

Mimicking Black, Fashioning White:
The Spectacular of Slavery in “Benito Cereno”

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*“I am a man, and what I have to recapture is the whole past of the world.
I am not responsible solely for the revolt in Santo Domingo.”*

Frantz Fanon

One of the most striking moments in “Benito Cereno” is when Amasa Delano asks Benito Cereno, “What has cast such a shadow upon you?” Cereno’s response is awfully simple: “The negro” (116), and then follows silence. This “negro” is totally different from what negro is in the American’s mind. What is contrasted in this scene is “Don Benito’s moral collapse” and “Delano’s moral obtuseness” (Stuckey 169). For Delano, the negro is nothing but “the most pleasing body servant in the world” with “a certain cheerfulness” who is “too stupid” to organize any conspiracy (52, 83, 75). Delano’s eloquence in articulating the negro depends on the conventional racist vocabulary of the time. Benito Cereno, however, never really clarifies what the negro is even after the rebellion is subdued. Just as the legal deposition silences Babo, the shadow of the “negro” smothers Benito Cereno. Don Benito’s reticence about race demonstrates that the blackness of the “negro” implies the horrible absence of the signified and at the same time is filled with numerous ambivalent meanings, as the whiteness of the whale suggests “the visible absence of color” as well as “the concrete of all colors” (*Moby-Dick* 175).

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon simultaneously defines and deconstructs the distinction between the Negro and the white by oddly and intentionally splitting a sentence: “The Negro is not. Any more than the white man” (231). Both the absolute otherness of the Negro in “the world of

the You" and the unavoidable interdependency of black and white are condensed in the unconventional period in the midst of the sentence (232). What Fanon tries to eliminate here is the hierarchy between black and white, which always already forces the existence of the Negro to be marginal and inferior: "It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world. / Superiority? Inferiority? / Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?" (231) Because of his ineluctable doubt upon the hierarchical tension between black and white, Fanon's black self cannot be stable and thus requires to be recaptured and reexamined. Whenever he asks who he is, he is obliged to question the mechanism of racial identities.

It may seem precipitate to juxtapose Herman Melville, a Caucasian American writer in the nineteenth century, with Frantz Fanon, a black psychiatrist and political activist who was born in Martinique, educated in France, and naturalized in Algeria in the twentieth century. But both of them are haunted by the same disgraceful past. By naming the slave ship "the San Dominick," which never fails to remind us and the contemporary readers of the Haitian slave revolt in the Age of Revolution (Sundquist 140), and by putting a figure-head of Christopher Colon to the ship, Melville traces back the history of slavery from the discovery of the "New World." Though Fanon refuses to be "the slave of the Slavery," and to be "sealed away in the materialized Tower of the Past," he shows his inevitable obsession with the past by declaring, "I am a Negro, and tons of chains, storms of blows, rivers of expectoration flow down my shoulders" (226, 230).

Fanon's unusual interruption of the sentence somehow explains Benito Cereno's speechlessness after "The negro." Both of them are interrogating Negro's subjectivities. Homi K. Bhabha interprets the strange halt in the midst of the sentence, "The Negro is not. Any more than the white man," as follows: "That familiar alignment of colonial subjects—Black/White, Self/Other—is disturbed with one brief pause and the traditional grounds of racial identity are dispersed, whenever they are found to rest in the narcissistic myths of negritude or white cultural supremacy" (40). Both Fanon's conscious insertion of the disturbing cessation and Cereno's involuntary dumbness refuse to accept the

conventional stereotypes of black and white. Because of the censorship of the contemporary readers, it cannot be as eloquent and outspoken as when Fanon/Bhabha questions the familiar boundary of black and white, but “Benito Cereno” keeps asking its readers what the Negro is and who name it.

This essay examines the politics of racial identities in “Benito Cereno.” First of all, the complex threefold narrative structure will be analyzed to show that the form of the story tells the untold critique of slavery. Secondly, I will explain how the slaves contain and transgress the ideologies of racism both in the dramatization of racial relationships and in ridiculing scientific racism. Finally, focusing on the fatal transformation of Benito Cereno’s body and soul after he is forced to act “white,” I will argue that the diseased, wounded, and finally dead body of Benito Cereno represents not only the unsubstantiality of white supremacy but also the tormented body and deprived subjectivity of black slaves.

The peculiar narrative structure of “Benito Cereno” is inseparably intertwined with its critique of racism. It is the form, not the story itself, which does speak: the ways that the story stutters, hesitates to end, and fails to unveil the truth, demonstrate how both timely and outdated to deal with race and slavery in the middle of nineteenth century because slavery had implicitly kept threatening the ideals of freedom and democracy of the United States since 1776, and the heated discussions of abolitionists began to make the deception of the country explicit and push it towards the Civil War. Even now, as Toni Morrison points out, “‘race’ is still a virtually unspeakable thing” (3). “Benito Cereno” is Melville’s bold attempt to narrate the unspeakable thing through the elaborate tactics of reticence.

Most part of the story is told from the perspective of the American Captain, Amasa Delano. It is ironic that this most eloquent section in the narrative informs us the least of what is happening on the San Dominick. Delano’s failure to pierce the mutiny is ascribed to his “singularly undistrustful good nature” and “benevolent heart” which cannot believe “the imputation of malign evil in man” (47). However, as Dennis Pahl rightly puts it, “on another level one might understand this ‘blindness’ more in terms of Delano’s desire *not to see*, that is, to repress anything that might undermine the stability of the historical world with which he is most familiar. . . : the world that privileges his identity as ‘American,’ ‘captain,’ ‘white,’ and ‘civilized’” (174). Delano’s insight reaches an impasse every time he encounters something that transcends his stereotypical

view on races. If Delano represents the common sense of contemporary American readers, his obtuseness could be interpreted as a biting criticism of readers themselves though they would not be astute enough to find it.

After the suppression of the slave rebellion, the unidentified narrator, who is curiously distanced from Melville and the story itself, interrupts Delano's discourse to place the deposition of Benito Cereno, expecting that it will "shed light on the preceding narratives" and "reveal the true port of departure and true history of the San Dominick's voyage" (103). The official documents, however, obviously take on unreliable appearances as they are translation from Spanish, not the full text but extracts, and the testimony of Cereno cannot be verified as evidence without support from other sailors' depositions: "Some disclosures therein were, at the time, held dubious *for both learned and natural reasons*. The tribunal inclined to the opinion that the deponent, not undisturbed in his mind by recent events, raved of some things which could never have happened" (103 emphasis added). This passage suggests that Benito Cereno's testimony is delivered under the pressure of legal ideology: the tribunal believes it *learnedly and naturally* impossible for the black slaves to be intelligent enough to plot and carry out the mutiny because they are *scientifically* proved to be inferior and thus *naturally* apt to be slaves.

Before adding a fragment of narrative in the end, the narrator makes an ambiguous comment on the deposition: "If the Deposition have served as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it, then, as a vault whose door has been flung back, the San Dominick's hull lies open to-day" (114). The metaphor of a lock and key reminds us of the padlock of chained Atufal and the key hung from Don Benito's neck, which exhibits, in Delano's words, "significant symbols" (63). For Delano, who is "a man of such native simplicity as to be incapable of satire or irony," the lock and key represents "the Spaniard's singularly evidenced lordship over the black" (63). As Atufal's chains turn out to be dropped in a moment without any key, the lock and key do not symbolize but caricature the white man's control over the Black. The deposition as a key should certainly be read as "satire or irony," too. The deposition does not ease the complications of the story nor let the San Dominick's hull lie open. The discourses of dominant ideology never reveal the truth of slavery and racism.

Is the last passage, which is "irregularly given" and to "conclude the account,"

supposed to be the key, then? It is supposed to open not only the door or a “vault” of St. Bartholomew’s church, where Benito Cereno sleeps, to elucidate the mystery of his death but also the San Dominick’s hull to reveal the reality of the slave ship. If the San Dominick’s hull lies open, we might see what Hortense J Spillers calls mass of undifferentiated slaves as “quantities”: “[T]he slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, not ‘counted’ / ‘accounted,’ or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure. Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into ‘account’ as *quantities*” (393). The slaves on the slave ship do not have subjectivities because they are cargo, counted by quantities, confined in the suffocating space. The deposition determines the legal identity of the slaves as a property of Alexandro Aranda. But we know that the slaves on the San Dominick are more than “quantities.”

Melville was fully aware of the complexity of slave agency. As Saidiya V. Hartman designates, the enslaved is “a subject who is socially dead and legally recognized as human only to the degree that he is criminally culpable” (24). Throughout the narrative, Melville let the slaves possess their subjectivities in a shrewd way; at first, as disguised loyal slaves in a masquerade who secretly seize control of the ship, and later, as “defiant” criminals who refuse to speak. As the masquerade constantly refers to the reality of slavery, it reveals that the slavery itself is a kind of masquerade by forcing the slaves (and even the white) to put on certain kind of masks. It is forbidden to enquire what is behind the masks.

As Eric Lott names the story of “Benito Cereno” “Melville’s version of the minstrel show,” what is enacted on the San Dominick can be seen as a dramatization of the politics of racism written, directed, and acted by slaves themselves. What is appreciated and ridiculed in it is not “black” culture but the myth of “white” supremacy and it is not based on love and theft but on hate and revenge. Instead of oversized and ragged Negro costumes, Don Benito wears costly apparel and a silver-mounted sword. For banjo, fiddle, castanets, and tambourine, the six hatchet-polishers “clashed their hatchets together, like cymbals, with a barbarous din,” and the four oakum-pickers chant with a “continuous, low, monotonous” tone (50).

The primary objective of the show is to make the audience, Captain Delano, believe

that nothing is happening on the vessel. The black mutineers put on the masks of docile and unwise slaves, and Don Benito is forced to wear a mask of dictatorial white. To deceive Delano, the script should follow the most stereotypical racial discourse of master and slave. What is striking about this drama is not how tightly it embraces the ideology of racism, but how boldly it transgresses the cultural expectation of races. According to Lott, "At every turn blackface minstrelsy has seemed a form in which transgression and containment coexisted, in which improbably threatening or startlingly sympathetic racial meanings were simultaneously produced and dissolved" (234). For the minstrelsy of the mutineers, transgression is not accidental but deliberate. It proves the outstanding cultural literacy of black slaves.

The contrast in dress of Babo and Benito strengthens Delano's impression of the beautiful spectacle of slave's "fidelity" and master's "confidence." While the Spaniard is wearing "a loose Chili jacket of dark velvet," "white small clothes and stockings, with silver buckles," "a high-crowned sombrero," and "a slender sword, silver-mounted," the servant is wearing "nothing but wide trousers, apparently, from their coarseness and patches, made out of some old topsail" (57). But as it turns out to be, "the dress so precise and costly" is not "willingly" put on by Cereno, and the "silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command," is not a sword, "but the ghost of one." It is Babo who conceals a real dagger in his shabby clothes. The contrastive costumes of Babo and Cereno contain as well as subvert the beautiful relationship of master and slave.

Another example of the containment and transgression would be the scene of barber. Seeing Babo preparing for shaving Cereno, the conventional image of slaves occurs to Delano: "Most negroes are natural valets and hairdressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castanets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction" (83). But the exquisite tableau of the servant helping the master grooming fissures when we notice that Babo makes use of the Spanish color as an apron. Though Delano is ignorant enough to interpret it as "an odd instance of the African love of bright colors and fine shows," it is nothing but a deliberate expression of the disrespect for the King and the country that holds slavery.

Thus in the rebellion, which is transformed into a masquerade of black and white, the slaves *re-present* races. "By overthrowing slavery and then staging it as a play, Babo has *conventionalized* the supposedly *natural* relations of master and slave" (Rogin 215,

emphasis mine). The highly literate slaves shrewdly conceal and reveal their outcry against slavery. And the black intelligence is condensed in the head of Babo, which is called "hive of subtlety" (116).

As Caroline Karcher astutely points out, "Not only does the entirety of 'Benito Cereno' give the lie to Delano's complacent reliance on the Negro's intellectual inferiority, but as some critics have recognized, Melville's portrayal of Babo as an almost disembodied brain—'his slight frame, inadequate to that which it held'—reverses the conventional racist stereotype of the Negro as all brown and no brain" (130). Physically Babo is frail enough to yield to "the superior muscular strength of his captor" (116). But the intellectual abilities epitomized in Babo's head surpass the interpretive skills of Caucasian Delano.

In the last scene, Babo's severed head is placed in the plaza. It is meant to be exposed to "the gaze of the whites" as the bodies of slaves and the poor have to suffer from indignities even after death. But the narrator's description of the head betrays the conventional cultural reading of a dead body of slave. Dead or alive, it is Cereno, not Babo, who continues to be under surveillance. As Franny Nudelman elucidates, "when Babo stares back, defiantly, it appears that he has not only survived the act of punishment but also thwarted the observer's desire to understand him" (54).

According to Nudelman, in nineteenth-century America, skulls of African Americans were used to prove their intellectual inferiority and thus to establish scientific racism. Babo's brain not only resists being an object of scientific observation, but also raises an objection against scientific racism itself. Substituting a skeleton of the slaveholder, Aranda, for the vessel's figure-head, the image of Christopher Colon, Babo asks Cereno whose skeleton it is, and whether he should not think it a white's judging from its whiteness (107). It is true that the cruel slaughter of the master reminds us of the stereotypical image of the savage custom, the practice of cannibalism, but here, Babo's inquiry about the correspondence between the color of the skeleton and its race is threatening all the more because it caricatures and ridicules the stupidity of pseudo-scientific racism based on the superficial observation of skulls. In this question, Babo forces Cereno to realize how groundless the racial hierarchy could be, and even reveals the interchangeability of races: once we pull the black/white skins off, the skull does not quite tell us whether it is that of black or white.

One of the major changes Melville made to the original story written by Amasa Delano is the characterization of the Spaniard, Benito Cereno. In Delano's narrative, after the revolt has been crushed, Cereno turns out to be a villain. He is reluctant to pay money to compensate for Delano's help and use "all his endeavors to delay the time of payment" (330). He treats the American with "so much dishonesty and ingratitude" (329). In Melville's story, however, after the rebellion, Cereno can never really recuperate from the shock and melancholia and finally perishes as if following the fate of Babo.

The shadow of the Negro cast upon Cereno does not vanish but looms over him. He becomes a mere shadow of his former self. Some critics interpret his fatal transformation at the end of the story as certain realization of moral responsibilities of the whites for slavery. John Haegert suggests that Benito Cereno's silence "indicates that he at least has some awareness that the institution of slavery is less a matter of law than of power—cruelly coercive and disproportionate power" (35). According to Eric J. Sundquist, "a majority have seen in those [legal] documents an approximation of the full moral burden of the story, a burden that Delano escapes and to which Benito Cereno succumbs in the muted finale" (179). Though Andrew Delbanco insists that it is "in Babo's silence, the story is told yet again—or, rather, eloquently untold" (242), I suppose that it is in Cereno's reticence (or his hesitation to speak), what Melville really wanted to disclose about slavery is told.

Melville lets Cereno's body speak for the critique of racism. Benito Cereno in his showy aristocratic attire with an empty scabbard not only embodies white ideology but also represents the pained body of black slaves. As Jason Richards indicates, "Cereno is blackened because he has been thoroughly enslaved, so much so that he becomes a kind of a symbol for slavery (85). Saidiya V. Hartman explains the mechanisms of how the enslaved black body is compelled to be a substitute for the white body: "[T]he fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion" (21). In the masquerade of slavery, Babo makes Cereno's white body an "empty vessel" open to the "projection" of Babo's "feelings, ideas, desires, and values." Babo realizes what Bhabha

calls “the fantasy of the native.” “The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master’s place while keeping his place in the slave’s *avenging anger*” (44). As a result of losing “the master’s place” and being immersed in “the slave’s avenging anger,” Benito Cereno cannot retrieve “the ideal ego that is white and whole” (76).

As Delbanco regards “the mirroring relation between oppressor and oppressed” as the theme of “Benito Cereno” (233), Benito Cereno becomes a double of Babo. Delbanco might go too far when he suggests “[w]hen the captain swoons against him, the black man half naked in skirtlike trousers cut from the topsail, the two conjoin in a kind of grotesque simulacrum of coitus” (234). But it is only the color of their skins which distinguishes between Cereno and Babo, who share age (around thirty), “hollowness,” and silence (64, 87, 104).

Because the “memory” of the illusion of white supremacy and of wounds and pains of the enslaved is carved on Benito Cereno’s body, and thus he became “human,” unlike Delano, Cereno cannot stop moralizing upon slavery, and is obliged to “follow his leader,” Babo, to death. In his search for the role of a postcolonial reader, Geoffrey Sanborn positively asserts that in describing Cereno’s death, Melville does not want his white readers to be like Delano nor Cereno, but “to learn how to live in a world where meaning is the product of ungrounded decisions, and where acts of illumination are always shadowed by the darkness they displace” (175). I have kept failing to discover, however, any redemption in the story. Cereno’s awareness of what the negro really is does not generate any empathy for the black slave in him. Melville’s despair at his country does not allow us to see any feasible solution to chattel slavery. As the Spanish government shuddered at potential intelligence of the black in the slave rebellion of Santo Domingo, Melville predicts that America is on the verge of political and moral collapse. Delano, whose ethical insensitivity clearly reflects Melville’s contemporary white readers, never recognizes that Cereno’s anguish will soon be his.

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