Lines, Knots, and Cyphers: Conceptions of History in the American Literature Survey
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Abstract: This essay reflects on successful methods, techniques, and assignment sequences that I have used in the first two weeks of the early American literature survey, questioning the ostensible linear development of an American literary and cultural history. I do so in order to open up a set of questions related to what Debra Madsen has called “exceptional destiny” and to introduce students to the stakes of theorizing the varied and often contested concepts of history. Although a number of scholars have effectively addressed issues related to anthology construction, canonicity, as well as chronology and coverage in teaching the American literature survey, none have linked these issues directly to the problem of American exceptionalism nor to questions regarding concepts of history. William Cullen Bryant's "The Prairies" and Herman Melville’s Benito Cereno serve as the principal literary texts, and I assign these works within the first week of class in order to introduce and model what it means to theorize history through literature.

Keywords: American Literature Survey, American Exceptionalism, Concepts of History, Herman Melville, Benito Cereno, William Cullen Bryant, "The Prairies."

Captain Delano crossed over to him, and stood in silence surveying the knot; his mind, by a not ungenial transition, passing from its own entanglements to those of the hemp. For intricacy such a knot he had never seen in an American ship, or indeed any other.

Herman Melville, Benito Cereno (1550)

With whom does historicism actually sympathize? The answer is inevitable: with the victor.

Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" (391)

This, in fact, is equivalent to a survey, in time, of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day.

Thomas Jefferson, 1824 letter to William Ludlow (Dekker 81-82)

Introduction: The Survey in the Shadows American Exceptionalism

The survey remains one of the principle means by which colleges and universities introduce students to the discipline of literary studies. Although effective at familiarizing students with a broad range of genres, aesthetic movements, modes of reading, and historical periods, the American literature survey elicits a number of questions: How much should students read?
In what sequence? What texts should the course include? Or exclude? How should periodization dictate the historical framework? In a literature course focused primarily on the United States, what makes American literature "American"? These questions concern not only design and execution, praxis and pedagogy, they gesture to broader and highly-fraught lines of inquiry within literary scholarship, particularly those efforts over the last two decades to critically identify and further theorize the legacy of American exceptionalism and—for our purposes in this essay—the degree to which the American literature course qua survey perpetuates, intentionally or not, what Deborah Madsen has referred to as the concept of "exceptional destiny" (Madsen 2).

By this category, Madsen draws attention to the foundational meta-narratives of "election" inaugurated by the Puritan worldviews of the Massachusetts Bay colonists. As an "elect" or chosen people, "they were charged with a special spiritual and political destiny: to create in the New World a church and a society that would provide the model for all the nations" (Madsen 1). Perpetuated by such figures as Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch, among others, scholarship within the field of American studies, Madsen contends, has often focused on the Puritan "errand in the wilderness" in order to "describe the development of American cultural identity from Puritan origins to the present"—further ensconcing within American literary scholarship and pedagogy the discourse of exceptionalism as a "form of interpretation with its own language and logic" (Madsen 2).

Following Madsen, Donald Pease has recently elaborated on the scope and various instantiations of American exceptionalism, what he remarks as a problematically deep-seated and "lasting belief in America as the fulfillment of the national ideal to which other nations aspire" (Pease 7), and he specifically traces out its influence on U.S. cultural and political realities, the U.S.’s vision of its place in the world, extending from the Cold War to our current
post-9/11 moment. "American exceptionalism," he writes, has been taken to mean that America is "distinctive" (meaning merely different), or "unique" (meaning anomalous), or "exemplary" (meaning a model for other nations to follow), or that it is "exempt" from the laws of historical progress (meaning that it is an "exception" to the laws and rules governing the development of other nations) (Pease 9).

Madsen’s and Pease’s characterization of exceptionalist discourse offers a helpful starting point for scholars, instructors, as well as students—especially as they learn to interrogate American exceptionalism as an interpretive frame "for the understanding of American events" (Pease 7). Recalling their works, my aim here is to address orders of historicism manifest within not only the content of an early American literature course but within the construction of the survey itself, particularly as the survey organizes and presents a literary history that begins in the early seventeenth-century British colonies (or with Christopher Columbus) and culminates with the U.S. Civil War.¹

A term that derives etymologically from "supervision" or the Latin supervidere, meaning to see (-videre) over or from above (super-), the survey, I suggest, obliges teacher-scholars to ask, further, what it means to view, study, and participate in an order of knowledge, an American literary history, from such a vantage point. In other words, how does an institutional practice of the discipline along with its pedagogical methods in the classroom, on the one hand, re-instantiate what critics of American literary and cultural studies, on the other, have attempted recently to dismantle? To answer this question, my aim over the past few years in teaching American literature has been to view the survey as not merely a curricular obligation or pedagogical method but also as an object of study. That is, I have attempted to examine the

¹ For other works addressing the topic of American exceptionalism, see Ashley Dawson and Malina Johar Schueller, eds. Exceptional State: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the New Imperialism (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).
survey as an order of knowledge (a way of producing and transferring knowledge) legitimated by institutional structures. To carry out that aim and to have some effect in the classroom whereby students are able to participate in this reflective work and understand better the institutions that shape them as subject-citizens (or non-citizens), I introduce them to various theoretical materials, juxtaposing readings in order to engage in critical comparative analysis of historical moments and the various concepts of history that shape and are shaped by literature.

While the survey traditionally presupposes a chronology of events and literary works modeled on the arrangement of texts within various anthologies—beginning often with British colonial writers such as John Smith, William Bradford, and John Winthrop, among others, or with early-modern works of exploration and colonization of the New World by figures such as Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci—each of these origination points can reinforce a notion of historicism that is linear and continuous. To be clear, teaching the survey as chronology does not equate necessarily to a support of American exceptionalism. In fact, teacher-scholars may address the myths and forms of exceptionalism that these early European writers projected onto the New World, its spaces and people, regardless of the sequence in which the materials are taught. I suggest, however, that a stronger and conscious critique of exceptionalism can be made when professors and students are better able to theorize chronology, continuity, and linearity. If we take seriously Walter Benjamin's characterization of "historicism"—a concept of history that appears as a "a chain of events" which obfuscates or mystifies the practices of barbarism and refuses to acknowledge the "wreckage" and "catastrophe" of human material realities—we can begin to introduce students to the ways in

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2 On juxtapositions and broader concerns about American literary history, see Jonathan Elmer’s "Response to Jonathan Arac." Focusing on a tangential but equally important topic, see Laura L. Aull’s "Students Creating Canons: Rethinking What (and Who) Constitutes the Canon."
which a survey of literature potentially sympathizes "with the victors" and, therefore, offer a set of counter histories and ways of reading literature (Benjamin 391-392).

Along with fulfilling the requisites for a degree in English, the surveys in American, British, as well as World literature at my university also satisfy particular general education requirements, and so students enroll in these courses with different motivations and arrive with various levels of preparation for and exposure to reading and writing about literature. The diverse student population at my institution—located in and serving a high percentage of students from the San Joaquin Valley in California—affords an important, even an outsider's, perspective for interrogating a body of U.S. literature that arises ostensibly out of a New England cultural and political setting. Students often readily admit that the geographical and historical markers of early American literature are completely foreign to them. I therefore spend a significant amount of time and attention in the survey recalling the economic, political, and historical linkages between the two coasts, noting how, from the earliest moments of the Republic, figures such as Timothy Dwight, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and numerous others looked west for continued expansion and influence over the continent and the greater Pacific region. And while many students may have heard of or read Walt Whitman's poetry, I remind them of how Whitman's aesthetics was entangled in a politics that celebrated notions of Manifest Destiny. As "Song of the Redwood-Tree" and other works make clear, the annexation of California accompanies a potentially extensive ordering of the globe: Whitman's description of the "swarming and busy race settling and organizing everywhere" coincides with a celebration of "Ships coming in from the whole round world, and going out the whole world, / To India and China and Australia and the thousand island paradises of the Pacific" (Whitman 354).

In what follows, I reflect on successful methods, specific techniques, and assignment sequences I have used in the first two weeks of the survey, turning and twisting the ostensible
linear development of an American literary and cultural history so as to open up a set of
questions related to "exceptional destiny" and to introduce students to the stakes of theorizing
the varied and often contested concepts of history. Although a number scholars have effectively
addressed issues related to anthology construction (David Damrosh 2001; Paul Lauter 2003;
Jonathan Elmer 2008), canonicity (Joseph Csicsila 2004; Laura L. Aull 2012; Randy Laist 2009;
Robert T. Tally Jr. 2007), as well as chronology and coverage (Gillian Steinberg 2013; Sandra
Hughes 2007; J. D. Isip 2011) in teaching the American literature survey, neither have they
linked these issues directly to the problem of American exceptionalism nor to questions
regarding concepts of history. While I provide excerpted works of criticism to nuance our
reading and provoke discussion, including short passages from Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and
Howard Zinn, among others, depending on the amount of time we have or the direction our
inquiries take us, my inclination, first and foremost, is to use literature as the primary material for
these lessons. I want students to know that literature is theoretical or, at least, that literature
poses theoretical questions about history, historiography, and historicity. And I want them to
understand better how various concepts of history have had direct ties to and have influenced
colonization, empire, and race in the U.S.

Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* serves as one of the principal theoretical literary texts,
and I assign it within the first week of class in order to introduce and model what it means to
examine concepts of history. Appropriating Amasa Delano’s eighteenth chapter of *A Narrative of
Voyages and Travels* ([1817] 1970), *Benito Cereno* depicts a fictional account of and recalls the
incidents surrounding a slave-ship rebellion off the coast of Chile. Shrouded in mystery, "gray
vapors," and "shadows present foreshadowing shadows to come" (Melville 1526), it is not until
the end of the narrative that Delano actually detects that the event before him is the scene of a
slave revolt *in medias res*. A difficult and complex work of prose fiction that alludes to and reads
like an "intricate knot," to evoke Jean Fagan Yellin’s term (1972), *Benito Cereno* complicates linear narrative as well as chronological historiography. My title, "Lines, Knots, and Cyphers," as well as the first epigraph that opens this essay recall the figures central to Melville’s conceptualization of a history. More than situating *Benito Cereno* within a survey of U.S. canonical and non-canonical literature, we can use Melville’s work of prose fiction as a means for posing questions about reading and interpretation, about U.S. projections of power over other global spaces, and about the introduction and development of slavery in the New World. Emphasizing the latter, *Benito Cereno* depicts slavery as an institution entangling the past with the mid nineteenth-century present. Such a depiction, moreover, allows us to theorize history not as a series of chronological and singular events laid out in linear continuity but as something that resembles the knot, a complex of contingent and overlapping events.

In their intellectual training, students have rarely encountered the idea that history or historiography requires a conceptual frame. And they tend to take for granted, moreover, that their own frames of reference presuppose an order of history that is linear and progressive. Before I can ask them to delve into a complex work like *Benito Cereno*, I have students read William Cullen Bryant's "The Prairies" (1834) on the first and second day of class. By focusing on this short work of poetry, I am able to introduce them to (1) the practice of close reading and (2) a work of literature that makes an obvious gesture to historicize. In Bryant's attempt to imagine the early nineteenth-century transformation of an American landscape and the populations who had inhabited (and will inhabit) that space, he invokes a concept of history known as "stadialism." While students may have never heard of the term, stadialism evinces characteristics that may reflect some of their own presuppositions about history, namely that history is progressive, that there are distinct and successive stages of human historical development.
Stadial History and the Naturalization of Violence

On the first day of class, after I have introduced the syllabus, course policies, and other orders of business, which usually takes approximately thirty minutes, and before we examine Melville’s more complicated novella *Benito Cereno*, I distribute a copy of Bryant’s "The Prairies" and read it aloud. For students who have had little experiencing reading literature, particularly works from the early nineteenth century, it proves helpful to experience this shorter work of poetry in *viva voce*. Subsequently, I ask students to read it by themselves, using a pen or pencil to make comments and pose questions in the margins. We spend the remaining time in class rereading aloud, focusing principally on the opening six lines:

These are the Gardens of the Desert, these
The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful,
And fresh as the young earth, ere man had sinned—
The Prairies. I behold them for the first,
And my heart swells, while the dilated sight
Takes in the encircling vastness. (126)

I want students to reflect on the poem and offer their ideas about what it means, but I prompt them to think about it in terms of formulating questions. For instance, why does the narrator mention "the Gardens of the Desert" in the first line? Who is the narrator—the "I" who "behold[s]"? What does it mean to "behold"? After some time reading and rereading, students begin to notice several allusions pertaining to the biblical story of Genesis, and they are able to link the first and third lines, both of which refer to an Edenic space and time—the "Gardens of the Desert," a "young earth" that existed "ere [before] man [Adam] had sinned." I remind them that the image of the garden and the figure of Adam appear often in American literature and that
we will encounter them again in works that had been published prior to and after Bryant's poem, but I ask them to begin thinking about, hypothesizing, why a work from 1834 would allude to the story of Genesis and the myth of Eden. Before we depart, I ask them to re-read "The Prairies" for homework and give particular attention to the poem’s other spatial and temporal categories. What other figures—animals, peoples, civilizations—reside in or had populated the space that the narrator describes? How does the narrator characterize the historical transformations of this space?

When we return to "The Prairies" the following class meeting, I prompt students to think about what it means, as the narrator suggests, to "take in the encircling vastness" with "dilated sight." I eventually want them to understand that the narrator's vision coincides with an order of colonization and expansion westward by European Americans. This line of inquiry (and the stakes of this inquiry), moreover, will require the entire class period to work through. We will yet have to investigate the cultural-historical contexts of the 1820s and 30s and make textual connections with other images in the poem before the question becomes clear to students. Nevertheless, they soon begin to understand that the narrator of the poem enacts a form of vision that sees not only across the prairies but also the expanses of a North American space. By means of poetic imagination and an act of will, the narrator observes the motion and loftiness of the "clouds" that "sweep over [the prairie] with their shadows." Students notice further that the narrator provides a view of the world from the same vantage point, directly addressing in speech "the prairie-hawk that, poised on high, / Flaps his broad wings," flying over and surveying the spaces that stretch from "the palms of Mexico and vines / Of Texas" to "the limpid brooks / That from the fountains of Sonora glide / Into the Pacific" (126-127).

I ask the students to think about what it means that Bryant's poet-traveler attains such a vantage, allowing him and his audience to see across broad portions of the continent and to the
Pacific. Here I want students to begin thinking about what other technologies provide such a view and in what or whose interests these views might serve. In turn they begin to see connections between Bryant's poem and the ostensibly benign activities of Google Maps and Google Earth as well as the more controversial use of drones and spy satellites deployed by the United States military and intelligence agencies. Later in the term, we will address in detail the ways in which cartography and mapping—while extremely beneficial to humanity—have also served those in power. But in this instance, we discuss how these forms of reconnaissance and ways of knowing the world are attendant with early nineteenth-century colonial expansion and the westward gaze of European Americans.

Here I also want students to note the shift that occurs in "The Prairies," the transition the narrator takes from the prairie-hawk's point of view to the next scene in which we find him, back on solid ground, "guid[ing]" his "steed" over "the verdant waste" (127). That is, while the opening portion of the poem depicts a survey of the world from lofty heights, anticipating a future that extends temporally and spatially to the Pacific and beyond, the poem then focuses on the solitary traveler—a frontiersman figure—who finds himself in a historical present, riding his horse through "the high rank grass" and pondering "the dead of other days," those other populations from the past whose lives marked a particular stage of historical development. "I think of those," the narrator reflects, "Upon whose rest [the steed] tramples" (127).

Are they here—

The dead of other days!—and did the dust
Of these fair solitudes once stir with life
And burn with passion? Let the mighty mounds
That overlook the rivers, or that rise
In the dim forest crowded with old oaks,
Answer. A race, that long has passed away,
Built them;—a disciplined and populous race
Heaped, with long toil, the earth, while yet the Greek
Was hewing the Pentelicus to forms
Of symmetry, and rearing on its rocks
The glittering Parthenon. (127)

I quote the passage at some length to further contextualize how Bryant constructs an image of "a populous race" whose history and cultural development may have been coincident with classical Greece but "long has passed away." Students then begin to notice how the poem characterizes these ancient people as herders and farmers: "These ample fields / Nourished their harvest, here their herds were fed, / When haply by their stalls the bison lowed, / And bowed his maned shoulder to the yoke" (127). But they sometimes admit confusion over the subsequent lines in which the poem introduces yet another set of people: "The red man came—/ the roaming hunter tribes, warlike and fierce, / And the mound-builders vanish from the earth" (127). I explain that Bryant, like many others in the early nineteenth century, believed that the ancient burial mounds in Illinois were remnants of a culture that preceded American Indians.13

While students recognize the poem’s pejorative category for Native Americans, they do not, for good reasons, understand initially why Bryant makes distinctions between the violent arrival of the "red man" and the passing of the "mound-builders." I, therefore, use this occasion

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13 One can also find a brief footnote on this topic in the Norton Anthology of American Literature, 127. See also George Dekker’s description of stadialist history and his recollection of W.H. Gardener description of the "mounds": "Gradually receding before the tread of civilization, and taking from it only the principle of destruction, they seem to be fast wasting to utter dissolution; and we shall one day look upon their history, with such emotions of curiosity and wonder, as those with which we now survey the immense mounds and heaps of ruin in the interior of our continent, so extensive that they have hardly yet been measured, so ancient that they lie buried in their own dust and covered with the growth of a thousand years, forcing upon the imagination the appalling thought of some great and flourishing, perhaps civilized people, who have been so utterly swept from the face of the earth, that they have not left even a traditionary name behind them" (quoted in Dekker: 84).
to elaborate on two important and related points: (1) Bryant draws on late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century notions of stadial history. (2) Despite his propensity towards a recognizable liberal politics (a supporter of abolitionism, antislavery, labor unionization, and free speech), he was vexingly and somewhat paradoxically also a proponent of Indian removal (Galloway 727).

Regarding the first point, I take a brief moment in class to lecture extemporaneously on the stadialist theory of historical development, remarking that the ideas supporting stadialism arise in late eighteenth-century French and Scottish philosophy. I mention Adam Smith as one example. While stadialism had influenced a number of intellectuals in the United States, Thomas Jefferson offers a pithy characterization of stadial theory in an 1824 letter to William Ludlow:

Let a philosophic observer commence a journey from the savages of the Rocky Mountains, eastwardly towards our seacoast. These he would observe in the earliest stage of association living under no law but that of nature, subsisting and covering themselves with the flesh and skins of wild beats. He would next find those on our frontiers in the pastoral state, raising domestic animals to supply the defects of hunting. Then succeed our own semi-barbarous citizens, the pioneers of the advance of civilization, and so in his progress he would meet the gradual shades of improving man until he would reach his, as yet, most improved state in our seaport towns. This, in fact, is equivalent to a survey, in time, of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day. I am eighty-one years of age, born where I now live, in the first range of mountains in the interior of our country. And I have observed this march of civilization advancing from the sea-coast, passing over us like a cloud of light, increasing our knowledge and improving our condition, insomuch as that we are at this time more advanced in civilization here than the seaports were when I was a boy. And where this
progress will stop no one can say. Barbarism has, in the meantime, been receding before the steady step of amelioration; and will in time, I trust, disappear from the earth.

(Quoted in Dekker 81-82).

I supply this passage to students in a handout, and together we observe how Jefferson's "survey" of the landscape from coast to coast and "of the progress of man from infancy . . . to [his] present day" evinces important parallels to Bryant's. On the board I note how stadialist theory tended to divide human development or progress into four stages (hence the name), and each of these stages evince specific methods of subsistence:

1. Savage = Hunting
2. Barbarian = Herding
3. Pastoral = Farming
4. Civilized = Commerce and Industry

Although nineteenth-century versions of stadialism in the U.S. did not always follow these characterizations identically, figures like Bryant, James Fennimore Cooper, Thomas Cole, and others, as did Jefferson, conceptualized stages "as being distributed across American space like colors across a spectrum" (Dekker 81). To offer further examples of stadialism, I show and have students discuss Cole's series of paintings entitled The Course of Empire. Here students recognize instantiations and variations on eighteenth-century concepts of the different stages, and we examine further the cyclical pattern of empire. I try to emphasize that while nineteenth-century artists and writers like Cole and Bryant may have thought that empires fall, they clearly saw their own moment as one which civilization—and, by extension, empire—was on the rise.

By drawing on these notions of stadialism in "The Prairies," moreover, Bryant aestheticized the politics of European American movement west across the continent and, likewise, validated the
conquest of the peoples who populated these spaces. And this leads me to the second point I want to emphasize in class.

While Bryant's politics and his position as editor of the New York *Evening Post* gravitated towards liberal causes such as antislavery, he viewed Indian removal "as a historical inevitability." As Andrew Galloway reminds us, "Bryant's editorials argued that the 'Red-man' had to move, for his own good and that of 'civilization'" (Galloway 727). I remind students that Bryant publishes "The Prairies" in the wake of the 1830 Indian Removal Act and Andrew Jackson's Trail of Tears. I then ask them to think about how the poem depicts or conceptualizes the forced relocation and extirpation of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole nations. In other words, how does the poem portray Indian removal as an ostensibly natural and historical set of processes? To answer this question, we focus on the following lines that come near the end of the poem:

Thus change the forms of being. Thus arise
Races of living things, glorious in strength,
And perish, as the quickening breath of God
Fills them, or is withdrawn. The red man, too,
Has left the blooming wilds he ranged so long,
And, nearer to the Rocky Mountains, sought
A wilder hunting-ground. (128)

Students soon recognize the complex political grammar of this passage, marking how Bryant posits, in one instance, that the "red man" is the subject of his own leaving and, in another, is the object of God's "quickening breath" that "is withdrawn." In seemingly natural rhythms, the "races" of the earth "rise" and "perish" as each stage of history gives way to the next.
In sum, we further address as a class how Bryant's conceptualization of stadial history further naturalized a set of policies, politics, state interventions, and forms of exceptionalism that eliminated and forced Native Americans from their homelands.

_In Medias Res:_ Melville's Meditation on History and Narrative

If Bryant's poem along with Jefferson's letter to Ludlow serve as heuristics for introducing and understanding better the stakes of stadialism and survey, a linear historicism that provides a kind of explanatory power for colonial movement over the continent, Herman Melville's _Benito Cereno_ allows for an alternative, theoretically complex way of thinking about history and narrative. When I assign Melville's 1855 novella, I suggest to students—especially those who are experiencing it for the first time—to pay attention to their own reading habits, take inventory of those moments when they encounter difficulty. Many report that the narrative moves slowly, that it seems confusing. As we review the opening passages, I help students navigate the intricacies of Melville’s nineteenth-century vocabulary and writing style, but I also assure them that the confusion and difficulty they experience as readers parallels the perplexed mind of Amasa Delano, the American captain whose view of the world and conceptualization of history functions as a central object of study in Melville’s narrative.

After we establish that Melville's novella makes use of third-person point of view (literary terms with which most students are familiar), I introduce an abbreviated definition of Gérard Genette's and Tzvetan Todorov's notion of focalization, giving particular attention to how _Benito Cereno_ evinces "internal" focalization, whereby the narrator’s knowledge of the story world is as limited as the character's vision.\(^4\) As the novella opens with Delano spying a "strange" ship

\(^4\) See William F. Edmisto, _Hindsight and Insight: Focalization in Four Eighteenth-Century French Novels_. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991. Edmisto offers a succinct definition of internal focalization: "As opposed to complete information, only a restricted selection of information is
"through the glass," for instance, it takes some time, careful reading, and Delano moving "nigher" in distance, before "the true character" of a "Spanish merchantman . . . carrying Negro slaves, amongst other valuable freight" comes into view (1526-1527). Focalized initially through Delano’s perceptions, we as readers have difficulty seeing beyond what he sees or experiences. We spend time, therefore, thinking aloud about what Delano’s view means or why is it important, and as they continue reading—and even rereading the text (which I require them to do)— I want them to look for moments where the narrator shifts to views outside of Delano’s, even where the narrator ironically reflects on how Delano perceives and conceives the world.

Before focusing on Delano’s character in detail, I contextualize the allusions and sources of Melville’s story. In particular, I explain that Benito Cereno draws significantly from an 1817 publication by a real person named Amasa Delano, a U.S. seaman and shipbuilder with a reputation for his three voyages around the world and his comprehension of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In the eighteenth chapter of A Narrative of Voyages and Travels, Delano recalls his 1805 encounter with a Spanish slave ship off the coast of Chile. The ship appears to be in distress, "act[ing] very awkwardly" (Delano 318), and so Delano recalls how he helps repair and provide provisions to its crew and African "cargo" (Delano 351). While assisting the Spanish captain Benito Cereno, Delano gradually, belatedly discovers that the slaves aboard had revolted and were, in fact, commanding the ship all the while performing as if they were still in bondage. That Delano could not initially see that the slaves were capable of revolt and that they had actually planned and plotted against their owners marks one of the central ironies in Melville’s fictionalized version of the event. To put it another way, while the real-life Delano had

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provided by the narrator of a focalized text. Internal focalization occurs when the narrator says only what a character knows, thinks, and perceives. This focal character becomes the subject of all perceptions. Every character, setting, and event is presented from his point of view. Internal focalization may remain fixed on one character throughout a text, or it may shift between two or more focal characters" (148-149).
navigated and documented the globe's extensive watery spaces, aiding the expansion of trade and opening of markets in China and elsewhere, his contributions to knowledge about and broad survey of the globe did not necessarily allow him to see past deep-seated racial conceits. Nor could he immediately comprehend how African slaves were intellectually capable of carrying carry out an intricate plot against the Spanish captain and crew.

Melville accentuated this irony further by making subtle changes to Delano's original narrative. On the chalkboard, I underscore for students that while Delano's encounter occurred in 1805, Melville sets Benito Cereno in 1799. Bearing further on the historical and political significance of the novella, Melville had retitled the ships' names, changing Delano's Perseverance to the Bachelor's Delight and the Spanish Tryal to the San Dominick. Throughout his literary career—whether it was the Pequod in Moby-Dick (1851) or the Bellipotent in Billy Budd (published posthumously in 1924)—Melville's representation and naming of ships had often stressed the serious historical, philosophical, and political issues that he attempted to address in his writing. Although students are not always familiar with late-eighteenth century events, a few students (with my help) are able to recall how, in the wake of the revolutions in the U.S. and France, a mass number of slaves led by Toussaint Louverture formed one of the strongest and most successful slave rebellions in history. That the site of this resistance, the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), occurred in Saint Domingue, the lucrative French colony on the western half of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola—what had been previously been named San Domingo by the Spanish and subsequently Haiti after the revolution—further recalls the long history and importance of this space to European colonization and exploitation.5

For an early and important treatment of this subject, see Eric Sundquist's essay, “‘Benito Cereno’ and New World Slavery.”
To emphasize this importance, I introduce and have students read alongside of *Benito Cereno* excerpts from the letters of Christopher Columbus as well as the first chapter of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*. This comparative method of reading and inquiry allows us to re-contextualize Columbus’s writings in a framework that does not necessarily repeat unwittingly forms of linear historicism and notions of American exceptionalism. Students are able to see, moreover, the historical entanglements and troubling legacies of Columbus’s early sixteenth-century commercial exploits of the New World—including his enslavement, torture, and annihilation of the Arawak and other native people on Hispaniola—with other historical events up through the nineteenth century.

I want students to know that Hispaniola (or San Domingo) and Christopher Columbus play a specific role in Melville’s narrative about slavery and revolution.⁶ If students have carefully read *Benito Cereno*, they will have noticed how Columbus haunts Melville’s dramatization of the slave revolt aboard the *San Dominick*. Not only does an image of Columbus don the ship as its figurehead, but “rudely painted or chalked” on the ship is the sentence “follow your leader,” intimating that those aboard the *San Dominick* will meet their same fateful demise as the first who inaugurated the slave trade from west to east (1528). Indeed, as I remind students, *Benito Cereno* really is a work that helps us theorize reading—that is, the ability to read and think historically and critically. Before we proceed to focus on Delano’s modes of interpreting signs and conceptualizing the world, I make it clear that the very opening of Melville’s novella should remind us of several key historical events, all of which Melville presents in a knotted historical entanglement: the initiation of New World and transatlantic slavery inaugurated by Columbus’s

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⁶ I use the terms revolt, rebellion, and revolution somewhat interchangeably here, but in our class discussion, I write these and other related terms on the chalkboard, asking students to think about the connotations and denotations of each. In other words, I ask them to think about how the term “revolution” evinces political and historical legitimacy over terms such as revolt or insurrection. We talk further about how representations of slave resistance have been characterized by various political and racial interests.
exploitations of Hispaniola in the early sixteenth century; the Haitian Revolution in the late eighteenth; and, finally, the moment when Melville was writing, in the wake of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act.7

To give focus to our discussion of this unwieldy narrative—one which strings together a wide range of historical events and political realities ranging from Christopher Columbus's initiation of the transatlantic slave trade to the shockwaves brought about by the Haitian revolution, from the liberalization of trade and commerce over the Atlantic and Pacific to the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act—I ask students to engage in an in-class, small-group exercise (consisting of approximately three people), investigating and citing those passages in Melville's *Benito Cereno* that refer to and depict Delano's habits of mind or way of seeing the world. Following our discussion on the "difficulty" of reading *Benito Cereno*, students then work together with the text, reflecting on how this "difficulty" in reading is important to the Melville's overall critique of Delano (his perspective, his way of thinking, his blindness). I use the following questions to guide their close analysis and re-examination of the narrative: How does race function in Delano's perspective of the scene that he confronts on board the *San Dominick*? How does the text continually refer to "order," and why is this notion of order important to Delano's way of exercising both "charity" and power? How does *Benito Cereno* complicate or call into question Delano's understanding of history and memory?

As students work in small groups, I spend time circulating in the classroom, talking with them about what they are discovering as they re-read the text together. While some students aptly note that the story resembles detective fiction, others also begin to comprehend how the

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7 See Jeffrey Hole, "Enforcement on Grand Scale: Fugitive Intelligence and the Literary Tactics of Douglass and Melville," for an examination of *Benito Cereno* in the context of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. Here he particularly draws attention to how Delano's act of "charity" towards the Spanish captain is a form legal *posse comitatus*, an attempt to extend U.S. jurisdictions and enforce fugitive slave law within international spaces.
vision of the world we have in *Benito Cereno* contrasts significantly with the narrative perspective and surveillance in Bryant's "The Prairies." To Delano, the opening scene before him appears "mute and calm; everything gray" (1526) unlike the panoramic vistas of Bryant's solitary traveler who scans the far-reaching spaces of the continent. And yet, as we discussed earlier, the real-life Delano would be a person prone to broad vistas, as the title of his 1817 book suggests. Melville's *Benito Cereno* cleverly "dramatizes how Delano's view of the world contributed to and extended the range and thus the purview of U.S. influence" while ironically depicting Delano as one who is incapable of recognizing the significant and historical reality of the slave revolt that unfolds before him (Hole 231).

**Addressing small groups and then the class as a whole,** I prompt students to think further about the connections between Delano's vision of gray "vapors" or the "shreds of fog" and the way in which the novella ironically draws attention to Delano's inability to fully account for and understand the "shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come" (1526). While sweeping through various scenes scattered throughout the text, students tend to overlook a revealing and literary complex passage from the first page:

> Considering the lawlessness and loneliness of the spot, and the sort of stories, at that day, associated with those seas, Captain Delano's surprise might have deepened into some uneasiness had he not been a person of a singularly undistrustful good-nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man. Whether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine. (1526)
As I draw their attention to and work carefully through this passage, students are usually amazed at how quickly the narrator's detached ironic voice appears—a voice that, on the one hand, seems to praise Delano for his "singularly undistrustful good-nature" and "benevolent heart" while, on the other hand, mocks him for his lack of "quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception" (1526). This distinction between the narrator's ironic voice and Delano's way of viewing and acting in the world is important for reading the rest of the novella, for tracing out how Melville depicts Delano's vision and blindness, his propensity to bring about—even enforce—his ideas of legal, racial, and historical order. Although "narrative is the literary and often legal means by which we understand, order, and assign authority to the past," critic Jeanine DeLombard reminds us, Melville's *Benito Cereno* complicates these easy assimilations. (DeLombard 37). In other words, Melville's narrative rubs against the grain of Delano's late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century conventional notions of legal, racial, and historical order.

Students soon notice how Melville depicts Delano's vision and blindness, how on the stranded Spanish vessel "the noisy confusion of the San Dominick's suffering host repeatedly challenged [Delano's] eye" (1532). What Delano sees as "confusion" and disorder, however, is a function of insurrection, the reversal of power relations between master and slave. All the while, Delano attributes the disorder to the Spaniard's impotency and lack of authority as a captain: "Still, Captain Delano was not without the idea, that had Benito Cereno been a man of greater energy, misrule would hardly come to pass" (1530). Even in those moments when Delano suspects that something onboard the Spanish vessel is out of joint, he is unable to recognize or even conceive of African slaves as having the capacity to organize such an intricate plot; instead, he can only think of them, as he does when he observes the six "hatchet-polishers" who, "sat intent upon their task, except at intervals, when, with the peculiar love in negroes of uniting industry with pastime, two and two they sideways clashed their hatchets
together, like cymbals,” as merely “unsophisticated Africans” (1529). To emphasize this idea, we give significant attention to one of the more extensively drawn-out and highly dramatized scenes of the novella in which Babo shaves Benito Cereno, addressing specifically the following passage:

Altogether the scene was somewhat peculiar, at least to Captain Delano, nor, as he saw the two thus postured, could he resist the vagary, that in the black he saw he saw a headsman, and in the white, a man at the block. But this was one of those antic conceits, appearing and vanishing in a breath, from which, perhaps, the best regulated mind is not always free. (1557)

At this point in our reading and discussion, students are able to see how the narrator ironically highlights Delano’s habits of mind, particularly the ways in which he organizes and categorizes his world using racial and racist conceits. This passage, moreover, leads us to consider other moments in the text that reflect on Delano’s “regulated mind.”

At some point in our discussion, students locate a subtle but telling description of Delano, wherein Melville’s narrator describes the American as "a man of such native simplicity as to be incapable of satire and irony" (1539). While students may have a general sense of what irony is, I develop their understanding of the term and the importance of this passage by explaining that irony comes from the Greek *eiron*. As a rhetorical figure, the *eiron* is a "dissembler." The act of disassembling often derives from this figure’s performance of physical weakness and intellectual foolishness, and in those moments of dramatic reversals (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnorisis*), reveals himself or herself to be much cleverer than the *alazon*, the braggart, the one who erroneously presupposes to have all the knowledge and power. Using these traditional rhetorical and dramatic figures, students begin to see how easily Delano’s character aligns with the part of the *alazon* and the personal servant-slave to Benito Cereno,
Babo, as the eiron. Not only does Delano seem to know what is wrong and how to correct Benito Cereno’s problems; he offers "charity" by means of exercising authority and power. Babo, on the other hand, plays the role that Delano expects him to play: "There is something in the negro," Delano thinks, "which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one’s person. Most negroes are natural valets and hairdressers" (1556). Taking to "negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs," Delano can only comprehend the "docility" and "limited mind" of the African slave (1556). He is therefore blind to any evidence and refuses to believe that rebellious slaves have commandeered the ship.

To further emphasize the stakes of Melville’s depiction of Delano and Babo, their opposite comportments and ways of thinking, I have students search for those lines in the text that reveal Babo’s clever demeanor, his role as a dissembler or eiron. Where Delano sees the ignorant "good-natured grin" of the slave Babo, Melville’s novella reveals the "intelligent smile" of one who is not only capable of planning and carrying out an insurrection but one who is endowed with historical memory, capable of associating particular insurrectionist attempts (as he does aboard the San Dominick) with the long history of the institution of slavery and slave rebellion in the New World (1542-43). For instance, when Delano finally discovers, in a "flash of revelation," that the slaves are in "piratical revolt," the novella depicts rather clearly (and ironically) the distinctions between Babo’s mind and Delano’s. As the canvas covering the "beak" of the ship comes loose during the skirmish between Delano’s crew and the slaves, we see superimposed over the ship’s figurehead of Columbus the whitened skeleton of Alejandro Aranda, the owner of the slaves. At once, the entangled figures of Columbus and Aranda, along with the phrase chalked on the side of the ship, "follow your leader," allows us to better understand how Melville’s Benito Cereno functions not only as a strong condemnation of the slave trade but figures importantly as a re-conceptualization of history. In Benito Cereno,
Melville imbues the slave Babo with historical memory and knowledge, one who knows and remembers the past as it haunts and remains knotted in the present in the same way that Babo has entwined the figure of Columbus with the bones of Aranda. Delano, on the other hand, evinces a mind committed to amnesia—of forgetting the past.

**Conclusion: Without Denouement**

The final scene of the novella allows us to examine Melville’s critique of Delano’s thinking and his propensity towards an order of historicism that deliberately and willfully disconnects the historical past from present realities. In dialogue with a traumatized Cereno who has barely survived the slave revolt aboard his ship, Delano states, “You generalize, Don Benito; and mournfully enough. But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it.” I ask students to think about and comment on what is important about Delano’s declaration. How, in other words, does Melville depict Delano’s conception of history and his propensity towards "order"? After several days of reading closely and thinking aloud about this text, students are able to see how Melville’s *Benito Cereno* calls into question the American captain’s exercise of power, particularly his efforts to enforce the violent and oppressive laws of the slave institution by re-capturing or killing the rebellious slaves. His participation in quelling the slave revolt marks a continuation of violent practices that have been coincident with the institution of slavery since Columbus. Just as he is incapable of resolving the literal knot handed to him by the old sailor, Delano refuses to give thought to the past: "For a moment, knot in hand, and knot in head, Captain Delano stood mute" (1550).

Before we bring our discussion to a close and move on to other works in the American literature survey, I want to be sure that they understand, too, how Melville’s novella tends to offer a view of history that sides with Babo. Both as a figure of irony and historical memory,
Babo reminds us that the past remains entangled, knotted with the present. Students comment, too, on Babo's haunting image at the end: "The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites" (1582). Noting how the Babo's "hive of subtlety" stands in contradistinction to both Delano’s intelligence (or ignorance) and his conceptualization of history, students are then able to read *Benito Cereno* as a work which problematizes the highly-managed ordering of history and narration into separate and distinct moments—a present that is divorced and sanitized from the earlier catastrophes. Good readers will point out that Babo's spectral and extended presence, "fixed on a pole in the plaza," and after meeting "his voiceless end" (1582), foreshadows other conflicts to come. I make mention of several slave revolts in the early and mid-nineteenth century, rebellions like Nat Turner's that also haunt the imagination of slave owners and whites in the antebellum South. And so I have students try to articulate what it means that *Benito Cereno* is a story without a proper resolution. To help draw important connections, I remind them that the word *dénouement*, a French term that authors and those in literary studies sometimes use to refer the resolution or the climax of a chain of events within narrative or drama, literally means "unknotting" or "deciphering." Melville leaves us with a knot, a cypher, commenting on the very problem of narration and order: "Hitherto the nature of the narrative, besides rendering the intricacies in the beginning unavoidable, has more or less required that many things, instead of begin set down in order of occurrence, should be retrospectively, or irregularly given" (1581). Melville had recalled a historical event like the slave rebellion aboard the *Tryal* and presented it "irregularly" because the conventional modes of narrative and history, of surveying from beginning to end, would have obscured the real violence and allowed, too easily, an audience to side with the victors, to use Benjamin’s terms.
What I like about teaching *Benito Cereno* early on in the survey course is that it challenges and then changes significantly the way students theorize history. They develop a critical-historical intelligence and grow more alert to the ordering of history, of patterns and historicity, appeals to exceptional destiny. When we continue over the next few weeks to read selections from William Bradford, John Winthrop, and Cotton Mather, students understand better the theoretical stakes of thinking about historiography and whose interests it serves, whose voices it silences.

**Works Cited**


JEFFREY HOLE's most recent works have appeared or are forthcoming in the journals *American Literature* and *Criticism*, and he is currently completing a book entitled *Cunning Inventions and the Force of Law: Literature in the Wake of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act*. 