo’s knife work provides a tertiary commentary on the power of theatre as a political tool. In *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics of Art and Herman Melville* Michael Rogin claims that Melville’s shaving scene exposes the conventions of power relations thereby challenging the organics underlying both the ‘natural rights’ philosophy of abolitionists and the paternalistic justification of Southern slaveholders.

Melville repeatedly places the themes of race and performance at the forefront of his story. The inverted power dynamics onboard the San Dominick find their double in Melville’s description of the San Dominick’s stern piece, which features a ‘dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked’ (Melville 164). Babo’s head and mask, ‘that hive of subtlety’ (Melville 258), become the key to solving Melville’s racial drama and San Dominick’s mystery. Contrary to Delano’s belief, Babo is nothing like ‘Barber and Fletcher’ (212), the legendarily faithful slaves of Johnson and Byron. It is only when Babo’s mask of servility is lifted that we see ‘his countenance lividly vindictive, expressing the centered purpose of his soul’ (233). While playing the role faithful slave, Babo is merely doing his ‘duty’. He performs a role that allows him to pursue revolution to what is almost its fullest extent.

For Melville, race is inextricably bound to performance. The repeated images of masks and blackness, the concealing powers of masks, and that which is concealed, signify the potentially dangerous and subversive aspects of blackness, black bodies and black persons. Masks conceal a potential abyss and unknowability. *Benito Cereno* is a comment upon this abyss and the role of performance in bridging the gap between language and knowledge and affecting

change. It is in the interstices of *Benito Cereno* that one finds one of the keys to Melville's tale. 'Babo is nothing' and everything; his body is a blank slate upon which the text of revolution can be written. Literature exposed black writers to white censure, and literacy itself was a crime for slaves, but blacks became adept at finding other modes of expression. Indeed, 'art became the backbone of the slave's political cultures and of their cultural history. It remains the means through which cultural activists even now engage in 'rescuing critiques of the present' (Gilroy 57). The San Dominick is a traditionally white stage which has been seized by a black stage manager. Babo, as its star and director, would have been a tellingly fearsome figure. He is subversive in body and action. His presence signifies chaos. His appropriation of minstrelsy's tropes renders racist thinkers like Delano vulnerable. Babo's ability to manipulate those tropes is the ultimate indictment of racist thinking. His artistry and the elaborate scenes that he sets are proof of his intellectual capacity and justify his position as master of himself, if not the San Dominick.

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