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# The Mask Strikes Back: Blackness as Aporia in Moby-Dick and Benito Cereno

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# The Mask Strikes Back: Blackness as Aporia in Moby-Dick and Benito Cereno

## **Abstract**

What is the American Gothic a reaction to? Whereas other thinkers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne locates the building blocks of the American Gothic in Puritan Christianity or Amerindian Genocide, I argue that Melville posits the genesis of chattel slavery and the construction of racial category as the repressed events that haunt the Americas and return uninvited. By using the Gothic motif of the living corpse, the famed writer of Moby-Dick addresses the social bereavement which Blackness comes to represent in the Americas. By looking for truth on the skin and flesh, the main characters of Moby-Dick and “Benito Cereno” represent the Enlightenment precept that truth can be arrested via observation and interpretation. Melville presents two Black characters as impasses in this project of interpretation: Moby-Dick’s drowned boy, Pip, and “Benito Cereno’s” undead leader, Babo.

## **Keywords**

Melville, Moby-Dick, Black Studies, Psychoanalysis

## **Disciplines**

African American Studies | American Literature | Literature in English, North America

## **Comments**

Written as an English Honors Thesis.

In Herman Melville's nautical tales, the drowned dead leave their chains in the water. The acclaimed American author attends to the primary issue of his time, American chattel slavery, and finds the building blocks of a New World Romanticism. In his novel *Moby-Dick* and short story "Benito Cereno," Melville blackens the burgeoning American Gothic aesthetic by associating Enlightenment interpretation and racial classification. The United States emerges during the springtime of constructivist epistemology and the transatlantic slave trade. The new social episteme that distinguishes human beings through the categories of race serves to legitimize the practice of involuntary servitude. Melville employs the Gothic motif of the living corpse to symbolize the political and epistemological bereavement associated with the racial category of Blackness. Black characters in Melville's transatlantic tales, *Moby-Dick* and "Benito Cereno," return from the dead to problematize interpretation. *Moby-Dick*'s drowned boy, Pip, and "Benito Cereno's" undead leader, Babo, seek to drown the arbiters of their subjugation, Captain Ahab and Benito Cereno. Their ghoulish afterlives annul and weaponize the subject-object dualism that frames both Enlightenment thought and the subjectivities of their masters. Although Melville's stories are encyclopedic in range and subject, his intention to set these stories on the sea speaks to a national and racial genesis. Melville traces and links the histories of America and Blackness to the Atlantic, a space of violent, sublime discovery.

### **Gothic Interpretation**

*Moby-Dick*'s Captain Ahab seems to abjure social difference in the creation of his ship society. Though Thales of Miletus may consider water as *arche*, oceanic bodies are anarchic spaces. The social imaginary of land-based civilization finds its natural counterweight at the seaboard. No nation owns the ocean. The aquatic wilderness instead provides the conditions for the possibility of associations and societies outside the terrestrial nation-state. These social

formations, whether piratical or joint-stock, may flow into land markets and port cities but ultimately ebb onto the ungoverned *mare incognitum*. The captain of the *Pequod* assembles indigenous, Black, and European mariners on this marginal and liminal space. Despite the unruliness that underscores the chapter “Midnight, Forecastle,” such society post-colonization and antebellum is unlikely. The ship is a mobile experiment. Melville’s nautical fiction simulates an alternative mode of governance. *Moby-Dick* demonstrates what Michel Foucault calls governmentality, the creative process of governing a state. Described through nautical analogy, the Foucauldian concept consists of “establishing relations between the sailors who are to be taken care of and the ship which is to be taken care of, and the cargo which is to be brought safely to port, and all those eventualities like winds, rocks, storms” (Foucault 93-4). Whalers are characteristically under the whim of natural forces; the *Pequod* illustrates the trials of balancing ethnic, racial, and social disputes with natural uncertainties. Ahab’s position is thereby to arrange a ship that can withstand internal and external conflict.

Ahab’s chosen governmentality is vendetta. “Government,” Foucault argues, “has a finality of its own” (94). Conclusiveness distinguishes Machiavelli’s Prince from Hobbes’s Leviathan. Despite Cold War Americanist readings of *Moby-Dick*, Ahab is more political artist than supreme tyrant. Ahab establishes his creative statecraft in the chapter “The Quarter-Deck,” in which the novel famously pivots from mercantilist journal to romantic quest. Corraling his sailors, the captain, who has an ivory peg-leg, recounts when “Moby Dick,” the novel’s eponymous whale, “brought [him] to this dead stump [he] stand[s] on now.” Those who set sail under the pretense of commercial whaling assume Ahab’s vindictive and mythical hatred for the White Whale. Not to procure spermaceti but “to chase that white whale on both sides of land” is “what [they] have shipped for” (*Moby-Dick* 139). Ahab’s program has a denouement; the

captain does not seek indefinite lordship. At once, the captain grounds the *Pequod*'s quest with a phenomenological gravity. As Starbuck, his first mate, objects to the inanity of hounding a mere albeit deadly animal, Ahab assures that "all visible objects" including Moby Dick are but "pasteboard masks" under which an "instructable thing" lurks. Ahab's quest, in truth, is to "strike through the mask" and "wreak his hate upon" the "inscrutable malice" behind Moby Dick (140). Ahab sets the *Pequod*'s sights beyond the apparent whale and towards an essential evil.

Pippin, per crew membership, must live under these Gothic passions. In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler presents how the Gothic genre centers the "Shadow" archetype, a "villain-hero" entrapped by their "bondage to evil" (109). The Shadow, like Faust, willfully accepts their bondage, and they are "doomed to stalk the earth"—itinerant as the picaresque hero. *Moby-Dick*'s Shadow, Ahab, roams sea instead of land but does so with an unbending resolve to apprehend an evil that once seized him. The narrative enters the captain's story *in medias res*—years after the birth of his vindictive persona, the seizure of his leg. Nonetheless, "The Quarter-Deck" features a collective nativity: the mass birth of the *Pequod*. Fiedler indicates the "oppressive parent[hood]" of the Shadow (113). The persona stands for an immediate ancestry just as the often archaic architecture of the Gothic aesthetic reveals a forgotten past. Ahab bears an obscured history that gives birth to the central narrative of Melville's novel: kill the white whale. As the chapter closes with an oath-sealing toast, Ishmael makes note of the appearance of Ahab "shock[ing] into [his mates] the same fiery emotion accumulated within the Leyden jar of his own magnetic life" (*Moby-Dick* 141). The *Pequod* inherits Ahab's passionate will and its object, the vindictive quest.

The Captain of the *Pequod* thus figures as Melville's modern Prometheus. Ahab's charge exemplifies interpellation and the surmounting of human capacities; the captain's Faustian

parentage invokes the eponym of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Ahab's quest to strike through the pasteboard mask parallels that of Shelley's Shadow, Victor Frankenstein, for who "life and death appeared [as] ideal bounds, which [he] should first break through, and pour a torrent of light onto [a] dark world" (Shelley 39). Frankenstein's tragic monomania ends in the creation of a creature whereas Melville's Shadow creates along the way towards revenge. Ahab achieves a political version of Frankenstein's goal in order to puncture different, phenomenological bounds. The *Pequod*'s artful leader has "drunk...of the [same] intoxicating draught" of Frankenstein who recounts his tragic, Gothic tale aboard a ship (190). Melville in turn rewrites *Frankenstein*—locating the Gothic nativity upon the Atlantic. Specifying *Moby-Dick*'s relation to Shelley's Gothic exemplar gives concision to Fiedler's broad theoretical strokes and gestures towards the epistemic significance of Ahab's quest. As the mythic Prometheus, Ahab animates his crew with his own electric fire and gives both life and direction to the *Pequod*'s mariners.

The ideal bounds which Ahab charges to strike through are humanity's epistemic boundaries. *Moby-Dick* emerges from a particular historical horizon of Enlightenment thought which German philosopher Immanuel Kant largely inaugurates. Ahab's mission first posits a particular limit to surmount, and this drive reflects the key philosophical concern of the time—the distinction between knowledge and nescience. Kant's 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* subtends this distinction which had implications for the burgeoning fields of science, social science, and art criticism. Kant sketches the contours for the inapprehensible "thing-in-itself" and asks the question of "how in a thinking subject outer intuition, namely, that of space, with its filling-in of shape and motion, is possible." Kant's "transcendental object" lurks behind the pasteboard mask, the apparent object (A393). Per Kant, the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves ground metaphysical questions, such as free will and Parmenidean unity. Kant

presents the phenomenological impasse that Ahab seeks to break; in other words, Melville sets his character against the key philosophic obstacle of the time. *Moby-Dick* is a fiction that not only models an experimental society but also sketches an attempt at apprehending the truth beyond appearances, things-in-themselves. Melville illustrates the inextricability between politics and episteme. Ahab as Frankenstein creates his creatures to move beyond the epistemic limits of humanity that Kant pronounces.

### **Pip: Melville's Frankenstein Monster**

One of Ahab's creations, Melville's Black "wight," occupies the *Pequod's* margins long before his cadaverous haunt (*Moby-Dick* 319). Essential to the theatrical "Midnight, Forecastle," Pippin, the *Pequod's* Black ship-keep, performs his introduction. His shipmates, roused by their captain, urge him to provide a rhythm to their festive square dance. Noting his lack of instrument, Pip's peers propose that he "beat thy belly [and] wag thy ears." When finally equipped with his tambourine, he is to "make a pagoda of thyself" (147-8). The ship-keep is unfit amongst rowdy sailors—even more so than the novel's romantic narrator. Pip's stature and nerves bar him from most nautical work. When not tending to the ship while others go whale-hunting, he must augment crew morale with song and dance. His body is their entertainment. Further, according to a Spanish crewman, the *Pequod's* jester allegedly derives from the "undeniable dark side of mankind," a "devilish dark" portion of society (150). Racial conflict abides on the *Pequod* as the comment begets a brief war of words between the Spaniard and Daggoo, a Black harpooner. Pip's lack of pertinent rank clearly distinguishes the drummer boy from Daggoo. In fact, the fearful musician, "shrinking under [his] windlass," laments the fact that his captain urged the whaler to kill the White Whale. Pippin ends the chapter with a prayer to the deified leviathan to spare him and "preserve him from all men that have no bowels to feel

fear” (151). Invoking the archenemy of his captain, Pip signals his early allegiance and yearning for an alternative to his present, fearless society.

Throughout *Moby-Dick*, Melville endows Blackness and other external features of otherness with mythical façades. These spectacular features constitute the novel’s most immediate form of interpretation: body reading. From Ishmael’s appraisal of Queequeg’s “unearthly complexion” to the aforesaid “undeniable darkness” of Blackness, the *Pequod*’s mariners attend to their peers’ externalities despite the supposed totality and uniformity of the crew (34). Ishmael describes Pip as ostensibly perkier and happier than another diminutive ship-keep, the white Dough Boy. Despite its undeniable darkness, Ishmael reminds the reader that “even blackness has its brilliancy,” a quality which Pip possesses. The narrator however ascribes these qualities to the entirety of Pip’s race—suggesting that “for blacks, the year’s calendar should show naught but three hundred and sixty-five Fourth of Julys and New Year’s Days.” Ishmael at once anticipates the most distinctive, sublime moment of body reading by noting how Pip “was destined to be luridly illumined by strange wild fires, that fictitiously showed him off to ten times the natural lustre” (319). Ishmael refers to the capacity of Ahab’s Promethean fire with the language of presentation rather than creation. Moreover, by deeming illumination fictitious, the narrator highlights the social constructivism used by Melville’s Prometheus.

In the rising action of “The Candles,” the *Pequod* is aflame with corpusants with which Ahab identifies. The chapter centers on the captain’s ode to the flame wherein he signals to his past of dabbling in Zoroastrian rituals, rites which gave the captain the scar across his face (383). The mythical flame exaggerates the image of Ahab’s pagan kinsmen, the harpooners:

Relieved against the ghostly light, the gigantic jet negro, Daggoo, loomed up to thrice his real stature, and seemed the black cloud from which the thunder had



come. The parted mouth of Tashtego revealed his shark-white teeth, which strangely gleamed as if they too had been tipped by corpusants; while lit up by the preternatural light, Queequeg's tattoo-ing burned like Satanic blue flames on his body. (381)

In his anticipation, Ishmael discloses the correct reading of this scene: a “fictitious” illumination. Ghostly light comes with, or rather, stands for a particular imagination that mediates the harpooners' images. By more than a century, Melville antedates psychological studies on implicit biases, and yet, he shows the interpretive givenness of racialized exaggeration. Daggoo, self-described as “quarried from” blackness, becomes the cloud from which the Spaniard first makes his racial claim (150). The ethereal flame ignites Tashtego's mouth with St. Elmo's fire. Finally, Queequeg's tattoos, a key fascination of Ishmael and Ahab, take on demonic, unworldly pretenses. The scene presents the harpooners as forces of nature, the precise force against which the *Pequod* wholly contends. All the while, Ahab regards the flame as a “fiery father” from which his “flaming self” derives (383). Just as this fire ushers in Melville's *Shadow*, the captain brings to being both the generic *Pequod* mariner and otherized characters, read as demonic in the preternatural light.

Ishmael indicates the relativism of interpretation through the story of Pippin's pivotal fall. The novel's narrator, enraptured by Pip's Black brilliancy, deems the ship-keep a “pure-watered diamond drop” with a “healthful glow”—“suspended against a blue-veined neck” and “the clear air of day.” Ishmael refers to Pippin's first lowering as proxy for the after-oarsman of Stubb, Ahab's second mate. Frightened by the struggle, Pip leaps overboard and becomes entangled and “remorselessly dragged” near the boat's chocks “by the line, which had taken several turns around his chest and neck.” After making a cost-benefit analysis, Stubb orders

Tashtego to cut Pip and the whale free. Stubb's reading is the first in which Pip's value is set against a whale. Ishmael juxtaposes the Pip before and during this episode with the diamond drop handled by a "cunning jeweler" who "lays [the drop] against a gloomy ground, and then lights it up" conjuring "fiery effulgences, infernally superb." Read against the sublimity of "The Candles," Ishmael demonstrates how Ahab and others, in a peculiar light, intensify the once brilliant jewel into an "evil-blazing diamond...stolen from the King of Hell" (320). Ishmael's own analogy operates using a language of commodity which further applies a distorting, interpretive layer. Nonetheless, the narrator's retelling of Pip's story further discloses the relativism behind the myriad interpretations of Blackness.

Both "The Candles" and "The Castaway" explore the significance of interpretation and its relation to Ahab's larger quest. Particularly, these interpretations emerge at the impasse of nescience, such as the seeming infinite of the ocean or the mysterious language and body of the non-European. Melville introduces interpretation as a key subject of the novel with Ishmael's analyses of his "bosom friend," Queequeg, the indigenous harpooner. For Ishmael, this "savage" object of analysis brings to mind phrenological and physiognomic categories. Fascinated by way of scientific racism, Ishmael regards his acquaintance as "George Washington cannibalistically developed." Moreover, the narrator educes a sublimity from Queequeg's generally stoic behavior—supposedly strange due to his ostensible deviancy from his environment (55). Invocations of scientific racism and the sublime elsewhere emerge in discussing Moby Dick and whales in general. In fact, some of Ishmael's "cetology" chapters, breaks from the narrative to analyze whales through various theoretical and scientific lenses, are exercises of phrenology. Sharon Cameron, in her study of the body in Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne's works, *The Corporeal Self*, highlights anatomization as a particular form of interpretation key to

*Moby-Dick* (Cameron 2). Ishmael's body reading signals a search for knowledge, emphasized in the cetology chapters, that aligns with Ahab's injunction. Interpretation, especially anatomization and the focus on otherized bodies, is a means of breaking through sensible phenomena to apprehend deeper truths about intelligences, virtues, and values.

Returning to Stubb's cost-benefit analysis invokes the fetishistic quality of Blackness. Heretofore, Blackness represented mystery and natural sublimity; Stubb's analysis invokes another historic reading of Blackness: pecuniary value. After Pip surfaces from his first leap, the crew immediately castigates the keep-turned-oarsman. Thereafter, Stubb intervenes to offer the drummer boy tough love by way of a terse mantra, "Stick to the boat" (*Moby-Dick* 320). The categorical imperative posits all forms of disobedience or willful deviancy as illicit. Stubb, to nail in the concept, further states that "a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama" (321).

On one hand, Ahab's quest merely seems to privilege the racially and socially relegated in American society. Stubb's command conveys the enforced totality and synergy of the *Pequod*; much like a militaristic unit, the mariners are appendages of a larger entity. Despite the abiding social, and typically racial, distinctions aboard the ship, the *Pequod* maintains the air of faceless unity. Cameron argues that *Moby-Dick* explores "how otherness is coerced into identity, or, alternately, how otherness is thrown out of identity's bounds," and her argument finds confirmation in the totalizing oath of "The Quarter Deck" (Cameron 19). Aboard the *Pequod*, the cannibalistically developed rank beside, if not above, representatives of *Abendland*. Pip however falls out of identity's bounds by not acting in line with the crew's self-acknowledged goal, "a dead whale or a stove boat." (*Moby-Dick* 137). By jumping from the ship in fear of his own life, the small oarsman relinquishes his crew membership which demands self-sacrificial whaling.

Cameron's diction is key; the *Pequod* is very much a corporation in both senses of commercial unit and physical body. Identity with the larger body implies acceptance of and action furthering the crew's larger goal. Ahab thus constitutes the head, the helm, of a nautical body wishing to surmount the limits of human capacity.

Conversely, in his mention of Pip's price, Stubb indicates that the trace of transatlantic chattel slavery, the black body, remains aboard the ship that ostensibly abjures difference. Stubb's utilitarian calculus is a moral injury; the mate announces and weaponizes the historic reification of Blackness in which Pip's body is barterable with the whale's oily contents. Early in the novel, Ishmael specifies the *Pequod*'s condition with the phrase "Who aint a slave" (21). The state in which all mariners are slave to one captain ostensibly supersedes the racialized legacy of transatlantic slavery. Along with the otherized bodies of the harpooners, Pippin's body—potentially captive and commodified—is subject to what Black Feminist scholar Hortense Spillers calls "profitable atomizing" in that "we lose any hint or suggestion of a dimension of ethics" (Spillers 68). Stubb's claim both objectifies the Black ship-keep and gives a wide berth to intersubjectivity. The mate's imperative forecloses Pip's agency; if the monetized boy must toe the *Pequod*'s line, he is more appendage than actor. After all, oarsmen aboard the *Pequod* must "put out their eyes, and ram a skewer through their necks" (*Moby-Dick* 186). Such sensual repression evinces the body analogy—on the smaller boats, Ahab's mates, ignited by Ahab's Promethean fire, act as the captain's proxy, a replacement helm. Pip's position compounds the incorporation of the obedient mariner with the commodification of a slave, and due to his alleged lack of pecuniary value, the ship-keep is categorically negligible.

Nonetheless, Melville portrays Pip under similar conditions as the more valuable whales. When Pip leaps again but does not "breast out the line," the boy causes no urgent quandary for

the boat, and Stubb's boat casts him aside in light of a potential whale capture. Ahab's nautical body evicts Pip whom Ishmael describes as a "hurried traveller's trunk" (321). Analogizing the boy as cargo, the narrator anticipates a later scene that repeats Pip's expulsion. When Ahab's first-mate Starbuck points to a whale oil leak in the *Pequod's* hold, the captain rejoins "Let it leak!" (362). For the captain, the commercial value of spermaceti is nothing compared to arresting Moby Dick's intractable malice. Juxtaposed, the two scenes emphasize Pippin's sheer negligibility to the *Pequod*. Stubb amputates Pip from the larger crew in order to obtain oil that will soon suffer Pip's same fate: discharge. Additionally, these scenes reveal Melville's anatomical interexchange between Black and indigenous bodies with whale bodies. In *Moby-Dick*, what happens to whales happens to Pip. More accurately, *Moby-Dick* conflates nonhuman bodies and objects in regards to Ahab's epistemic quest. Amputated from the *Pequod*, and objectified as instrument and commodity, Pip neither registers as human nor subject in Melville's novel.

Orphaned overboard, Pip the ship-keep dies. Ishmael articulates how the sea "drowned" the boy's "soul" yet "kept his finite body up" (321). The narrator specifies that Pip's body is now finite—not extending beyond its physical limits and thereby no longer part of Ahab's larger corpus. Post-abandonment, Pip's body is merely "flesh," what Spillers deems the "zero degree of social conceptualization," as he is "seared, divided ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, [and] 'escaped' overboard" (Spillers 67). The bodiless orphan falls into the anarchic ocean; like Frankenstein's creature, Pip is bereaved. The unfortunate wight becomes cadaverous flesh, and yet, Pip finds new society in the deep ocean. Pip's fall acquaints him with the "miser-merman, Wisdom," otherwise known as Davy Jones, "the keeper of ocean-bottom treasures" (322; 335n9). Amongst these riches were "multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects" as

well as “God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom.” Instead of exegetically engaging this passage, one ought to notice the *Pequod*’s reaction to Pip’s posthumous return and his stories of the deep. The *Pequod* eventually recovers Pip’s animated corpse. Like Plato’s former cave-dweller who returns to the cave after seeing the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, Pip recounts Wisdom’s treasures, and his “shipmates called him mad.” Pip’s death and experience of Wisdom further sets him apart from Ahab’s body. As Ishmael notes, “man’s insanity is heaven’s sense,” and Pip’s corpse henceforth persists aboard the *Pequod* as flesh and arbiter of “celestial thought” (322).

Pip speaks from beyond the grave. Pip’s apprehension of Wisdom’s treasures implies the kind of inhuman, and thereby insensible, knowledge which Ahab so desperately seeks. In his *Melville and the Idea of Blackness*, Christopher Freeburg asserts that Pip “is socially incoherent and almost entirely given over to the eternities that circulate through him” (Freeburg 53). Post-fall, Pip’s speech evinces Freeburg’s analysis. In “Queequeg in his Coffin,” Pip announces his loss of identity and displays unreason in the process. The wight grabs hold of Queequeg, who is ostensibly fatigued by terminal sickness, and asks if the dying harpooner could “seek out one Pip, who’s been missing long... If ye find him, then comfort him; for he must be very sad; for look! he’s left his tambourine behind” (*Moby-Dick* 365). The corpse announces that he is no longer Pip as the Black drummer boy loses his identity via amputation. Markedly, Queequeg is socially coherent aboard the *Pequod*—not his esoteric tattooing and culture but rather his anatomic positionality in Ahab’s maritime corpus. Pip depicts the harpooner’s death on those terms by suggesting that “Queequeg dies game! I say; game, game, game! but base little Pip, he died a coward...a runaway... I’d never beat my tambourine over base Pip, and hail him General” (366). Queequeg’s social relevance aboard the *Pequod* differentiates his death; Ahab prizes him

as a trusted and crucial lieutenant. Pip, on the other hand, relinquishes his burial rites in his flight.

Interpretive coherence and incorporation are sequentially linked. Cameron theorizes that *Moby-Dick* illustrates a “self [that] acknowledges [the] world only in the process of trying to appropriate it” (Cameron 19). Melville locates this appropriative procedure in the body; Ahab’s nautical body absorbs, totalizes, and erases distinction. Prior to attaching the other to the unified whole, one must acknowledge and apprehend the other. In his work *Melville’s Anatomies*, Samuel Otter first locates such an anatomic direction in Ishmael’s cetologies. Ishmael’s obsessive study thus reads as one in alignment with Ahab’s larger quest. For Otter, “Cetology” presents a peculiar conclusion: “To grasp the anatomy of the whale is to lay one’s hands on the framework of the cosmos” (Otter 135). Ishmael’s scholarly means cycle various lenses of interpretation. The cetologies enact Ahab’s quest, told upon “The Quarter-Deck,” by way of science—especially the pseudosciences of physiognomy and phrenology. These interpretive lenses highlight particular bodily traits to signify meanings akin to Ahab’s Promethean fire. In their anatomic obsessions, both Ishmael and Ahab occupy a Faustian position as they seek to apprehend “a world of definition, coherence, and difference...in the skin and in the skull” (5).

Melville highlights the poetics behind interpretation in the chapter “The Doubloon.” Therein, Ahab examines the prize he offers his crew for killing Moby Dick, a gold ounce, and takes note of its “strange figures and inscriptions” in order to “interpret for himself in some monomaniacal way whatever significance might lurk in them” (*Moby-Dick* 331). The coin, nailed to the ship’s mast, stands in as another pasteboard mask, and the *Pequod* gather round the mast to strike through via interpretation. Ishmael’s narration brings to mind the narrator’s own penetrative glances at Queequeg in the beginning of the novel. Nonetheless, Ishmael states that

the *Pequod* “revered [the doubloon] as the white whale’s talisman.” Such relationality is not far off. Mariners imbue the White Whale with deific significances, and upon acknowledging the three mountain peaks of the doubloon—“from one a flame; a tower on another; on the third a crowing cock”—Stubbs makes zodiac interpretations whereas Starbuck alludes to the dogma of Christian trinity, three hypostases in one godhead. Cameron reminds us that these interpretive gestures precede a drive to incorporate. The captain’s own interpretation speaks to that appropriative drive:

There’s something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things...The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self. (332)

One might suggest that Ahab’s drive for knowledge is actually one of self-knowledge. In such a reading, all objects reflect the *Pequod*’s captain. Ahab’s reading does in fact point to the symbolic gravity of the coin. The captain projects that the coin stands in for the world itself, and interestingly, the world stands for the self. This passage in other words confirms Cameron’s dictum that, in *Moby-Dick*, acknowledgement of the outside world leads to a coerced selfsameness.

In opposition, Pip renders the interpretive process absurd and portends its collapse as a ghostly prophet. Melville closes “The Doubloon” with the *Pequod*’s Black specter to give him the final say on interpretation. The corpse identifies the coin as the “ship’s navel,” and instead of just navel-gazing, the *Pequod*’s crewmen “are all on fire to unscrew it.” The coin and the drive to



interpret its cryptic glyphs make up the core of the *Pequod*. Pip questions “what’s the consequence” to unscrewing the unifying center of Ahab’s nautical body. Upon fulfilling Ahab’s quest and striking through the pasteboard mask, what is accomplished? Does the *Pequod* as a differentiated whole cease to exist? Pip suggests that such questioning is for naught as future mariners will “come to fish up this old mast, and find a doubloon lodged in it, with bedded oysters for the shaggy bark.” In so doing, the undead ship-keep foretells a future in which Ahab’s epistemic quest fails. As for the doubloon, Pip claims that “the green miser’ll hoard [it] soon” (335). The doubloon will eventually constitute part of Davy Jones’s treasure chest. Pip’s eschatological rambling not only bespeaks an allegiance to the residents of *mare incognitum* but also suggest that the corpse apprehended some of Wisdom’s truths. Pip’s zombification serves to confirm Ishmael’s suggestion that Pip’s fall arose “a living and ever accompanying prophecy:” the wizened ship-keep who once drowned and died (319).

Pip’s relationship with Captain Ahab in the novel’s final arc exemplifies the boy’s critical relation to the *Pequod* and its quest. In the chapter “The Log and the Line,” Captain Ahab realizes that Pip is different than the rest of the crew for he “see[s] not [his] reflection in the vacant pupils of [Pip’s] eyes.” Pip invalidates Ahab’s former assertion that one may find their self-reflection in all objects. All are Ahab except Pip. Although Pip no longer stands as Ahab, the ship-keep bonds with the captain, holds his hand, and interprets the grasp as a “man-rope” for which he “will not let...go.” Neither will Ahab, the captain assures (390). Pip no longer qualifies as part of Ahab’s body; the amputated corpse now exists as something Other. Yet, the ship-keep’s otherness does not register under the same paradigm as the doubloon, the White Whale, and other such objects that amount to Narcissus’s pool. There is an interpretive break, an impasse that disables Ahab from finding himself in Pip. Ahab can no longer master Pip. In

regards to his eschatological criticisms of interpretation, Pip operates very much as a gadfly that checks and balances Ahab and the *Pequod*'s status quo. Pippin's commitment to that relationship, signified through the man-rope, hints at his abiding significance beyond his death and until the novel's close.

Ahab's incapacity to rationalize Pip as part of his system, part of his body, pertains to the boy's fall. After all, the Black corpse was once the captain's appendage. Neither an "ob-ject facing [Ahab]" nor an "ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire," Pip is now what psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva calls "abject." Undead, the boy is a "weight of meaninglessness" that exists aboard yet not of the *Pequod*. To Kristeva, "cadaver," a word which derives from the Latin "*cadere*, to fall," represents the abject. In the psychoanalytic subject/object distinction, the animated body was once associated with the subject who desires meaning, a conceptual persona that Kristeva names "I." Ahab's *Pequod*, with its quest for instructable, uninterpretable things, is *Moby-Dick*'s "I." In death, the cadaver represents the moment in which "nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit." It is a "border:" the transition from the "I" to unmarked I, a pre-subjective position that does not desire meaning. Pip's amputation from the *Pequod* and his subsequent fall into the ocean is precisely what makes him meaningless and socially incoherent. Pip gives definition to Melville's link between politics and episteme; social bounds deeply relate to epistemic bounds. The cadaver's critical antagonism evidences a relationship beyond the subject/object distinction: the subject/abject difference in which "the abject does not cease challenging his master" (Kristeva 2-3).

Despite his inability to find meaning and self-reflection in Pip, Ahab treats the man-rope as a possible relation of interpretation. The captain hopes to gain insight from his orphan, the

cadaver. Kristeva argues that the abject “is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object.” By not reflecting Ahab’s image, Pip disturbs the “identity, system, [and] order” of the *Pequod* (4). In fact, when Pip first emerges from the water and speaks of his posthumous, underwater observations, “his shipmates called him mad” (*Moby-Dick* 322). At first, Ahab cannot recognize the ship-keep’s state of abjection and assumes that Pip is but a pasteboard mask to interpret and appropriate. Hand-in-hand, the two descend to Ahab’s deck wherein the captain seeks to “suck most wondrous philosophies” from the corpse who must have encountered “some unknown conduits from the unknown worlds” (396). The captain’s ardent hunger for knowledge becomes an attempt to rationalize the abject as an object. Ahab’s assumption is to some degree correct. Pip’s incomprehensible ramblings bespeak an underwater, otherworldly knowledge precisely because Pip’s cadaver no longer has a world. He has fallen out of out of the socio-historical world built around the captain’s epistemic quest. Much like the scientist or theologian that examines the corpse for meaning, Ahab seeks to strike through a dead body.

Ahab thus regards Pip as a sublime object. For the captain, the interpretive impasse only implies a challenge to surmount the wondrous unknown. Ahab construes Pip similarly to how he views Moby Dick. The deified, omnipotent whale exemplifies the awe-inspiring force of nature which recurrently represents the sublime. Yet, Ahab wants to overcome the natural force and appropriate its innate, hidden truth. Philosopher Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* argues that the cause of delightful pain is the sublime (123). Considering the sublime can “suffer all the parts of our bodies to fall into a relaxation,” for its grandness is overwhelming, Burke suggests that purposive encounters with the sublime, what he calls “exercise,” is a means to surmount the “melancholy, dejection, [and]

despair” often caused by sublime objects (122). Burke privileges a subject’s mastery over objects even when those objects are magnificent while considering exercise as remedial.

Burke’s remedial exercise explains why Ahab views pasteboard masks as salves to his own affliction. When Ahab tells Pip that “Like cures like; and for this hunt [of Moby Dick], my malady becomes my most desired health,” the captain discloses quite a bit about his character. Freeburg believes that the first clause in this statement “demonstrates the potential Pip offers as a friend and collaborator” (Freeburg 55). However, the man-rope is not a platonic relation of mutual recognition. In fact, the relationship is an antagonism. Instead, “like cures like” relates to the corporeal. On one hand, Pip once reluctantly identified as part of Ahab’s body. Pip “is not an ‘other’ for [Ahab].” In the boy’s fall, The *Pequod* “expels” and “abjects” itself in Pip (Kristeva 3). Conversely, both characters to some degree endure what Kristeva calls an “inaugural loss that [lays] the foundations of...being” (5). Ahab loses his leg; Pip loses his “I.” Both privations ground the characters. Such loss is the reason why cadaver repeatedly reminds the *Pequod* that what was once Pip is now missing (*Moby-Dick* 362). The reader of *Moby-Dick* experiences Ahab’s story *in medias res* after the inaugural encounter with the eponymous whale. The encounter between Ahab and the whale, which happens before the start of Ishmael’s tale, grounds the second clause of Ahab’s statement. Freeburg correctly interprets the second clause as existential. Ahab’s malady, according to Freeburg, renders him “a slave to his own desire to acquire mastery” (Freeburg 55). Using Pip’s words, Ahab wants to unscrew his own navel.

Paradoxically, Pip is both cynical of the drive to master and considerate of his own rejection in that process. Ahab alleges that the process of interpretation, grounded by a subject/object distinction, is a mode of self-reflection. Markedly, Kristeva sets abjection against “narcissism,” or the “regression to a position set back from the other.” The subject stands as

fulcrum to the process, and occupying the subject position doubles as setting oneself against the objective. Interpretation is thus “centripetal.” Pip recognizes Ahab and the *Pequod*’s narcissism and questions their desire to unscrew their navels, or rather, complete the interpretive/appropriative process. Completion of the interpretive/appropriative process does not inherently cure Ahab’s desire to master. After all, the *Pequod* itself was an object of Ahab’s will to master. Pip, as abject, is “narcissistic crisis” in that he views narcissism with “reproachful jealousy” (Kristeva 14). The orphan is upset at his abandonment. The corpse both stultifies Ahab and his narcissistic crew but also recurrently pleads Ahab to “use [him]” to replace the captain’s “one lost leg” (*Moby-Dick* 399). Pip’s undead cadaver tries to re-incorporate himself into the *Pequod* to no avail.

More significantly, Pip’s aim at replacing the captain’s severed leg bespeaks an interest in annulling Ahab’s narcissism. The boy’s haunting of the *Pequod* shifts Ahab’s attention from his obsession, an oceanic Other, to Pip, an abjected self. Pip’s presence, in other words, “[clouds] the waters of Narcissus” (Kristeva 15). The undead boy is a negative distraction from the task to kill Moby Dick, and Ahab ultimately realizes that the crux of their relationship. In Pip’s final chapter, “The Cabin,” Ahab once again abandons the abjected boy for he recognizes the boy’s annulling effect. Instead of re-incorporating the Black boy, the captain proudly stands on his ivory peg. Cameron argues that, despite Ahab’s injunctions that Pip and him share a similar insanity, the undead’s curse “very antithesis of [Ahab’s] own, and in guarded recognition of the difference Ahab knows that in his attraction to Pip lies the danger of its dissipation” (Cameron 20). Ahab chooses to relegate Pip by screwing him into the captain’s “screwed chair” (*Moby-Dick* 399). As Ahab ascends the stairs to the ship’s deck and his inevitable destruction, Pip role plays as the *Pequod*’s helm and enacts the captain’s lordship. After asking an imaginary crew if

they have seen “poor Pip,” the corpse digresses to a knowing, bittersweet toast: “shame upon all cowards” (400)! Abjected and orphaned again, the corpse misses the mark in dismantling Ahab’s project.

Nevertheless, Melville’s Black cadaver, shown Wisdom’s treasures, proves to be the ignored, spectral witness of Ahab’s fraught narcissism. Noticing Ahab’s ivory footsteps on the deck above him, Pip cries that he is “down-hearted when [Ahab] walks over [him].” Such is the despondency of the abject, the thrown-away, the radically separated. Pip’s posthumous goal is to have Ahab abject himself. If Ahab rebukes his own epistemic quest, he in turn rebukes his subjective position and returns to a pre-subjective state nor longer jeopardized by his need to master. Notably, Pip maintains his critical relationship with the captain. Screwed to Ahab’s chair, Pip knowingly claims that “[t]here [he]’ll stay, though this stern strikes rocks; and they bulge through; and oysters come to join me” (400). Pip’s final, apocalyptic words denote his ceaseless devotion to the subject/object relationship, the man-rope between the captain and the cadaver. Moreover, Pip remains the true witness of Ahab’s narcissism as opposed to the final orphan of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael himself. “Orphan,” the final word in Melville’s opus, refers to the narrator of Ahab’s escapades. The *Rachel*, a ship searching for missing children, picks up Ishmael. Markedly, it is Ishmael who carries on Ahab’s narcissism in his cetologies by reinforcing the objective study long after *Moby Dick* obliterates the *Pequod*. Although Ahab had many creations, Pip was his Monster and his abject.

### **Babo: Melville’s Silent Leader**

Melville’s invocations of Blackness always-already double as indications of transatlantic slavery. In her seminal work of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison argues that “in the construction of blackness and

enslavement could be found not only the not-free, but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me.” Morrison points to the inextricable relation between the object and the unfree in the American imagination. To re-invoke Stubb’s claim of Pip’s cost, *Moby-Dick*’s cadaver represents both one abjected from a Kantian subjectivity and one commodified as chattel. Melville however directly relates the construction of Blackness and slavery in his short story “Benito Cereno.” The slave revolt narrative directly engages interpretation through the lens of Captain Amasa Delano and the plight of slavery by way of Babo’s Napoleonesque figure. Whereas Melville captures the abject, critical aspect of Blackness through Pip, Babo exemplifies an objectified Blackness as a kind of memetic subterfuge. Morrison notes that the invention of “American Africanism,” the attempt at objectifying Blackness in the wake of the slave trade, was a “fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American” (Morrison 38). Babo’s active and deceitful portrayal of American Africanism posits him as the conniving Shadow, the patriarchal figure that looms and haunts over the *San Dominick*’s architecture.

Notably, Babo is as dead as Pip. Babo’s social incoherence is bound up in his subjection. Since its publishing, Orlando Patterson’s *Social Death and Slavery* has been the primary text in analyzing how slavery takes the form of “domination” via “desocialization” (Patterson 337). The commodification and forced servitude that constitutes chattel slavery sets the slave outside the realm of the *socius*; there is no *polis*, or political community, between a lord and bondsman. Moreover, as Freeburg argues, social death is a condition that is “wrapped up in law, culture, and ideology” (Freeburg 100). Thereby, slavery is natal and terminal; escaping slavery once one is a slave is a harrowing ordeal. Emancipation is never quite emancipation as slavery lives on in the social, legal, and scientific framework of a society once afflicted with slavery. Pip’s potential

subjection lives on in Stubb's political and economic imagination. Delano, in his dealings with Babo and his hostage Don Benito Cereno, notes Babo's seeming "fidelity" to Cereno. On that note, the American captain claims his "envy [for] such a friend; slave [he] cannot call him." Melville's speaker denotes Cereno and Babo as "master and man;" however, no amount of fraternity changes the material reality of Babo's social death ("Benito Cereno" 2414). Babo, along with the slaves of the *San Dominick*, haunt the ship as the living dead.

Delano's preconceptions as he boards the ghost ship ground the terror of Melville's slave revolt narrative. As the captain witnesses the image of "four oakum-pickers" and "six hatchet-polishers," the welcoming band of the *San Dominick*, the narration describes their actions as "the peculiar love in negroes of uniting industry with pastime...clash[ing] their hatchets together, like cymbals" (2409). Although the narration does not come from Delano directly, the narration follows the American captain's perspective closely and does not stray from its purview. Instead of considering the Black armed men as threatening, Delano rationalizes their presence as diligent yet festive. When the American notes Babo's attendance to the frail Cereno's bodily needs, such as acting as a crutch, the narrator notes how Babo's "affectionate zeal...transmutes into something filial or fraternal acts in themselves but menial" (2410). Instead of regarding Babo's attendance as surveillance, the narration suggests that Delano can only envision Cereno's servant as servile. Most fascinating is the American's opinion of Don Cereno. Despite Cereno's frailty and urbane attire, Delano believes that "the most savage energies might be couched" in a man whose "aspect [is] infantile weakness" (2420). The captain finds the dual "spectacle of fidelity...and confidence" between Cereno and Babo suspicious; however, he believes that the sickly captain must truly be the brain behind their relationship (2414). Throughout the story,



Delano reads whiteness and blackness through the dichotomy of intelligence and noble servanthood.

Embedded in Delano's perspective on the servile nature of slaves is a commitment to the constitutive force behind Black subjection: the commodification of the body. "Benito Cereno" retains Melville's attention to the corporeal subject. When faced with the scene of Cereno chastising Atufal, a seeming "mutineer" aboard the *San Dominick*, the American captain "survey[s], not without a mixture of admiration, the colossal form of the negro" (2418). In this survey, Delano objectifies the form of Atufal as sublime. Burke notes that "there is a wider difference between admiration and love, [and] the sublime which is the cause of the former, always dwells on great objects, and terrible." However, Burke is wrong in his subsequent statement that "we submit to what we admire" (Burke 103). Submission is not in the cards for the Delano. The power that undergirds his admiration is that of a non-slave. Delano, in fact, presents himself as a potential slave owner in After witnessing the fidelity and confidence between Cereno and Babo, the American captain offers fifty doubloons to which Babo responds that "Master wouldn't part with Babo for a thousand doubloons" ("Benito Cereno" 2424). Delano's admiration of Atufal's frame and Babo's assiduousness is market valorization. His mode of objectification is sizing up the market worthiness of the slaves. If Delano can be typified as the epitomized subject of "Benito Cereno," then his subjectivity is directed towards finance capital.

The captain cannot fathom an evil connived by the slaves as they are, in his eyes, naturally servile. Delano's suspicions of Cereno return when the Spanish captain withdraws himself out of "indisposition" and leaves the American captain with his thoughts. Delano considers the possibility that his excuse was "but a pretense" for the maturation of some conniving plot against him. Such uncertainties recall the fact that Cereno praises the slaves while

censuring his own white crew. The faint possibility that Benito Cereno was “in complicity with the blacks” plagues his mind, but he recoils at the thought because the slaves were “too stupid” whereas “whites...by nature were the shrewdest race” (2428). Melville symbolizes Delano’s conundrum in the following scene wherein an old slave presents a Gordian knot to the captain who is urged to undo it while the slaves, including Atufal, preside over him (2429). Melville helps establish the detective story in the frame of the American Gothic. However, the conundrum his detective encounters is the trappings of his own white supremacy. The entire crew and cargo of the *San Dominick* present Delano with a Gordian knot, a kind of pasteboard mask, of which his mode of interpretation fails.

Delano’s mode of white supremacy is a racialized epistemic superiority that occludes his perspective and ultimately endangers him. Philosopher Charles Mills speaks of such epistemic conceit in his essay, “White Ignorance.” Mills construes ignorance as a “cognitive phenomenon” that refers to both “false belief and absence of true belief” (Mills 232-3). Delano’s cognitive barrier obstructs him from considering Black cunning. A will to believe in epistemic white supremacy surmounts all the evidence to the contrary. His reflections on the “peculiarity” and contradictions of the *San Dominick*, which include a slave boy’s homicide of a Spanish boy and the “trampling of [a Spanish] sailor by two negroes,” lead back to the culpability of Cereno. If there is a schemer, it must be the Spaniard, a word that Delano reads as “curious, conspirator, [and] Guy-Fawkish” (“Benito Cereno” 2431). Not knowing the mysteries that undergird the *San Dominick* and presuming that Cereno contrives all the secrecy constitute the captain’s ignorance. The American captain underestimates the epistemic agency of the slaves to the extent of a priori absolutism. To Delano, cabalistic knowledge cannot exist in the mind of the naturally servile, and the slaves’ stupidity renders such calculation improbable.

In “Benito Cereno,” white ignorance only serves to tighten a Gordian knot of which an unraveling is always belated. Wishing to curb Delano’s curiosity, Babo diverts the investigation of the *San Dominick* into a small “deck-cabin” called the “cuddy” wherein he wishes to shave Cereno. The cuddy episode illustrates how white ignorance begets self-sabotage. As Babo beckons Cereno to sit in the cuddy’s salon chair, the American captain reflects on how Black slaves are suited for hairdressing, and he finds it pleasing “to behold” and “to be the manipulated subject of” the Black hairstylist. Delano signifies Blackness with the qualities of “cheerfulness,” harmony, “docility,” “unaspiring contentment of a limited mind, and “susceptibility of blind attachment.” He considers how his treatment of even “free men of color” relates to how “other men” relate to “Newfoundland dogs” (2435). The idea of the happy, servile Blackness is at the core of Delano’s white ignorance. Under these terms, Blackness is neither reflective nor human. The relationship between Delano and a Black person, free or not, is asymmetric; white men function as natural masters whereas the Black person is canine, white man’s best friend. When Babo’s “razor draws blood” to further digress Delano’s investigation, the Spanish captain is horrified whereas the American captain questions his theory of Cereno’s deception. Unbeknownst to the detective, the aspect of Babo’s manipulated subject expresses a terror much like James I, the object of Guy Fawkes’s gunpowder plot (2436-7). The detective mistakes the conspirator for the servant, captive for the pirate. Delano’s racialized conceit disables him from witnessing the revolt occurring in front of him. The American captain ultimately learns that Cereno, the “plotting pirate,” is but a pawn. The captain’s “long benighted mind” realizes that the servant holds both his former master and Delano captive aboard the *San Dominick* (2446-7). Delano’s white ignorance traps him aboard a ship in revolt.

Markedly, white ignorance is the cause of the *San Dominick's* revolution. Following Delano's rescue of Cereno from Babo and procurement of the surviving cargo, Melville discloses Cereno's testimony of the events leading up to the American's investigation. Cereno identifies the aristocratic Don Alexandro Aranda as the original proprietor of the *San Dominick's* cargo. Cereno claims that Aranda did not fetter his slaves as "they were all tractable." Seven days later after the ship left port, the slaves revolted (2451). Whether conceived by Delano or Aranda, the tractable assessment proves false. Interpreting Blackness as inherently obeisant, both men blind themselves from imminent revolution. Melville reveals in both characters the fraught, self-destructive conceit of white ignorance. White ignorance marginalizes other races and crafts a misguided hierarchy of races that distorts reality. Both interpreter and interpreted are subject to the failures of a faulty, prejudiced episteme.

Babo capitalizes on the cognitive barrier that white ignorance produces. Cereno indicates that Babo led the *San Dominick* revolt with Atufal at his right hand (2452). Subjected to the false conceits of white ignorance, the Black revolutionary understands the stereotypes that delimit his existence. Charles Mills argues that "white ignorance is not limited to white people" (234). Slaves' uptake of white episteme can serve to inform their behavior and interpretations. Babo thereby performs the idea of Blackness as noble servitude. He employs this façade to covertly undermine the American captain. Notably, he succeeds in this charade. Delano only discovers Babo's intentions after the insurgent drops the act and attacks Cereno (2447). Melville's detective never solves his case because he cannot. Babo connives within the captain's blind-spot, his epistemic conceit. Instead of annulling interpretation as Pip does, Babo weaponizes the faulty epistemology of white ignorance. More accurately, Babo adapts his own saintly epistemic position into a violent means. "Gifted with second-sight" by white ignorance, Babo "see[s]

himself through the revelation of the other world...through the eyes of others.” In his classic theory of Blackness, *The Souls of Black Folk*, William Edward Burghart Du Bois conceptualizes such “double-consciousness” as the plight of the Black American (*Souls* 8). Melville exemplifies double-consciousness in the trickster Babo who makes use of his second-sight for revolutionary ends.

A weaponized double-consciousness challenges the epistemic world from which it derives. Du Bois posits the Atlantic Ocean as the historic source of Blackness and its associated stereotypes. From the “death ship,” Du Bois’s phrase for the slave ship, “and the curving river” emerges the “sincere and passionate belief that...between men and cattle, God created a *tertium quid*, and called it a Negro” (63). Just as Delano treats his Black peers as dogs, white ignorance historically sets the Blackness outside the realm of human. The epistemic distinction between Black and white persons extends from such an ontological difference. Thereby, when Patterson speaks to the social death, he implies what may be considered the epistemic death of the slave. Divorced from the *socius*, the enslaved subject in turn loses epistemic agency, or any capacity to be a shrewd interpreter or producer of knowledge. Melville’s intertextual link between interpretation and mastery suggests a fugitive, underside connection between objectification/abjection and slavery. As the speaker in Du Bois’s “The Souls of White Folk,” Babo is “singularly clairvoyant” of white episteme; in fact, double-consciousness gives him the upper hand in the match of wits between him and Delano: the ability to “know [white folks’] thoughts” (*Darkwater* 29). Second-sighted, Babo checkmates Delano. However, the minute he drops his ruse, Babo loses out to American brute force. Embodying the thought of Black obeisance, Melville’s Black rebel deflects the violence of white ignorance back to its representatives, Delano and Aranda.

Despite his capture, Babo refuses interpretive arrest with silence. There was a disproportion between the strength of his body and his mind. When realizing that his body was bound, Babo “uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words.” Willfully silent in a moment of capture, Babo expresses no speech that might be used against him in the courts of legal history. His resistance against forced speech is the final and definitive revolt. Read alongside the insurgent’s subversion of white ignorance, silence becomes another means of disrupting interpretation. When the tribunal judges urge Cereno to testify on Babo’s regard, the Spanish captain “refuses” and then “faints.” Babo’s “legal identity” amounts to the testimonies of the rescued sailors; Cereno refuses to act beyond his role as a deponent in the original revolt and Delano’s arrival (“Benito Cereno” 2460-1). The events aboard the *San Dominick* during the reign of Babo go unrecorded by both Babo and Cereno. Babo’s terror frightens Cereno to the point of silence. Acting as a silent impasse, the insurgent serves to sustain a gap of knowledge in the Spanish courts.

Employing subterfuge and silence, Babo succeeds where Pip fails by having Cereno abject himself. After the events aboard the *San Dominick*, Delano wonders why his Spanish friend has not recovered from his timidity and sickness. To the question “What has cast such a shadow upon you,” Cereno answers: “the negro” (2460). The Spanish deposition recounts Babo’s installation of a new social arrangement aboard the *San Dominick* yet it does not actually detail the tenure of his rule. Instead, Cereno retells how Babo substitutes the ship’s figure-head, a statue of Christopher Columbus, with the skeleton of his former master, Don Aranda. Babo’s warning to Cereno, a pivotal moment of terror, is that the Spaniard will “follow [his] leader” if he failed in “keep[ing] faith with the blacks” (2453) Epistemically, Aranda’s substitute in Melville’s story is Captain Delano who represents an ineffectual white ignorance. Cereno’s

prolonged condition and refusal to speak to neither Spanish notary nor judge suggests another fate for the wan captain. Cereno's sickness and refusal to speak are inextricably linked—as he faints whenever asked clarifying questions about Babo or his reign. The Spanish captain has a kind of allergic reaction to interpretation and white episteme. Aboard the *San Dominick* during Babo's rule, the man cannot willfully ignore Babo's aggressive wit nor the intelligent prospects of Blackness. When Babo met “his voiceless end” at the hand of the Spanish government, Cereno “follow[s] his leader,” and his body sits “borne on the bier” (2461). Both definitions of “bear” ought to be raised: the bier supports Cereno's corpse and a new abjected Cereno comes to existence (“bear, v.1”). Regardless of whether the Spaniard desires his shattered state, Cereno follows his Black leader in rebellious silence and death.

### **Concluding Notes**

The presence of Melville's Black undead, Pip and Babo, disturbs the order that brings them into being. The cadaver and the insurgent recognize, halt, and exploit interpretation as a design for arresting truth. The drowned monster struggles to submerge his creator, and the revolutionary succeeds in epistemically subverting white ignorance. Both cases of the abject bespeak an upheld, carried out oblivion. In his essay “The Social Life of Social Death,” theoretician of Blackness Jared Sexton argues that “the most radical negation of the antiblack world is the most radical affirmation of a blackened world” (37). Both Pip and Babo in their rejection and attempted ruin of white narcissist episteme cast a shadow upon Melville's nautical worlds. Pip and Babo represent the aporetic aspect of abjection. They illustrate a Blackness that emerges within and shatters a frame of interpretive mastery. The Black corpses blackened, symbolically neutral affect benights and blinds the narcissist. The two haunts work to breakdown the subject/object distinction and return subjects to presubjective positions. No matter the social

arrangement or multi-culture, the historic implications of Blackness persist in the mere drive to master. Pip and Babo, abject orphans, seek to reduce the system to ashes.

Melville's second-sighted witnesses of white narcissism demonstrate that the history of chattel slavery will always return to cast its shadow. Writing his novels before the Civil War, Melville posits chattel slavery as the historic component of the American Gothic as opposed to Nathaniel Hawthorne's suggestion, Puritan Christianity. Markedly, Melville's stories implicate all European nations complicit in the transatlantic slave trade. In Article 14 of the 1805 Constitution, Haiti, the Gothic Nation which inspires "Benito Cereno," mandates that "all acception of color...cease;" instead, "the Haytians shall henceforth be known by the generic appellation of Blacks" ("Constitution of Hayti (1805)"). Although the Haitians claim to reject color, instead of replacing the categories of race with what might today be called color-blindness, the new nation instead blackens the world. Blackening the world is futurist. Melville's aporetic abjects pursue creative destruction. The fugitive, cadaverous agents of Blackness are both aporia and architect. Pip and Babo darken the waters in which they are born. The stone that the builders refuse obliterate the house.



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