5-2014

Herman Melville and Richard Wright: Camaraderie and Revolt

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HERMAN MELVILLE AND RICHARD WRIGHT:

CAMARADERIE AND REVOLT

A Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Graduate School of
The University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2014

Major Subject: English - Literature and Cultural Studies

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May 2014

ABSTRACT

Braune, Linda., Herman Melville and Richard Wright: Camaraderie and Revolt. Master of Arts (MA), May, 2014, 115 pp., 72 titles.

In 1940, Black leftist writer Richard Wright, in his classic *Native Son*, sought out a great figure in the American Black canon, W. E. B. Du Bois, to understand and delineate double consciousness of Blacks. But it is surprising, perhaps, that Wright also drew from a major figure in the white canon, Herman Melville, in order to explore the overcoming of double consciousness and its effects. Although another tradition might interpret Melville's Captain Ahab as "predicting" Wright's story of Bigger Thomas, I suggest that it is the *Pequod* crew of *Moby-Dick*, not the driven and driving Captain, which compels Wright's attention. A spirit of revolt and camaraderie in the world at sea – I enlist in my analysis Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's "motley crew" and Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* – informs Melville's 1850s sea stories, and predicts Wright's interest in Melville and Wright's advice to emerging Black writers.

DEDICATION

For my parents, without whom my education and this thesis would not have been possible. For my mother with love (who was unable to see this document before her passing) who provided me with her love of Shakespeare, opera, and poetry. For my father, with love, who through his creativity in art and his love of literature has given me a very precious gift: love of the sea.

For my husband and co-intellect, Nick, with love, whose conversations and rereading helped me reach my goal.

For my daughter, Joan, activist and philosophy professor, with love, who inspired me to study for my Master's degree, a little later in life than anticipated, by her persistence in obtaining her PhD.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge Dr. Shawn Thomson, my committee chair and mentor, who was so generous with his knowledge and time. His expertise in asking the right literary questions at the right moment gave me the confidence and perseverance to further my research. I also thank Dr. Thomson for his classes in American Literature and Ethnic Studies in which he imparted to me a sense of the complexity of Herman Melville, Richard Wright, and the Harlem Renaissance thinkers.

I thank Dr. Rebecca Mitchell for being a member of my thesis committee and for her suggestions. She enlightened me in the ways of graduate school, which can be awkward without prior introduction, and assisted me in preparation for conference presentations. Through her Comparative Literature class, I took my first leap into the pages of James Joyce.

I thank Dr. R. Jacob McDonie for being a member of my thesis committee and providing comments. His class on Chaucer showed me what a graduate seminar should be and that, when practiced, Middle English can be spoken with ease.

Two additional faculty members I wish to thank are Dr. David Anshen for his intensive Literary Theory class that prompted me to research Jean-Paul Sartre, and Dr. Melynda Nuss for her Cultural Studies class that encouraged my interest in Hardt and Negri.

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INTRODUCTION

Five years before *Native Son* was written, on September 24, 1935, Richard Wright witnessed Black fighter Joe Louis's win against white boxer Max Baer. Filled with emotion after the fight, Wright stood shoulder to shoulder with the 25,000 Blacks who filled the streets, and he felt the electricity run through the Black crowds (Webb 135-36). In his article in *New Masses*, Wright tried to express what was occurring:

> Something had popped loose, all right. And it had come from deep down. Out of the darkness it had leaped from its coil. And nobody could have said just what it was, and nobody wanted to say. Blacks and whites were afraid. But it was a sweet fear, at least for the blacks. It was a mingling of fear and fulfillment. Something dreaded and yet wanted. A something had popped out of a dark hole, something with a hydra-like head, and it was darting forth its tongue. (19)

The power centered in this Black fighter's success over a white man had brought the Black population to a new pitch of excitement. Awareness that racial tensions had reached a new height – the Scottsboro Boys case was a hot issue at that time -- and the appearance of crowds in the streets brought potential of rebellion ever closer to the surface, and if one head of the hydra were to be hit, others would appear on the spot.

Wright, although only twenty-seven years old and not a high school graduate, was a voracious reader, an activist in Chicago's labor and left intellectual circles, and was constantly writing and questioning, far beyond his years. When he wrote the above passage, he was not just

talking about one event, one important prize fight, but he was no doubt reflecting on the process of revolt itself. "Four centuries of oppression," Wright wrote, "of frustrated hopes, of black bitterness, felt even in the bones of the bewildered young, were rising to the surface" ("Joe Louis," *New Masses* 19) with those 25,000 Blacks in the streets. The "hydra-like" image that Wright mentions in 1935 is the same threatening "something" that the Black rebellion has laid before its white owners and leaders in the past, for instance during the Saint-Domingue (Haiti) revolution in 1799. Wright's future friend, the important twentieth-century Marxist C. L. R. James, was researching and writing a play about the Saint-Domingue revolution during this same time that Wright was writing for *New Masses*. James reports a dramatic declaration made by Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Black leader of the Haitian Revolution, just before his rule was cut short and he was taken to prison. In his declaration, Toussaint uses a different image than the hydra, but notice that the point is the same: "You have cut down in San Domingo only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep" (James, *Black Jacobins* 334).

Some writers, who hold a different interpretation than I do, assume that Herman Melville is somehow "pessimistic" in his writing and that Wright would have rejected an affinity with Melville's work in those years when Wright was authoring *Native Son* from a Marxist perspective. True, Melville's *Benito Cereno* has been labeled this way, and Elizabeth Schultz, a major Melville scholar, uses Wright's own words to emphasize Melville's pessimism (Schultz 640). Nevertheless, in "Personalism," the document Schultz draws her "pessimism" comment from, Wright is developing his theoretical method for African-American writers to incorporate into their writing the changes in historical perspective demanded by seeing "revolt in writing" (Webb 138) as part of other ongoing eruptions of revolt. That Melville's *Benito Cereno* is

centered on the imagery of revolt, and also, as I will explicate, that this novella is an alternate ending for *Moby-Dick*, belies any serious pessimism. Another writer, Markus Heide, views what appears to be wreckage at the end of *Benito Cereno* as indication that the African slaves' liberation struggle is quashed, and that Melville, hence, is pessimistic. However, Heide views the suppression of the struggle in *Benito Cereno* as a finality. When he further states that the novella does not conclude in "the multiethnic, multiracial, or transnational harmony" (53), he misinterprets Melville's intent, as Wright would realize. Revolts on the *Town-Ho, Pequod,* or *the San Dominick* do not end at the conclusion of each narrative; they are each a moment in unfolding revolution. Wright, who speaks of four centuries of frustrated hopes and the hydra-like process, would understand that unfolding process. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker in *The Many-Headed Hydra* mention that the Saint-Domingue Revolution itself took place after waves of rebellions in the 1700s throughout the Caribbean (241) and at the same time as a string of slave rebellions in the new United States, some far from successful (275-76). Melville, who, I will show, was interested in the Haitian Revolution, probably had the process of linked revolts explicitly in mind as he wrote *Benito Cereno*.

I am assuming that there is a felt continuity in the consciousness of the oppressed across borders and periods of time. (It is not surprising at all, for instance, that the young Black activists for civil rights in the 1960s would start searching for historical precedents and would soon be demanding Black History programs.) A young Marxist writer like Wright, who in the ferment of the 1930s was reading American literature with a hunger, would be watching closely for instances of that "something," that consciousness which he describes as "dreaded and yet wanted," arising in revolt from below. In the period when he was trying to document the new consciousness in his journalism, as in the *New Masses* piece above, and in his fiction between

1935 and 1940, he seems to have sensed that same "fear and fulfillment" consciousness in the pages of Melville's *Moby-Dick*. (And, interestingly, I will show that at least three major Black writers have sensed it.)

I focus on Wright's work between 1935 and 1940 and on Melville's work between 1850 (*Moby-Dick*) and 1856 when he published what I call the "alternate ending" to *Moby-Dick*: *Benito Cereno*. It is a short novel dealing with a revolt from "deep down," as it were, in the *Pequod*, a revolt which did not die in the whirlpool. The consciousness of "sweet fear" that Wright documented in 1935 in the streets of Chicago, where "nobody could say what it was and nobody wanted to say" might also describe *Benito Cereno*'s gray and ominous *San Dominick* ship. Scholarship has not revealed exactly what year Wright read Melville and I have found no evidence that Wright read *Benito Cereno*. However, it is my perception that when Wright was documenting Black consciousness in *Native Son*, he signified on Melville's famous sea story because he felt Melville had similar interests in documenting much the same consciousness. Wright was acutely aware that Melville was writing at a time of crisis and fear, when the nation was dividing and approaching a civil breaking point.

Besides 1935 to 1940 and 1850 to 1856, two other periods of time, one narrow and one much broader, play a significant role in my analysis. The narrow period is 1791 to 1805, when the "hydra-like" head which Wright senses in the Chicago streets appeared in Saint-Domingue. That same "dreaded and yet wanted" consciousness was the first Black revolution of the modern age. So close to those same revolutionary years, the famous *Phenomenology of the Mind* by G. W. F. Hegel appeared (1807), with its analysis of human consciousness being shaped by the dialectic of master and slave. Significantly, over the recent period, philosopher Susan Buck-Morss has shown that Hegel was fully aware of Toussaint's revolution in Haiti when he was

writing the *Phenomenology* (*Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*). Melville was also conscious of the Haitian Revolution and referenced it, and he was apparently interested in Hegel. Wright's future friend C. L. R. James, who was married to Wright's first biographer, Constance Webb, wrote a Marxist classic, *The Black Jacobins* about Toussaint. Shortly before writing *Native Son*, Wright would have known about James's work through Wright's friend Paul Robeson, who famously starred in James's play in London about Toussaint. It is also noteworthy that although some Marxists consider Hegel a waste of time, James was not one of those; he wrote on Hegel. And importantly he also wrote a book on Melville. Although this connection with Toussaint will need to be discussed with more precision, it should be remembered again that the felt consciousness for the revolt from below can leap from one period of time to another. Melville, writing in the 1850s, had the Black revolution in Haiti in his mind, and it is not surprising that Wright would be one of the first to sense this radical, indeed Black revolutionary, side in Melville.

The broader period of time which plays a role here, is from about 1600 through at least the American Civil War -- a period when the "motley crew" of castaways and mariners, including freed Blacks, populated the Black Atlantic. Ships like the *Pequod* sailed on the blue sea water but also sailed on this volatile, rebellious, internationalist culture, "mingling..fear [with]… fulfillment," to use Wright's term.

When I read *Moby-Dick* during my first summer of graduate study, I felt the presence of a genius and a friend. But although I spent time perusing Hershel Parker's two-volume biography of Melville and Andrew Delbanco's invaluable resource *Melville*, something was missing for me in *Moby-Dick.* I turned to reading Melville's other novels, *Typee, Pierre, Omoo,* etc. and was very pleased to find in *Pierre* an exciting progressive social criticism regarding

attitudes toward Native Americans. Discovering that no one else had quite seen this side of Melville as well as I had, I submitted my paper to the South Central MLA conference in San Antonio, presented it there – it was well received – and soon joined The Melville Society and began receiving *Leviathan*, its journal. Later, while taking a class on Black writers, an amazing article caught my attention. Elizabeth Schultz, a leading Melville scholar – a *Leviathan* advisory board member – had written an article in 1999 showing Richard Wright signifying on *Moby-Dick.* Maybe I was finding what I would need to connect emotionally to that classic. Schultz's article is groundbreaking and it immediately resonated with me, so I enlisted again on the *Pequod.*

In my new adventure, however, I found something I had not expected, something Schultz was missing in her powerful, well-documented, and admittedly leading-edge article, "The Power of Blackness: Richard Wright Re-Writes *Moby-Dick.*" This insight I had is developed in the first chapter following this Introduction: Schultz proved that Wright had taken Melville as a resource, but missed the complexity of Wright's approach. Schultz's problem emerges when she sees Wright using Melville's "wall" symbol, missing how Wright complicates the symbol from a Black consciousness perspective, adding W. E. B. Du Bois's Veil (a heavy curtain) to the wall. Wright signifies on what he perhaps considers the most important work in the white American canon, *Moby-Dick,* but he also links *Native Son* to the most important book in the Black canon, Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), which develops double consciousness of Blacks and even includes a very important story of a young Black man who kills the child of a white benefactor of Blacks in his own town.

Everyone misses something in a novel, but Schultz's lapse led her to a larger mistake. She thinks that Wright was admiring the determination and focus of Ahab, but Wright's

admiration was for the crew, the motley crew being made into a mechanical crew by Ahab and driven to destruction.

In the second chapter, "Melville: Camaraderie and Revolt," the realization comes to the fore that it is not the captains, like Captain Ahab (in *Moby-Dick*) or Captain Aranda (in *Benito Cereno*), but the crew members that can tear the Veil and change history through their new capability to revolt. Wright's signifying on Melville's novel, *Moby-Dick,* is intended to show how and why he finds a kinship with Melville's liberatory impulses, with both authors attracted to internationalism, the "motley crew," and particularly Black consciousness. These inclinations will be investigated in the context of another ship story, *Benito Cereno,* where Melville references the Saint-Domingue Revolt of 1799. Melville depicts the Africans as having a sense of dignity which offsets Captain Delano's white supremacist attitudes that Africans are "primitive," "savage," and best fit to be personal servants. Although various critics -- Jonathan Beecher, Jean Fagan Yellin, and Markus Heide, to name a few – have linked Melville's *Benito Cereno* to the Saint-Domingue revolt, my situating that link as an alternate ending to *Moby-Dick* and in the context of the motley crew and hydra will hopefully advance current Melville scholarship. (In the first chapter, Schultz is shown to have misunderstood Wright's use of Melville, but the second chapter shows she may have also misunderstood Melville: he is far less pessimistic about the possibility of revolt from below than she may think.)

The third and final chapter, "Black Consciousness: Wright's Camaraderie and Revolt," explores the rising consciousness of the oppressed Blacks as interpreted through a brief study of Hegel's master-slave dialectic. Douglass portrays this struggle in his fight with the slave breaker Covey, and Melville utilizes Hegel's dialectic in the struggle for recognition between Babo and Don Benito. Also in this chapter, Wright is shown to be concerned to document the

consciousness of the Blacks to be identified (recognized) as truly alive and doing work in common with others. Wright's 1935-36 theoretical work in such writings as "Personalism" and "Blueprint for Negro Writing" displays his plans for a new Black consciousness that will challenge the Veil described by Du Bois. Wright reflects on the camaraderie he felt in the Chicago streets and in Melville's crew and shows its "dreaded and yet wanted" desire for revolt. This chapter synthesizes the ideas from the first two chapters into a discussion on Wright's literary theory and his attempt to convey it, with its sense of camaraderie and revolt, to aspiring Black writers. He assumes that the writer must be ever alert to document the new consciousness as it "popped out of a dark hole" hydra-like. But he is not documenting it for those standing around curious or for posterity eager for a tear of sympathy. He documents the process of revolt…for the revolt, as part of the revolt. Wright later became a friend of Jean-Paul Sartre and wrote the preface to Sartre's play, "The Respectful Prostitute," a scorching denunciation of America's racism, with references to the Scottsboro Boys case. In Sartre's understanding of literature – and Sartre praises Wright -- the author's text is not a fixed artifact; it is a moment of silence with readers and an ongoing social process, which, Wright knows, is not sucked down pessimistically with the *Pequod*.

CHAPTER I

BIGGER'S HEAVY CURTAIN: DU BOIS'S "VEIL" IN WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

Richard Wright's *Native Son* received an overwhelmingly positive response upon publication in March 1940. Superlatives flowed from reviewers' pens: "extremely remarkable" (Lehmann 574), "enormously stirring" (Poore 25), "greatest writer Negro America has produced" (Shanklin 224). In fact, the world was holding its breath even before its publication date, the book having already received praise from the Guggenheim award's committee and having already been prepared for the *New York Times*'s March edition of the Book-of-the-Month Club (Poore 25). Richard Wright was compared to Dreiser, Zola, and Gorki (Shanklin 224). The novel was explicitly compared with Dreiser's great American novel *An American Tragedy* (Lehmann 574), and Wright's method with that of Dostoevsky (Poore 25, interpreting Dorothy Canfield Fisher). No novel completely escapes mention of a defect, but the imperfections of *Native Son* were seen as slight; for instance, Charles Poore suggested that some might say it is "impressive but overdrawn," yet Poore softened this by placing Wright alongside Dickens and Steinbeck (25).

The social repercussions of the narrative were often stressed in the reviews. Rosamond Lehmann claims *Native Son* "is an exhaustive analysis of the structure and taboos of a society which makes such crimes [Bigger's killing of Mary and Bessie] not only possible but inevitable" (574). Bigger was seen as directly affected by the racism surrounding him. Understanding this,

Jay Shanklin explains what circumstances the protagonist is up against: "His [Bigger's] six bullets were no match for the organized violence of society" (224). Although harsher criticism of *Native Son* surfaces later, particularly when Wright traveled to Paris and was rebuffed by American critics (Fabre v-vi), the early reviewers realized the massive impact Wright's novel would have on an American population steeped in racism and its resultant violence.

In those initial reviews in 1940, Wright was categorized with many great American and international authors, but one earlier influence seems to have been forgotten amidst all of the excitement: the author of the great American novel *Moby-Dick*. It would not be until approximately sixty years after the publication of *Native Son* that Herman Melville scholar Elizabeth Schultz would demonstrate Melville's influence on Richard Wright's novel.

Linking Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Wright's *Native Son* in her article, "The Power of Blackness: Richard Wright Re-Writes Moby-Dick," Schultz draws on their commonalities, attempting to shift *Native Son* into the realm of an epic grandeur literature to which *Moby-Dick* belongs. Schultz's essay compellingly demonstrates how Wright was gripped by Melville's book, and how he consciously enhanced his work by employing symbolism familiar to readers of *Moby-Dick*: "snow," "wall," "mask," "fire," etc. Although in *Native Son* Wright signifies on all of the mentioned symbols, the symbol of the "wall" seems most powerful for linking Wright's themes to Melville's, and this paper will carry Schultz's work further by expanding the concept of the wall.

Schultz's analysis of the expansive connections between these works is important for deciphering the influences on Wright's novel; however, I will argue that Schultz does not fully grasp why Wright signifies on Melville, and the key to her error is her too limited discussion of the crucial, repeated wall symbolism. What Wright does is to link an unusual "curtain" to the

wall, and, as Black writers at the time would have known, this curtain is W. E. B. Du Bois's heavy "Veil." Where Melville speaks of a "wall," Wright in *Native Son* speaks of a "wall, or curtain" clearly contextualizing the curtain as Du Bois's "Veil." This connection to the Veil adds new meaning to Bigger's struggle, but also shows Wright signifying (in Henry Louis Gates's manner) on a Black writer, in addition to signifying on Melville within Western literature generally. Regretfully Schultz, who follows Gates's lead (Schultz 641), and who correctly sees Wright reflecting numerous authors within the Western literary tradition, misses how Wright is signifying on the evolving African American tradition, particularly on the work of his contemporary, the foremost American Black intellectual of his age, W. E. B. Du Bois; and consequently, Schultz misses how Wright clearly links Melville's wall to Du Bois's Veil.

Taking a nuanced approach to interpreting Melville and Wright's protagonists, I will further argue that in missing the link between the Veil and the wall, Schultz pairs Bigger and Ahab too easily, because she does not perceive how the curtain (Veil) can bring Du Bois's double-consciousness into play whenever African Americans come up against the immovable wall of racism and attempt to break through it.

Signifying on Du Bois: Wall to Curtain to Veil

On the surface, it seems unlikely that a narrative about an unskilled young Black man living in the tight walls of urban Chicago could draw much of importance from the story of an older, rancorous, determined sea captain chasing a whale on the open seas. But Schultz does a remarkable job exploring how *Native Son* signifies on *Moby-Dick*, and she convincingly demonstrates this by using Henry Louis Gates's approach, where Black writers, like Wright, utilize Western texts and through a revision process establish their work within, and to some degree in contrast to, an American literary tradition – a process he calls "signifying on" (Gates

342). However, Wright will go even further than Schultz notices. By signifying on Melville and by using Du Bois to accomplish it, Wright is not just opening space for his own work but for the work of other Black authors within that tradition.

W. E. B. Du Bois, Wright's contemporary (although 45 years older than Wright), represents a vital trajectory within that African American tradition. He was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, and also developed the idea of the "Talented Tenth," the elite group of intellectuals, which established itself within the Harlem Renaissance and which would attempt, through a new "racial assertiveness," to improve race relations, especially through literature and the arts (Lewis xiii). Du Bois, who had written about the "Veil" and "double-consciousness" in his seminal *The Souls of Black Folk* even earlier (1903), is therefore a crucial link to the African American intellectual tradition.

In *Souls*, the Veil has several levels of meaning. It is evident that it is a metaphor for the division between the races, viewed from the side of the Blacks. Du Bois states that Blacks are "those who live within the Veil" (170). The Veil also presumes double consciousness, where Blacks for survival are forced to see themselves role-playing through the eyes of white Americans.

In *Native Son*, the symbols of the wall and curtain are not minor occurrences, but are repeatedly brought to bear on the text. Wright establishes the importance of the wall by using the word "wall" over eighteen times. The also frequently used term "curtain" -- it first appears early, when Bigger is feeling the shame of his family's situation, where they each must avert their eyes when others dress in their one room apartment (Wright, *Native* 10) -- appears linked to that wall (almost as a synonym) at least five times!

- "behind a wall, a curtain" (10),
- "behind a wall or a curtain" (107),
- "behind his curtain or wall" (239),
- "behind his curtain, his wall" (267), and again
- "behind his curtain, his wall" (269).

Wright seems to insist that for Black Americans there is no Melvillean wall that can be smashed through at one stroke as Ahab proffers (Melville 178); rather, they must break through a more psychological/emotional barrier – a thicker curtain-wall, laden with double consciousness.

Particularly in her interpretation of the wall and looming, Schultz misses Wright's insistence that the wall for Bigger is a curtain and Veil. Wright's purpose becomes clearest when Bigger is finally about to be caught by the white looming crowd. Wright's narrator becomes intensely omniscient, seeing inside the workings of Bigger's consciousness: "He was surprised that he was not afraid. Under it all some part of his mind was beginning to stand aside; he was going behind his curtain, his wall, looking out with sullen stares of contempt. He was outside of himself now, looking on…" (Wright, *Native* 267), and when the authorities told him to give up his gun, "He was behind his curtain now, looking down at himself" (268). Bigger experiences Du Bois's Veil as "two-ness" (38) here, almost simultaneously seeing himself as if through the eyes of others, experiencing, and protecting himself from, his own humiliating existence in relation to an American world which is not his own, and always looms.

Schultz shows that a "looming" racist society does influence Bigger's actions, but Bigger, as a complex character, is not simply a blank slate scrawled on by a racist environment. As Du Bois might help us understand, Bigger is also divided in his very consciousness between yearning for his own identity and fulfilling the requirements of that ambiguous "looming"

society which both singles him out as Black (accuses and shames him) and at the same time corners him into defined behaviors. Although scholars have more recently debated Bigger's psychological "split-consciousness," W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) had earlier named this general state of mind as "double-consciousness" which is probably a better term. (To use the word "split-consciousness" infers too much of a psychological aberration, almost a diagnosis of an internal flaw in an abnormal individual.) When Bigger is singled out by a racist society, he becomes isolated and alienated and remains behind his "curtain," his awareness of two souls, Du Bois's *Souls*. He desires to be a part of that very society which rejects him, as evidenced, for instance, by his desire to be a pilot as in the sky-writing airplane scene (Wright, *Native* 16-17), and at the same time places him in a submissive (because unworthy) role, with the required servile "Yessuh" and "Yessum" he performs before Mr. Dalton (Wright, *Native* 170, 187). What Bigger wanted was to "merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black" (240). For that to occur, he would have to dissolve his double-consciousness, but forces seemingly beyond his control will prevent this from occurring on any permanent level.

> Du Bois succinctly describes this "two-ness" (38) confronted by Blacks in America:
>
> The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two

> warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (38)

Just as Du Bois understands that Blacks contain within themselves two tugging consciousnesses side by side, one which is "American" and one which is "Negro" (38), so too does Bigger's consciousness locate him as divided between, on the one hand, proving himself in a Black community (which he believes would entail robbing a white storeowner and threatening his gang members), and on the other hand, as catering to a racist white society (accepting the stereotypes "if you are Black, you are a rapist" and "shuffling" before whites with "Yessuhs").

Bigger lives "behind a wall, a curtain," which prevents him from having to recognize or experience the shame and despair of his family's living conditions and precludes his ability to understand what his life means (Wright, *Native* 10). Some reference to Du Bois's Veil as a curtain and wall appears in James Nagel's essay on vision and blindness imagery in *Native Son*: "Blindness is…a metaphor of a lack of understanding and of a tendency to generalize individuals on the basis of race…both a rationalization for those who are looking and a disguise for those who are being looked at…Thus the Veil, like blindness, creates a sense of isolation within impregnable walls" (Nagel 152-53), and impairs vision on both sides of the racial color-line.

Wright expresses a growing divide for Bigger between Blacks and whites, portrayed as Bigger against the members of the white Dalton family household. It begins with Bigger being forced to become aware of his difference. When he stands before the wealthy Daltons' home before his job interview, he experiences a moment of crisis: he is conflicted by the thought that perhaps they will expect him to enter by a back entrance [a carry-over of the common practice of house servants in the South] but he does not see one and he fears a neighbor might call the police. To Bigger the Dalton home is like the big white master's house on the slave plantation,

ominous and disconcerting (Bigger knows his family's apartment is owned by the white millionaire Dalton). Feeling his separation from "his own people" (Wright, *Native* 44), Bigger wishes he had not come to a white area which makes him feel "fear and hate" (44). Inside the house at the interview, the look from Mr. Dalton causes Bigger to be "conscious of every square inch of skin on his black body" (46) and "…Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin (67). It is as if the mask is being ripped from Bigger as he tries to hold it fast. The Veil, which divides Bigger from the Daltons and Jan, is the result of the double-consciousness created in Bigger by the mixed expectations of the "other." This difference he was made to feel seemed to turn in on Bigger, then, and he became an object of hatred to himself and he felt his physicality melting away (67). He was "the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin" (67). Bigger senses the differing expectations of the two worlds, but he is not able to break through the Veil.

The Veil between Bigger and the authority and power of the white world widens, and Bigger's double-consciousness intensifies as the novel proceeds. As Jan passes near Bigger in the Dalton home, Bigger's "eyes are watchful, but veiled" (Wright, *Native* 166). When Jan confronts Bigger outside, after Jan has been questioned by Mr. Dalton and his investigator, they stand for a moment with the snow "forming a delicate screen between them" (Siegal 520; Wright, *Native* 171). This screen is the curtain, Du Bois's Veil, which causes Bigger to react, this time by pulling out his gun and intimidating Jan to leave him alone (Wright, *Native* 172). Soon, when Bigger begins to feel a sense of the significance of his action after he kills Mary, the Veil recedes somewhat: now Bigger does "not have to hide behind a wall or curtain" because he begins to feel safe temporarily in the "blindness" of the Daltons and others in their home (107).

The sense of power, and therefore a lessening of fear, which grows in Bigger after he accidentally kills Mary, is a realization of some connection to that other world, where he might be recognized as significant through the action he himself has done. The irony that one scholar, Dorothy Redden (1976), sees in Bigger -- that he senses his self or identity through the "significant action" of killing Mary, finding a sense of "creation" in the death of another -- is also noted by Fabre, earlier (1973) (Redden 385). Bigger realizes he has done something, he has acted, he has become significant to the white world, to which he in some way feels closer to by this act, yet obviously could not be farther from because of the loss to that white family. The Veil remains more heavily in place.

The Veil presumes double consciousness. In "How Bigger Was Born," Wright describes the variation in reactions that often arise from oppressive double-consciousness, primarily a "blind rebellion" or "sweet, other-worldly submissiveness (438). It is clear here that Wright picks up on Du Bois's description of the "two-ness." Wright states that this is "because the blacks were so *close* to the very civilization which sought to keep them out,…and because the very tissue of their consciousness received its tone and timbre from the strivings of that dominant civilization" (438). Wright's description here of Blacks being so near white society, which maintains them as outcasts, reflects Du Bois's Veil, which produces "double-consciousness." Bigger exhibits the two reactions to the experience of that double-consciousness: being defiant toward (and sometimes indifferent to) white culture and being submissive to the Daltons.

Du Bois gives Voice to the Veil

Bigger's racial double-consciousness, as well as his yearning to be part of American society, would make it difficult to compare him to Ahab, yet Schultz attempts it by reaching for epic grandeur although not realizing Bigger's vision is impaired by the heavy Veil or curtain, not

simply a wall. Schultz comes closest to understanding the wall as Veil when discussing the "pasteboard mask" and the concept of "facelessness" (644-45). Bigger confronts a man, whose visage is described as "a piece of white pasteboard" (Wright, *Native* 263) when fleeing on rooftops from the white mob, a crowd moving with advancing hate, pressing on to lynch him. Individuals seem to appear out of a "looming" whiteness (Schultz 643), a delineation of "looming" which Schultz senses Wright gleans from Lewis Mumford's analysis of *Moby-Dick* (rather than Melville's *Moby-Dick*; Schultz being uncertain whether Wright read the latter before 1940 [Schultz 640]) and provides meaning as the "white looming bulk" (Wright, *Native* 266) of white society that figures so prominently in Bigger's mind. White individuals are just "pasteboard mask[s]" and a part of what Bigger hates. This "pasteboard mask" and "looming," which tap emotions from *Moby-Dick,* create the preconditions for Bigger's complex conflict.

In fleeing over the rooftops, Bigger finds himself blocked by a "high water tank with a round flat top" (Wright, *Native* 266), almost Moby-Dick-like, but more within the Daltons' modern technical world from which Bigger is alienated. All Bigger sees is a "white looming bulk," (266) which again exhibits Wright combining and signifying on Melville's images. The "looming white wall," the racism of white society in *Native Son*, is Melville's "image of the ungraspable phantom of life" (Melville 5), unfathomable to Bigger; he hates it for its overpowering authority, and he strikes back at the mask which hides from him the meaning of his own life. Black individuals, like prisoners inside their masks, come up against the wall of white society, a "looming white wall" (Schultz 643), as Schultz emphasizes, and sense its "malice" toward the "other" (themselves). The prisoner can only strike out at this vast masked thing, an unchangeable immovable whiteness, a racism which the oppressed cannot break through. The "pasteboard mask" prevents the white and the Black from recognizing and

understanding each other; the Veil of racism hangs between them. Cornered by the vigilantes at the water tank, Bigger cannot break through this wall and his fleeing concludes.

Bigger's interaction with white society in *Native Son* can be viewed more theoretically by understanding Schultz's reference to Stephen George. Schultz wisely taps George's perceptions of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. She describes the protagonist behind his mask in sync with George's use of Levinas's theory: "Bigger experiences whiteness as both faceless and formless, hence as devoid of humanity…" (Schultz 645). Bigger is unable to identify this mask-like "faceless formlessness." In Books I and II of *Native Son*, Bigger is confronted by a vast looming whiteness and at the same time remains behind a "curtain." Schultz, in a footnote, reminds her readers that Melville also uses the "faceless" terminology when Ishmael is unable to recognize who or what Moby Dick is because the whale has no face (Schultz, *Notes* [#14] 652). Because it is so difficult to see behind the mask, there is no recognition of the "other." Schultz does recognize George's insight, that Bigger is confronted with this "faceless and formless" other, but she does not critically look beneath Bigger's mask enough to trace his hidden double-consciousness.

As I briefly mentioned earlier, Bigger's psyche has been under scholarly discussion and over time has become the center of an intense debate. This critical debate suggests that Bigger has a troubled consciousness or dual self, or what many scholars refer to as a "split-consciousness."[1] Stephen George, instead, uses a phenomenological approach to explain Bigger's reactions. In his article "The Horror of Bigger Thomas: The Perception of Form without Face in Richard Wright's *Native Son*" (1997), George accepts that Wright situates

[1] For further scholarship on this issue: Michel Fabre (1973), Jeffrey Sadler (1976), Robert Butler (1986), Louis Tremaine (1986), Stephen George (1997), Aimé Ellis (2002), and Matthew Elder (2010), among others. The debate is couched between, on the one hand, the influence of a racist flawed environment creating the crisis in Bigger with subsequent violent results, and on the other hand, a broken "split-consciousness" within Bigger himself.

Bigger as pressed to think and act in certain ways by societal racial and economic forces. He sees Bigger as influenced by the outside world, but also views Bigger as an individual so affected by those forces that the only type of relationship he is capable of is a stunted one. As understood through the ethical lens of Levinas, George views Bigger as confronted by the demand for ethical responsibility toward the "other" in his encounters with Mary and Bessie, who have become "objects" in his mind; and through a perversion in Bigger's connection with them, he turns in violence against a mere "face." But I would suggest that Bigger's complexity requires that one also examine *toward whom* Bigger is ethically responsible. American society is requiring him to react to powerful white authority, but Bigger is also pulled toward his own African American past. George uncovers Bigger's ability to cut up Mary's body and smash Bessie's head, for they are only "things" to Bigger. But more specifically, I believe, Bigger reacts to both the white (Mary) and the Black (Bessie). Because Bigger has been pulled in two disparate directions, his consciousness is affected. This notion of reacting to a "faceless and formless" object (as Schultz also notices) reflects the wall which Bigger comes up against. Mary, Bessie, and the man he strikes on the rooftop are not breathing, emoting human beings to Bigger, particularly at moments of violence toward them; he sees them as if also wearing the "pasteboard" mask that he himself wears. Yet, Schultz does not step beyond this analysis to discover the heart of Bigger's double-consciousness behind the Veil.

Schultz comes close to the Veil in her discussion of the "pasteboard mask" and in her discussion of "facelessness" borrowed from Levinas's approach; however, she fails to hear how Du Bois's Veil "speaks" in *Native Son* -- Du Bois's literary case study in *The Souls of Black Folk* will enable us to preview the Veil's voice, where Black John kills the prominent Judge's favored child, just as Bigger kills prominent Mr. Dalton's favored child. The curtain-wall stands firmly

as a Veil when examining Du Bois's contribution to Black literature, a Veil which Wright is clearly referencing. How does Du Bois himself explain the Veil? Besides the more formal description of the Veil in *Souls of Black Folk*, part of which was referenced earlier in this paper, Du Bois clarifies his idea of the Veil and double-consciousness in his fascinating fictional case study, Chapter XIII of his book. He allows the little story "Of the Coming of John," to speak for itself about the Veil he discusses more sociologically in other parts of *Souls*. Black John Jones is affected by the humiliating double-consciousness set up by the Veil between his Black past and white racist social expectations and perceptions. Similar to Bigger's uncomfortable experience in his first encounters with the white Daltons' culture, Black John has difficulty reintegrating himself into his own culture's southern hometown when returning from college in the North. John suddenly finds himself superficially conscious of his difference regarding his education and experience. In his youth, he grew up playing with another John, the son of the powerful local white Judge. It is this judge who will help but later racially target and shame Black John. Black John discovers his sister struggling to get away from the white friend of his youth, white John, the Judge's son. Black John, who is at that moment deep inside himself and angry with Jim Crow attitudes which moments ago had caused the Judge to remove his teaching job because he taught about the French Revolution, grabs a branch, reacts in anger and kills his white pal from childhood, the powerful Judge's son. Like Bigger, who confronts a "looming white wall" and in anger and fear strikes back, Black John acts quickly.

Du Bois's Black John, like Bigger, does not flee town but returns to the scene of the crime. John knows there will be no fair trial and waits for the mob to lynch him. John's double-consciousness is evident at that moment. As he imagines his college friends' futures, he distantly thinks his own name with an unfamiliarness, looking in at himself from the outside with

the double-consciousness of one who has lived two lives side by side, one of Southern submissiveness, the other of the educated Black having tasted Northern freedom.

I suggest that white John and Black John are metaphorically a unity and this brings the Veil to the fore. Both Johns went to college and came back realizing the backwardness of their hometown; both are dependent on the Judge. Their unity is Du Bois's "two-ness," which as double-consciousness is ever-present throughout the essay, not simply at its conclusion. The Judge's son is surrounded by the comfort of wealth, high culture, and acceptance, while Black John grows in awareness of Jim Crow and as Du Bois reminds his readers, "He grew…to feel…the Veil that lay between him and the white world; he first noticed now the oppression that had not seemed oppression before,…restraints and slights that…had gone unnoticed…" (Du Bois 175). Notice how Wright's Bigger sees those who "help" him as also being the enemy. Those things that had seemed natural before, like Bigger and his own Black skin, and the everyday presence of white helpers and judges, now felt strained.

Double-consciousness is layered through the story. Although Black John is suspended from school because of "tardiness, carelessness, and appalling good-humor" (Du Bois 174), white John's attitudes and actions, even if exactly those listed here, would have been acceptable for a youthful fraternity member on campus. The double standard is clear. The double-consciousness Black John experiences is shown in the double standard of the Judge praising his own son for going off to Princeton to "become a man" (174) and then telling the relatives of John, who is Black, that school will "spoil him" (174), i.e. make him unfit to quietly accept his oppression. Black John experiences the Veil as he returns to his hometown, hiding his resentment, but white John "did not veil his contempt for the little town" (181). That white John

does not have to hide his emotions illustrates the freedom and wholeness allowed to white John, which must be kept behind a curtain for Black John.

Du Bois brings together the duality, the white and the Black, tearing away the Veil at the conclusion: John goes back to the location where he "killed" his alter-self, white John, but the body is mysteriously not there. John has lived within the Veil and now has broken through it: "He wondered how Brown turned out, and Carey? And Jones – Jones? Why, *he* was Jones…[Jones is John's surname]" (Du Bois 183). He is at first looking at himself through the Veil, from outside himself looking in, then suddenly in a momentary flash, but only for a moment, he knows himself as one human being, both Black and "American," just as Bigger realizes who he is for a moment in prison and says "I didn't want to kill!...But what I killed for, I am!" (Wright, *Native* 429). But these instants do not last for either character, for the mob and the lynching (by electrocution "under the fairness of the law" in Bigger's case) await each protagonist. As Max tells the court with a touch of irony, "An outright lynching would be more honest than a 'mock trial'!" (384).

The Veil in Bigger's Four-walled Prisons

The "wall" imagery in *Native Son* places Bigger architecturally within different sets of four walls that are prison-like. Although Schultz misses out on the importance of the Veil in what follows, this portion of the paper takes the reader from room to four-walled room to view the Veil in Bigger's life, a tour of looming walls that Schultz would surely appreciate. One may notice that Bigger never seems to leave his every day "prison." Bigger realizes this when he tells Gus, his fellow gang member: "It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence…" (Wright, *Native* 20). Bigger here is like Black John as John states his own name as if it is someone else's. The Veil between

Bigger and the rest of the world prevents him from feeling unity with American society, and always leaves him within the complexity of his own double-consciousness.

The first room of the tour encounters Bigger in the claustrophobically "tiny, one-room apartment" (Wright, *Native* 4) his family lives in. It is no surprise that the Thomas family's apartment building on the South Side of Chicago is owned by wealthy white Mr. Dalton, who charges high rent for a rat-infested cramped space (Wright, *Native* 48, 326). Similar to a prison, there are no solid internal walls within it, so that Bigger, his brother, his sister, and his mother all have to look aside as they get dressed in the morning. It is as if the reader stands overlooking the scene from a "Panopticon" view of the dressing and undressing, adding to the shame the family members feel about the location and smallness of their quarters. As difficult as it would be to corner and kill a rat, the apartment is so small that when one appears, Bigger is able to smash it under a thrown frying pan (6). The "curtain" appears in this scene as cordoning off the kitchen area from the rest of the room (9), but the intentionally vague description is concretized as something more abstract. Bigger is living "with them, but behind a wall, a curtain" (10), the Veil which alienates Bigger and which causes him to separate himself from his family in his consciousness. He must avoid the gaze of his family. Bigger's anger seeps from behind his mask.

From this tiny family apartment of four walls, Bigger moves into Doc's poolroom. Like his apartment, this is another establishment run by whites for South Side Blacks. It is the locus of Bigger's Black gang and of the height of Bigger's emotions of anger, fear, and hate, which he transfers from whites onto Gus (Wright, *Native* 25). Bigger's mind is seething in violent images of punching or stabbing Gus (26-27) during their argument, but Bigger remains behind the Veil. He cannot let Gus and the rest of the gang notice that he is very fearful of robbing the white

storeowner. As mentioned earlier, one side of Bigger's "two-ness" desires to be accepted by the Black community. But as Wright's narrator states "All that morning he had lurked behind his curtain of indifference and looked at things, snapping and glaring…" (28). His anger is the result of the Veil; Bigger cannot be part of American society because America has prefigured him an outsider, and at the same time he is alienated from himself (28) and his own Black culture. Bigger does not have the assuredness of Ahab to break through the wall all at once in one "strike" (Melville 178); his whole life seems answerable to two separate worlds. Bigger strains under the chains that prevent him from being like the white pilot.

Continuing the tour, Bigger feels his imprisonment in Mary's bedroom within the four tight walls as blind Mrs. Dalton stands by the bed of soon to be smothered Mary. Bigger finds that "a hysterical terror seized him…A white blur was standing by the door…ghostlike" (Wright, *Native* 85), Mrs. Dalton is seen as if through an imaginary veil, a Veil which makes objects seem blurry when looked through; this Veil rises between Bigger and the privileged white world and immobilizes him. It has a sense of vagueness to it, just as the "looming whiteness" antagonized Bigger and made him fearful. It is this judgmental "looming whiteness" which stands large over Bigger, a Veil of ambiguity between himself and American society, as Ahab's "unknown but still reasoning thing…behind the unreasoning mask" (Melville 178). In her blindness, Mrs. Dalton is that unreasonable judgmental thing; in Bigger's mind she sees and judges him, turning him into the "Black rapist." The narrator asks, "How could he get out of the room?" (Wright, *Native* 87). Nothing is physically preventing him from running. He is psychologically terrified of staying and of moving outside of the four walls of the bedroom. He discovered then that Mary was dead and in his double-conscious "two-ness" he had killed her. Suddenly, Bigger's thoughts transfer to the "vast city of white people that sprawled outside" (87). The white crowd, which will soon

hunt him down, is separated from Bigger by a Veil. Looking through that "curtain," he has misinterpreted what is on the other side (white culture). His misinterpretation brings catastrophe to Bigger's life. This is surely the most gripping moment in the novel; the entire scene in the bedroom with its "white bed" (84) is a "white blur" and he places a figurative white veil over Mary's face.

Bigger's imprisonment in this room holds within it the ambiguity of his relationship to the other side of the Veil. Mary represents everything Bigger hates. The white looming world which has denied him everything in his life – this is the world he hates. Yet, Mary is also the young glamorous "other" in the movie Bigger watched, the beautiful glittery part of the white world which he desires. Bigger loves her and hates her at the same time, and the Veil stands between the two. But when he finds he has killed her, after he is away from this room, then he adopts the white world's definition of himself and states assertively to himself that "Yes, he had raped her" (Wright, *Native* 227), taking on the exact identity which the white society had cornered him into: he is now the black rapist even to himself. He has listened to that all of his life: if you are Black, you rape white women. Because Bigger so much desires all that he cannot have of American society, when he discovers that the white world tells him who he is, he conclusively takes at least that identity for himself.

Stepping into the next room, the Veil makes an appearance again in an abandoned building where, cornered by walled-in darkness, Bigger rapes and kills his Black girlfriend, Bessie. It is fitting that this skeleton of a building, which now only holds ghosts of the bustle of life once moving here, is also probably owned by Mr. Dalton, or someone like him. Bigger realizes that Bessie knows too much about Mary's death, so he commits himself to killing Bessie at this point. Before he lifts the brick to strike her, he sees "the white blur" again (notice the

word “the” indicates the reader has read this term before), and Wright directly references the first time the “white blur” made an appearance by now stating, “the white blur, hovering near, of Mary burning, of Britten, of the law tracking him down, came back” (Wright, *Native* 236). Thereby, Wright connects the two instances of killing with the appearance of the Veil. After he kills Bessie with a brick and throws her body down the shaft, he shines the flashlight over the spot where she had lain. Besides the blood, he sees “a faint veil of vapor hovering in the air above it” (238). Surely, Wright’s use of the word veil here strikingly references Du Bois’s Veil. Bigger felt the Veil was only vapor now, because “there remained to him a queer sense of power. *He* had done this. *He* had brought all this about. In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him…” (239). For the first time in his life, Bigger feels he is free and can be recognized (given recognition if others remove blinders from their eyes, which will soon happen when they discover Bigger is the killer). The Veil is now a vapor, diminishing for Bigger.

The Veil suddenly becomes a sort of gothic-like prison for Bigger when he leaves the semi-safety of another abandoned building, climbs through a trap door to the roof, and is about to flee for his life. On the roof, beams of search lights begin to circle Bigger more and more. “They circled slowly, hemming him in; bars of light forming a prison, a wall between him and the rest of the world…” (Wright, *Native* 258). One can almost hear the beams groan, like rusty hinges, as they cross each other encircling Bigger.

The four previous rooms have only been figurative prisons, but here the physical prison with its four walls into which Bigger is placed at the end of *Native Son* is a very real, government-run American institution. It also ironically turns out to be the only set of four walls where Bigger is able to recognize, if but for a moment, his true identity not tied to white culture.

Earlier it was shown that Stephen George, using the approach of Levinas, expressed the conditions under which it is possible for Bigger to kill, but he also did it in a way which still left open the possibility of Bigger finding his identity, or self, momentarily near the end of the book. George explains that through the intervention of a "face-to-face" with Jan, the dead Mary's boyfriend, the possibility is opened up for the appearance of a more human reaction in Bigger; it is as if there is a removal of a mask from Jan's face (George 502) and Bigger is able to relate to Jan himself. Wright lets Jan speak and Jan tells Bigger he loved Mary, but sitting in jail Jan thought about "all of the black men who've been killed, the black men who had to grieve when their people were snatched from them in slavery and since slavery" and if they could live with that, he should also (Wright, *Native* 288). By expressing this, Jan lifts the Veil to meet Bigger, as a human being, on the other side. Jan has offered friendship to him and "flung aside the curtain" (289). Jan, here, has discovered the secret to avoiding the "white philanthropist" syndrome. The Veil, for that moment, did not hang between the white Jan and the Black Bigger.

Philanthropy precludes meeting face-to-face. White philanthropists never cease harping on the "race problem" and trying to solve minorities' problems for them. From the time of Emancipation and maybe before, this almost invariably would be the way that these whites would relate to Blacks. When Du Bois's Judge decides to give Black John "a chance," he says "You know I'm a friend of your people…Now I like the colored people, and sympathize with all their reasonable aspirations…" (Du Bois 180). This is the exact attitude that Mr. Dalton in *Native Son* has when he tells Bigger, "I'm a supporter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [Wright brilliantly references the organization founded by W. E. B. Du Bois]" (Wright, *Native* 53) and "gave over five million dollars to colored schools" (56). The Judge and Dalton wish to help, if only they can control the direction taken by what they

consider these unfortunate helpless children, and have power over which achievements they will reach. This includes Mrs. Dalton, Mary, Jan, and also the Judge's white community. Here is radical/liberal society and all the white "do-gooders" and educators and social planners trying to stop racism, chasing the white whale, in charge but approaching the problem in the wrong way – and the result of which is the death of Bigger. (Ahab's crew of course dies too.)

Does Bigger Resemble Ahab?

If Bigger is pressured by a racist white world into performing acts of terror, which he had not planned out over a long period, then he is very unlike Melville's Ahab, who built an entire whaling journey around taking revenge on Moby Dick. Although Schultz pairs Ahab and Bigger as larger than life figures, I suggest that they are quite different – so different that perhaps Schultz retains a burden of proof, which she does not meet. Schultz's paralleling of Ahab and Bigger misses the Veil which screens Bigger's vision of the white world, separating him from that world and forcing him to view himself through its eyes. She shows that for Ahab, the white whale is the wall which he must break through, and for Bigger the wall is white society and white racism (Schultz 642). Both Ahab and Bigger experience isolation and alienation (648). But I noticed a discrepancy in Schultz's connection of this alienation to the protagonists' "feeling of rage and hate" and their "commitment to death and destruction" (647). True, Ahab is bent on destruction of Moby Dick and perhaps of anyone or anything that may stand in his path of accomplishing it. But Bigger did not plan to kill Mary. Unlike Ahab, Bigger is not a figure who has a plan to destroy a whale; only when he feels so cornered and walled in by racism, so threatened that he feels there is no alternative – only under these extreme conditions would he kill. I would suggest that Bigger did not have the all-consuming, long-term "commitment to

death and destruction" which Schultz describes. Here Ahab and Bigger differ and Schultz may be twinning them erroneously.

To Schultz's credit, she does instill in her readers the ability to read the significance of the immense weight of psychological pressure on both protagonists by highlighting their confrontations with their respective "looming walls." She explains that as Melville had done with Ahab, Wright created an epic hero; by signifying yet revising (in Henry Louis Gates's theoretical manner), Wright projects Bigger as encompassing a similar heroism, and even becomes a tortured hero who is capable of silencing white racism (Schultz 641). Schultz provides additional evidence for pairing Bigger and Ahab by showing that in "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright hints at the connection between Bigger and Ahab as "symbolic figure[s] of American life" and as representations of "the prophecy of our future," both phrases appearing in Melville's style and meaning (Schultz 640; Wright, "How" 447). In this way, Schultz links Bigger to Ahab almost at the level of grandeur. Yet, has not this broad all-encompassing "grandeur," so linked to the splendor of *Moby-Dick*, become too majestic to include Bigger?

Would Wright agree that there is epic grandeur? Ahab is discussed by C. L. R. James, a Black historian, activist, and social critic who was an older friend of Wright and was married to Wright's future biographer, Constance Webb. James interprets Ahab as an intentionally isolated individualist, who distances himself from his crew and becomes totalitarian. James analyzes *Moby-Dick* in his book *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In.* Perusing the text of *Moby-Dick*, it becomes evident that Ahab does isolate himself and also abuses his position of power. Ishmael, as Melville's narrator, refers to Ahab as "supreme lord and dictator" (Melville 133). Ahab makes explicit his dictatorial attitude, when he

tells Stubb, his second mate, "Down, dog, and kennel!" (138). And again his harshness comes through when he states that "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (178).

In his solitary harshness, Ahab does not even recognize the opposing attitude of his crew. He does not hear Starbuck's "foreboding invocation; nor yet the low laugh from the hold" (Melville 179) in response to Ahab's insistence on hunting down Moby Dick. Can the reader hear Wright's narrator here describe Bigger's Starbuckian reaction: "His lips twisted a smile that was half-leer and half-defiance" (Wright, *Native* 245)? James perceives that tyrannical Ahab desires a mechanical crew which will automatically do his bidding (James 50). During the final pursuit to kill Moby Dick, Ahab responds to Starbuck, and while verbally attacking him refers to Starbuck's bravery as "mechanical" (Melville 602). In his isolation, Ahab, earlier, begins to doubt the full loyalty of his crew in the mission of hunting down that specific white whale he is after, and therefore "he has himself hoisted up to the mast-head for he does not believe that the sailors now will shout if Moby Dick appears" (James 52). The crew, on the other hand, as if to counter the grandeur Schultz and Mumford attach to Ahab, is presented by James as "the power of human association for a common purpose, the unconquerable spirit of man" (60). James sees Melville's "main theme [as], how the society of free individualism would give birth to totalitarianism and be unable to defend itself against it" (54). Ahab brings his crew (all except Ishmael) down with him.

Bigger, in contrast to Ahab, yearns to be a part of American society. The "looming" white wall of racism causes him to isolate himself to avoid the shame imposed by it, and a Veil comes down between himself and others. Bigger isolates himself, but not the way Ahab does. Bigger looks through the Veil at others, seeing only a "white blur" rather than human beings. Bigger's repeated responses to racism, based in built up fear and anger, cause his actions in

killing Mary and Bessie. Yet, it is not simply the result of that racist environment. Bigger has developed a double-consciousness which corners him when he is in Mary's bedroom with her mother approaching. He hears in his head the oft repeated refrain, "Blacks are rapists," and internalizes it, just as he internalizes the shame he feels when he "becomes" his Black skin as whites look at him. In a double-consciousness, Bigger is both Black and American, but cannot reconcile the two. Bigger, in killing, is not a powerful totalitarian driving a crew. Bigger is in that crew!

Bigger is in C. L. R. James's crew, like Stubb who experiences a fearful dream of being kicked by Ahab and then kicking back at a pyramid. Ahab, turned pyramid, solidly stands while Stubb "like a blazing fool, kept kicking it" (Melville 142). C. L. R. James understands "how men rationalized their subservience to tyranny" and that Melville would have used this to his advantage (James 53). This is how James would most likely view Bigger. A fearful, angry crew member, in a moment of dispossession of his soul, responding to the "looming whiteness" and later suffering a further loss of his humanness as he kills Bessie in his attempt to escape from the approaching lynching (figurative here). Stubb rationalizes that Ahab's leg which kicked him is only ivory, so it cannot be an insult. Ahab leads his crew to their deaths in his quest, but first turns them into mechanical bodies to serve his will in the whale hunt for Moby Dick. James explains, "The crew [to Ahab] are not human beings but things, as he calls them 'manufactured men'" (James 16). Bigger is greatly manufactured; and it is a racist white society which made him. Wright warns America of the possible results of such a social dilemma.

James's humanism – he was one of the founders of Marxist Humanism – provides a context for such a warning. We could become the mob who could ignorantly accept fascism. Thinking more critically about how we view and treat others, taking care to not isolate ourselves

from other human beings, remembering what makes us human can prevent catastrophe. Ahab holds forth the torch lit by St. Elmo's Fire which burns on the *Pequod*'s yard-arms and grasps its power for himself alone: "I own thy speechless, placeless power…in the midst of the personified impersonal…the queenly personality lives in me and feels her royal rights" (Melville 550-51). Through the lightning and thunderbolt, Ahab controls the electricity which will pass through Bigger's body. It was too late for Ahab to learn the dangers of isolation and totalitarianism, but Bigger experienced humanness for a short moment before he was electrocuted, saving the potential humanity of the crew and us from the white whale and white Ahab; leaving us to create our future afresh.

As a Black Marxist, Wright most likely would see the white whale and the white captain as two sides of the same inscrutable and vile problem, just as would Wright's friend C. L. R. James: the racial divide is not healed by Du Bois's Judge or Wright's Daltons. These "friends" of the "Negro Cause" are dangerous. For Ahab, "The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them…He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down…" (Melville 200; James 12). That same destructive "monomania" and "rage" exists in Ahab! Moby Dick and Ahab are twin images.

Ahab arises from the driven privileged class, while Bigger is a "worker" trying to find solidarity in life. The aura around Ahab indicates an educated white captain, well-versed in the tools of his trade, having been a captain for forty years (James 8), and a controller of men like a corporate CEO. Bigger, on the other hand, is seeking a low-income job as a chauffeur in a wealthy white home. Bigger desires the world of the crew on the *Pequod*, "a body of men at work, the skill and the danger, the laboriousness and the physical and mental mobilization of

human resources, the comradeship and the unity, the simplicity and the naturalness" (James 28). But the Veil prevents Bigger from even seeing himself being accepted into this American society. He can never be a captain -- or a white pilot -- and he knows it.

Wright, himself, had been on the receiving end of racism and feels strongly that American society will suffer death, if it is not changed quickly. His intentional fight against racism, and his desire to liberate all Blacks around the world, is also his fight against fascism and Stalinism as well (Fabre 186, 224). In "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright emphasizes that "Bigger, an American product, a native son of this land, carried within him the potentialities of either Communism or Fascism…[although] He is not either…[Bigger] is product of a dislocated society" (Wright, "How" 446). C. L. R. James, from the same social circles, sees this fight in the same light. James shows the side of Ahab the individualist controlling despot who eventually completely excludes all ideas except his own and judges the entire world only by his own barometer, but additionally, James describes Hitler's similar move to ignore all trained staff and go with his gut "intuition" (James 50). Wright's fight is the same as James's. They both realize the connection between extreme isolation and fascism, as well as the need for the "crew" to work toward a common goal.

Schultz stresses her perception of Mumford's understanding of Ahab and Bigger in a larger-than-life "prophecy of our future" frame, seeing Ahab as representing the "highest purpose" in man (Shultz 650). This "highest purpose" initially appears to form a great model for imitation, but if we look in the "little lower layer" – in Melville's terminology (178), we find Ahab, and people like him, becoming what James describes as totalitarians. James specifically uses this "highest purpose" to prove that Ahab's purpose is morphed into totalitarianism, that Ahab more and more isolates himself from the crew and becomes a tyrannical leader. James

alerts his readers to avoid this situation in life, and forewarns the crew (his readership) to beware of leaders such as Hitler. Mumford, remember, was writing in the late 1920s before the fears of Nazism or fascism and Stalinism had come forward, while Wright was living through a time of the greatest fears of a runaway fascism that society, perhaps, would not be able to halt. Through Schultz's eyes we view Mumford's interpretation of almost an Alice in Wonderland "made large" picture of grandeur – or in Schultz's borrowing of Wright's words, "the prophecy of our future" and "symbolic figure of American life" (Schultz 640; Wright, "How" 447). But Schultz's linking of Bigger and Ahab with Wright's terminology may be changing Wright's intent. Of course, all grand purposes do not lead to evil, but this one seems to have attained it -- this is not the model that Wright as a Marxist anti-fascist writer in 1940 sought to emulate.

In the 1930s a more pessimistic view would begin to come through. In 1940, a long decade after Mumford's *Melville* (1929), when Wright is writing *Native Son,* Ahab is beginning to be viewed as a fascist figure fighting whales in an inhuman drive. Hence, Wright may have been taking a more pessimistic view, rejecting the grandeur, and viewing Melville's Ahab as becoming a despot, who draws the contours of a tyrannical purpose, ending in death for himself and most of his crew. James believes in the potential heroism of the crew, and would probably include Bigger in their circle, but not Ahab. Wright would probably agree. True, Bigger kills, but he becomes cornered to kill by a racist society. Bigger does discover for a moment in prison what it is to be human and this shows Wright's concern. Despite Schultz's optimism, racism is not dissipated by the killing of the whale; and Bigger dies by electrocution despite American society going through the motions of a legal trial.

Although Schultz, importantly, does fill a lacuna by delineating Melville's influence on Wright's *Native Son,* she does not notice the significance of the "curtain" as Du Bois's Veil, in

fact, she barely notices the curtain which Wright adds to Melville's wall. As a result Schultz misses a crucial difference between Ahab and Bigger. Ahab's quest is to hunt down Moby Dick, the white whale, to attempt to break through the intricacies of the unfathomable universe. Ahab is both mad at times and a totalitarian. And he has "scorn for the great masses of men as manufactured men…and Ahab lives…perpetually planning and scheming" (James 29). But it must be understood that Bigger is one of those "manufactured men" who has been prodded, questioned, and abused. He has little to plan because the wall is always continually and suddenly appearing before him, barring his way. He is scorned by whites, and pointed out as different and targeted for "improvement" by white philanthropists. When viewed metaphorically, Ahab, as white philanthropist or sociologist, drives the crew (Bigger among them), telling Bigger how to manage his life and how to view the white whale, the wall. Ahab and Bigger, therefore, are on opposite poles of the spectrum in so many ways.

Wake-up Call to End Repression

Wright notes, in his "Blueprint for Negro Writing," that although educated African Americans gained a feeling of pride from the accomplishments of Black writers, they did not see these writings as "a guide in their daily living" (Wright, "Blueprint" 195). Wright hoped that *Native Son* would show "the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations" (195). That is why he signifies on Du Bois. (Note these are not just "reasonable" aspirations determined by white philanthropists.) He wrote "Blueprint" to inspire Black writers. Perhaps Wright inspired C. L. R. James in this respect. But, if Wright intended to expose the dangers of where American racism was leading the nation (Rampersad ix), it would be necessary to reach out to both Blacks and whites – but whites needed to know too that they could not just reach out as philanthropists and sociologists. And Wright shows his readers that while in jail Bigger was

angry hearing people discuss how to help him. White dominance was being protected at the expense of Blacks, and too easily through the violence of lynchings, Ku Klux Klan stagings, and attacks on the "outcast."

The ringing of the alarm clock in the first line of *Native Son* is meant to wake up Bigger, but more importantly for the reader, to alert and warn America. The ring of the alarm is similar to the shout of the crew in *Moby-Dick* that the whale has been sighted*;* it is a call for action. Paul Siegel, in "The Conclusion of Richard Wright's *Native Son*," explicates how Max, Bigger's lawyer, tries to create understanding in the judge's mind that "the American people [are] proceeding to their doom like sleepwalkers" and they, just as the judge, are blind to the full meaning of the effects of American racism and will "actively support or passively and unthinkingly accept the institutions of a repressive society" (Siegel 519-20). (Perhaps Wright is also thinking here of Black John and his powerful white Judge who gave him a job, like Dalton gave Bigger a job.) Wright understands the need to create a Black identity through literature, but more specifically to present it in the context of the urgent call for Americans to wake up and take leadership against the racism which is dividing the nation, and against racialist fascism which Wright saw rising around the world. Combining his warning with his desire to expand on the African American literary tradition through his own writing, Wright pens *Native Son,* which has echoes of what he envisions as an American classic call to action, *Moby-Dick,* and reverberations of an African American classic call to action, *Souls of Black Folk.*

CHAPTER II

MELVILLE: CAMARADERIE AND REVOLT

> There was in the back of their minds…a wild and intense longing…to belong…to feel the clean, deep, organic satisfaction of doing a job in common with others.
>
> - Richard Wright, *How "Bigger" Was Born*

> In overthrowing me [Toussaint L'Ouverture], you have cut down in San Domingo only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep.
>
> - C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins*

Elizabeth Schultz is a foremost Melville scholar and must be praised for her important article, "The Power of Blackness: Richard Wright Re-Writes *Moby-Dick*," which links Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* to a work written ninety years later, Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Although few caught the impact of this link very clearly before, it is doubtful that any writer after Schultz could deny that Wright signified on *Moby-Dick*. She surely contributes to understanding how Wright was using the (white) American canon, but she surprisingly misses the Black canon that he deliberately pairs with it: Wright's frequent pairing of Melville's "wall"

with Du Bois's "curtain." In addition, it is not just any book she misses, but perhaps the most important book in the Black canon after Frederick Douglass's autobiography – the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (Perhaps Wright sees his great novel signifying on the best in the American white canon and the best in the Black one.) And because of this oversight, missing why Du Bois's heavy "Veil," which Wright will extend later to the "color curtain," is linked to Melville's wall, Schultz underestimates double consciousness as a theme for Wright's *Native Son*. But Schultz's omission of the Black canon (Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*), which is being paired with Melville's classic, led her to fall into a derived mistake: she seems to assume that Wright would accept the dominant analysis of *Moby-Dick* at the time, Lewis Mumford's interpretation. But Wright, unlike Mumford, does not seem to identify with Ahab in his heroic determination and near-epic struggle against the white whale. Wright would more likely see Ahab as totalitarianism incarnate, with his wooden leg locked into place, and his lungs screaming and his arm pointing the way dramatically to humanity's sure destruction.

This chapter will switch the focus of attention away from Ahab. Much like his future friend, the prominent Black intellectual C. L. R. James, who later in prison would write a book defending Melville's crew, Wright's eye would be on that crew not the captain. Notably, Wright seeks to empower the crew against any totalitarian Ahab figures. If Wright's attachment to the sea story *Moby-Dick* is not predicted by Mumford's interpretation, then what would predict it? Three qualities of Melville's story itself predict that a young Black Communist Party member would signify on *Moby-Dick*: 1) Melville's sense of the sea as a passageway to slavery but also to freedom, 2) Melville's sense of the sea as a locus of revolt (revolution from below, in Wright's more Marxist mindset), and 3) Melville's sense of the sea as an opening for a new

camaraderie (proletarian internationalism). These three qualities would stand as a foundation for Wright's thought, just as much as for Melville's.

The Mumford Issue

Before elaborating these three points that lead to my crew-centered interpretation as opposed to Schultz's, it must be stated that Schultz's view, assuming a connection between Wright and Mumford's interpretation of Melville, sounded strong to me at first glance. A young man like Wright, recently out of the poverty of the South and now living in the poverty of Chicago, with few resources and not having finished high school, would own few books. Although Wright read incessantly, most of his books were lent to him or were from the library. Schultz, however, notes that one book he did own was Mumford's 1929 book on Melville (640). She notes that fact in passing and adds that in writing a part of *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright gleans favorably from another book by Mumford, *The Golden Day* (640). And Schultz reminds us in her article that Wright knew Mumford, who arranged one of Wright's first works to be published in the mid-1930s (652n7). (Schultz did not mention but could have mentioned that, at the time Mumford published Wright's story, Mumford was a noted progressive and a part of a group of intellectuals Wright in 1936 would have clearly admired.) Schultz also establishes that Mumford considered *Moby-Dick* an American epic and Wright considered his book *Native Son* an American epic. She quotes Wright as saying that he wanted Bigger to be "a symbolic figure of American life" (640; Wright "How" 447), "a living personality and at the same time a symbol of all the larger things" (640; Wright "How" 448). She then argues that, given the desire of Wright to find a symbol that large (and given Wright's knowledge of Mumford's book and the stature of the book), that Wright, following Mumford chooses Ahab as the symbolic figure to signify on in *Native Son* (640). She assumes that Mumford's interpretation "seems to predict"

Wright's choice of imagery (642): that Wright sees his Bigger struggling like Ahab against a monstrous problem, and that for Wright, "Bigger is as heroic as Ahab in his struggle" (Schultz 641). And Mumford's Ahab "stands for [human] purpose in its highest expression" (650). The prediction seemed so easy.

Yet, pairing Bigger to Ahab produces too many inconsistencies. For Wright, I suggest, Ahab is the boss of a medium-sized industrial enterprise, a captain of an industry as it were, an unswerving, driving, fanatical force ordering workers to keep the flag up as he risks bringing it all down with him for his own interests; on the other hand, Bigger is nearly unemployed, insecure in the car with two whites, terrified of being accused, empowered in some ways after the death of Mary, but frightened and hiding. Schultz, straining to make her grand Ahab/Bigger pairing work, and perhaps noticing the similar "M" and "D" initials, seemingly pairs white *Moby-Dick* with white Mary Dalton (642). She seems to see Ahab wanting Moby-Dick to submit and Bigger wanting Mary Dalton to submit. But it does not really work well for this reader, since Bigger hardly exhibits the focused determination of Ahab when he dreads helping drunken young Mary up to her house, and terrified and awkward, tries too hard to keep her from making drunken mutterings when Mary's blind mother enters the room. It seems more sensible to see Wright's important comment that Bigger is "a symbol of all the larger things" ("How" 448) (as bigger, as larger), because Bigger is somehow symbolizing the outcasts, the poor, the majority, the very ship crew with all its problems, frailties (and even divisions) rather than the commanding Ahab steering them all to death.

When Schultz shows that at the tower ledge Bigger sees the white faces in a "deep down" sea spinning below him, and in the same paragraph the term "white looming bulk" (Schultz 643;Wright, *Native Son* 265) appears twice, Schultz proves conclusively that Wright is playing

with flurries of images referencing the whirlpool conclusion of *Moby-Dick*. Yet, there is an alternate interpretation for the tower ledge/whirlpool scene, an interpretation making more sense than stressing Bigger as Ahab. For one thing, Ahab dies in the whirlpool, but Bigger lives through 150 more pages. This almost makes Bigger Ishmael (not Ahab), the living remnant of the crew who will live to tell another story, a better story (and a grander epic) where (possibly) the crew is not led to destruction but confronts the tyrannical twins of the white whale and white industrial capitalists like Ahab, who play recklessly with the valuable lives of Blacks and whites alike.

What I suggest here is in a sense not only a better interpretation of *Moby-Dick* itself, but also a possible alternate ending, a sequel to *Moby-Dick*, as it were. There is redemption and the signal of a new Black and white solidarity (in the form of Jan and Bigger meeting as equals, dare I say friends) at the end of Wright's book. I will argue that Wright may sense that a new revolutionary activity to achieve a just and vigorous common good as the basis for a new society is emanating also from *Moby-Dick*. The alternate vision of the *Pequod* on the Atlantic will appear as *Benito Cereno* continuing the crew's story from *Moby-Dick* in ways directly related to the "motley" crew (to be defined shortly) and their adoption of a method of repetitive revolt.

This repetitive revolt denotes a continuing and spontaneous self-activity and a new camaraderie. Wright, a Black intellectual signifying on Du Bois as well as Melville, would hear the drumbeat of revolt in *Moby-Dick* against Ahab, while Schultz and Mumford did not. Wright will hear a different story than they do, when he reads an epic novel taking place in the international waters of the "Black Atlantic" (Paul Gilroy's term). I suggest that his ear is tuned to hearing sounds of revolt, the dangerous motley crew, the true actors in history, those who will unseat the intensely self-involved Ahabs.

Although it is not necessary to develop Mumford's view any further, in depth, it is important to explain the following three points briefly before exploring my alternative (Black Atlantic) analysis, because Schultz makes so much of Mumford's heroic Ahab interpretation.

True, Wright knew Mumford personally, was helped by Mumford and probably read two books by him, but things had changed since 1929 when Mumford wrote his book on Melville, changed dramatically. The 1930s was a period of depression and labor upsurge, and the Communist Party members were urging it on. Part of the felt urgency was that all during that decade fascism had been rising internationally, the deadly enemy of the workers. (And it *could* happen here, as one famous novelist Wright was reading put it – we know Wright had read some books by Sinclair Lewis.) Fascism was not foreign; capitalism itself, the economic system heralded in America by Henry Ford and others, was the real root of fascism according to communists. It is much more likely (contrary to Schultz) that Wright, a Communist Party member, was repulsed by whatever this strange feud is between white Ahab and the white whale, the joint enemy of those of us doing the work on the ship. Wright, when younger, might have respected Mumford, but would hardly be attracted to Mumford's interpretation that glamourizes the captain, when writing *Native Son* in 1939-40.

True, Mumford was on the left throughout his life, but at least two leftist Black writers have a different interpretation than he had. The first, C. L. R. James, a major figure in the Caribbean/Black Atlantic struggle, was a Marxist of great fame who was interpreting Marx through the lens of Hegel (more on Hegel later) and would become a very close friend of Wright just a few years after *Native Son* was written and throughout the 1950s. James wrote a book in 1953, *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways*, clearly rejecting Mumford's interpretation. He insists that Melville's epic hero was not Ahab but rather the castaways and workers, the international,

interracial crew. To James and Melville, the "castaways" are those left adrift in the international waters of the broad Atlantic, and those, like Wright's Bigger, who must live outside of the mercantile world's dependence on capital and a secure home. Unlike those "who feel that at any moment what they possess and where they stand in the world could be lost through a downturn in the market or the wreck of the ship of state" (Thomson 86), the castaway has already lost his standing in society or, like Bigger, was never given the opportunity to develop one. James and Wright's hero lies in the crew, not in the captain. The second leftist Black writer, Ralph Ellison, who was an acquaintance of Wright while *Native Son* was being written, was also to become a critic of Mumford. Although Mumford was a liberal and leftist, he nevertheless could not see how the Black dimension would aid, not distract from, the working class struggle. Ellison thought that Mumford missed the color line, even missed the significance of the Civil War, the world-historical "Second American Revolution" as Marx famously called it (Nadel 2-3, 94, 158n6). Mumford saw the Civil War as senseless slaughter, a blight on history (Foley 179). [For a polemical approach building on Ellison's view, looking at Mumford's glorification of the "Golden Day" (viewing Melville through a rose-colored lens which celebrates an American Renaissance and ignores the Black struggle), see Alan Nadel 3, 88-89, 158n6].

True, Wright owed Mumford a great debt in 1936, but Constance Webb's biography of Wright makes note that when many writers were backing away from the Communist Party in the later 1930s, Mumford was among them (Webb 150). Wright lined up greatly with the writers who stayed with the party during the time he was writing *Native Son*, and he believed that those writers like Mumford had shown the weakest vacillating qualities of the petty bourgeoisie at a crucial time, when the chips were down (150). And Constance Webb never mentions Wright

interacting with Mumford after 1936, even though Mumford remained a major intellectual figure into the 1970s; nor was Mumford even mentioned in Hazel Rowley's long biography.

Schultz does not mention the above three points, but Ahab would seem less like Wright's epic hero and Mary Dalton less like Moby-Dick, if Schultz realized that Mumford's 1920's writings were probably ringing hollow to Wright by 1939-40.

The Black Atlantic as Passageway

I do not have any more stone-solid evidence at hand for my analysis than Schultz had for her Mumford-inspired interpretation, because Wright did not apparently discuss anywhere why he signified on *Moby-Dick* the way he did, and before Schultz wrote her article the *Moby-Dick/Native Son* issue remained unexplored. I offer that my interpretation has as much, or a little more, standing as a working intuition as hers. Then, if Schultz's interpretation that Mumford's analysis "predicts Wright's choice of imagery" is set aside, it opens up the possibility of finding a better viewpoint to predict how Wright would look at *Moby-Dick* and choose to signify on it. I think Wright would look at the grand novel of the *Pequod* by placing that ship in a special setting, the setting of the Black Atlantic, home of the oppressive Middle Passage, but also home of the "motley crew," the home of Caribbean slave rebellions, and home of the freeing passage-way back to Senegal when needed.

Although Melville is completely at home with the sea, I have seen little direct evidence of Wright's reverence for it. But as a Black intellectual he surely must have had some frightening and fearful images. The sea can separate one from one's true home and also be a wild and dark deep grave, as he says in *Native Son*, in the tower/whirlpool passage, "an ocean of boiling hate" (265). On the other hand, we know that his maternal grandfather, an escaped slave who lived with the Wright family when Richard was young, loved the efforts of Frederick Douglass (Webb

11-12) and Richard Wright surely knew the work of Douglass himself, who, despite knowing the horrors of the sea, looked to it as the symbol of freedom – a passageway to freedom in the Black Atlantic.

Slaves like Douglass yearn toward the new horizon and the freedom the sea offers. The slave's gaze, in 1799 (Melville's *Benito Cereno* is set in that year), is not the gaze of the Saint-Domingue planters or the imperialists of Spain and France. The slave's gaze does not settle on the wealth to be gained from the Atlantic currents; the slave's eye passes over and beyond the Middle Passage, the wealthy sugar plantations of Saint-Domingue, and the commercial buyers in Europe and America. The sea is freedom to the oppressed, a liberty beckoning just a little further. Douglass was able to broaden his horizons through his imaginative vision of the sea. Douglass expresses this longing for freedom in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*:

> I have often…stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced…the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. (64)
>
> My thoughts would compel utterance… with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships: "You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave!...You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly round the world…O that I could also go! Could I but swim! If I could fly!" (64)

This sense of yearning for freedom is also felt by those who look into the vastness of the sky by day and the stars by night. It is well-known that the stars' formations led escaping slaves to freedom. Douglass named his own newspaper the *North Star*, which led him to even further freedom, allowing him some independence from William Lloyd Garrison. Wright's Bigger, in *Native Son*, also felt a similar yearning for recognition and freedom in gazing at the airplane in the sky and wishing he were a pilot (16-17) in control of his own future.

Wright himself yearned for freedom and journeyed to obtain it. He left the South for the North when young hoping for a better life, then traveled to New York. As Paul Gilroy emphasizes, "Wright's life bears witness to the value of critical perceptions that could only have been gained through the restlessness, even homelessness, that he sometimes manages to make into an analytic opportunity" (150). *Native Son* is set in Chicago, but written in New York (Webb 169). And Wright moved from Chicago to New York, still a major port city in the late 1930s, in order to lessen his distance to the freedom and respect he desired. He would have known that the Black Atlantic represented freedom for Blacks, not just a freedom to return to Africa but also to find openings in Europe. Wright would move to Europe later. Du Bois, whom Wright signifies on in *Native Son,* famously studied in Europe, finding far more acceptance than he would have otherwise, and traveled often (Gilroy 117). In this way, the sea is a passageway to potential. Douglass traveled the sea to Europe and found respect, and also in 1889 became a prominent American ambassador to Haiti (Buck-Morss 55n97). C. L. R. James, who was living in the States when Wright wrote *Native Son*, although James probably did not know Wright directly until after *Native Son* was written – moved between Britain and the Caribbean. In London, James's play on Toussaint L'Ouverture in the 1930s played to great cheers. And Paul Robeson, a Black, communist-circle, intellectual public figure and friend of Wright, had found respect in Britain and acclaim as the lead actor in James's London play in 1936 (Buhle 346). Once Wright left for Europe in 1946, and from there visited other parts of the world, he would discover the sense of freedom and respect the sea could offer, and consequently would never move back to the States.

The Black Atlantic as Revolt

The "Black Atlantic" concept used here – expanding on the concept in the book *The Black Atlantic* by Paul Gilroy, and with the added symbolism drawn from Linebaugh and Rediker's "Atlantic currents in motion" (2) -- would include the ebbing and flowing from Africa to the Caribbean and to Europe and the American East coast. This Black Atlantic concept involves commerce, including the slave trade and whaling, but also implies revolution. When Wright picked up Melville's book, he noticed that a ship is not only a conveyance for transporting goods and hunting whales, but for transporting revolt, and Wright would notice that Melville's *Pequod* is itself a locus of possible seething rebellion. Wright was also aware – at the very least because of the Robeson-James concern with Haiti – that the Caribbean was an historical Atlantic center of revolt.

Revolt was the watchword of the American South and of the Caribbean islands just across the water, from the eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth when *Moby-Dick* was written. The revolts occurring in Saint-Domingue, (Haiti, before independence) for instance, in the 1790s reverberated loudly through America; not only by objective news of revolt moving with the commercial ships from Saint-Domingue, but by sympathetic local slave revolts popping up in America itself. Melville, writing under the felt tensions of the antebellum period, takes an immediate palpable interest in the Saint-Domingue revolt which occurred in the near-distant past and is associated with the slavery issue in America. In fact, Melville had an interest in Toussaint L'Ouverture over a long period (45), according to critic Jonathan Beecher. Melville had received a gift copy of Harriet Martineau's *The Hour and the Man*, her biography of Toussaint, "while he was seeing *Moby-Dick* through the press" in 1851 (45) and before the serialization of *Benito Cereno* in Putnam's in 1855. Although Beecher avoids the inference that Melville felt

inspirited to write *Benito Cereno* which centers on revolt, after reading Martineau's book, that possibility is surely one that should be left open.

When Melville is writing in the 1850s, the Saint-Domingue revolt is still reappearing in the news. Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the Saint-Domingue island revolt, has become a symbol of the revolution. On February 27, 1855, within the same year in which Melville's serialized *Benito Cereno* is published, a prominent article appears in the *New York Daily Times*. Melville may have noticed it. Entitled "Toussaint L'Ouverture – Lecture by C. W. Elliott," the article reports on a speech given to the New York Mercantile Library Association by historical lecturer C. W. Elliott. The article, giving high praise to both the lecturer and Toussaint, states that "the Revolution brought out [Toussaint's]… talents" (8). Yet, the *New York Daily Times* writer, unable to resist making a racial essentialist remark, denigrates the international stature of Toussaint by reporting on "his rare domestic virtues": "He loved home life, yet he did not shrink from the most arduous privations in the service of his countrymen" (9). Belittling the stature of Blacks by centering discussion on their "domesticity" instead of their revolutionary activity, as the *Daily Times* author does, is indicative of the prevalent racist attitudes that are common at Melville's time: Blacks make such great domestics, since they shine things so well, cook so well, etc. Here, the story of the Black oppressed is overshadowed by the dominant power's narration of history, despite the Blacks being the agents of rebellion. Melville mocks that demeaning attitude toward Blacks and their supposed fitness for domestic work, in his next great ship story, *Benito Cereno*.

The Saint-Domingue rebellion was a series of slave revolts. Slave rebellion, in particular, holds an appeal for Melville due to his personal exposure to the slave issue. Eric Sundquist reminds his readers:

> Melville saw the centrality of slavery and revolution in antebellum American political and cultural life – not least in the corresponding 'shadow' of blackness that San Domingo's successful slave revolution cast over the failed design for a democratic social world in the United States. (28-29)

Melville recognized the centrality of slavery in the Saint-Domingue revolt, and simultaneously saw that somehow American society was failing to uphold its own plans for a broad democratic egalitarianism by embracing slavery. He was deeply affected by issues related to slaves and their revolts in his own time. First, during his married life, Melville was confronted daily by his father-in-law's public actions as a judge. According to Jean Fagan Yellin, Judge Lemuel Shaw directly sent a fugitive slave back into slavery by refusing him habeas corpus (678), thus upholding the Fugitive Slave Act (but Shaw did hold a "personal opposition to slavery"[Yellin 678]). Second, Peter Gansevoort, Melville's maternal grandfather owned slaves (Robertson-Lorant 3), so Melville surely would have understood the ugly side of the institution. Third, he would have heard news of shipboard slave revolts: Yellin mentions two widely discussed instances of pirate ships off the eastern coast of America, the *Amistad* (1839) and the *Creole* (1841) (680). These ships were carrying cargos of slaves, but these Blacks rose up and refused to accept any more ill treatment, either joining pirates who took over their ship or, in mutiny, gaining control of the ship themselves. The increasing frequency of slave revolts, which was beginning to affect the income from Atlantic trade routes, was bringing to consciousness capitalist society's dependence on slavery. Experiences like these may have nudged Melville to express in *Benito Cereno* the conditions that would remind the American white population that political change was worth contemplating.

Melville, in *Benito Cereno,* allows a camaraderie to emerge in the crew that defies the institution of slavery and engages revolution. Wright's project is to encourage Black writers to "own" that same sense of revolt. In this sense of revolt and in the cooperation and camaraderie necessary for group rebellion will be found the parallel thought of Melville and Wright.

The Black Atlantic as Camaraderie

Anyone reading Melville's work – including Richard Wright to whom we will return later – would notice that Melville has deep respect for the traditions of the sea, recognizing crew camaraderie and diversity as positive characteristics. Despite Ahab's claim to dictatorship in *Moby-Dick*, a ship's world could be and often was quite democratic and egalitarian at the level of the crew. Melville as a young man yearned for the sense of crew cooperation and variety of diverse peoples, and he found that camaraderie and diversity in his own youth while whaling with the crew of the Acushnet. Within his fiction, Melville displays it: in *Typee* he fondly encounters Pacific islanders; in *Moby-Dick* he meets Africans, Native Americans, and a variety of races; in *Pierre or The Ambiguities* Native Americans appear; in *Benito Cereno* the Africans' nobility is noted. More particularly, Don Benito's crew in *Benito Cereno* has a unique unity in its diversity: the slaves are captured from disparate areas of Africa, speak various languages or dialects (Buck-Morss 120), yet learn to communicate and plot revolt.

The "motley" ship crews on the Black Atlantic discovered pathways to camaraderie, without which they could not have revolted from below in any unified way. With the many sea encounters Melville personally had and given his cosmopolitan reading habits, and with his taste for stories emphasizing rebellion and camaraderie, Melville would be one of the first today to recognize the importance of Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's idea of the "motley crew." In *The Many-Headed Hydra,* these authors locate a hint of the crew's rebellious history in the

Renaissance origins of the term "motley": "the 'motley' was a multicolored garment…worn by a jester who was permitted by the king to make jokes, even to tell the truth, to power [and]…the motley brought carnivalesque expectations of disorder and subversion." (27-8). This sense of "disorder," as the messiness that appears in rebellion, is evident in Melville's *Benito Cereno,* and here the "motley" crew, assembled from remote parts of the world, becomes a powerful force for subversion. This disorder is not the result of poor planning, but rather it is seeming disorder that surprises the eye with sudden unexpected and repeated incursions. (The ruling class is ultimately unable to keep the proletariat "in line.")

The motley crew, taking on its "motley" hue, arose in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries: "European capitalists had to forcibly expropriate masses of…[those who owned property for subsistence] so that their labor-power could be redeployed in new economic projects in new geographical settings" (Linebaugh and Rediker 17). The dispossessed from "England…, Ireland, Africa, the Caribbean, and North America" (28) were destined to become part of the "motley crew." The work of this proletarian crew varied from being "skilled navigators and sailors on early transatlantic ships" to being plantation slaves and servants of the wealthy (28). These skilled multiethnic crews became the fodder that oiled the capitalist machine and ensured its expansion. But these exploited workers, who learned a sense of cooperation and discipline under the eye of their captains or masters, also began using these acquired skills as part of a process of subversion. Their mutinies brought disorder, their riots did too.

Once the revolts begin, the ruling class has difficulty restoring order; a strange force emerges from the sea -- the hydra monster from the "Hercules-hydra myth" (Linebaugh and Rediker 3-4). As the myth revealed, Hercules's labor was daunting, because when he tried to kill the hydra creature by cutting off one of its heads, two new heads appeared where the first one

had been (2). I suggest that the hydra appears in the revolts in *Benito Cereno* as a regeneration of the latent revolt in *Moby-Dick*: the insurgents from one revolt in *Moby-Dick* (one head of the hydra) whisper the techniques to another motley crew and shock waves reverberate to a new revolt in *Benito Cereno* (a second head of the hydra). Social historians Linebaugh and Rediker find both cooperation and intrigue in how the motley crews develop from laborers into rebels, converging as hydra centers of revolt:

> From the beginning of English colonial expansion in the early seventeenth century through the metropolitan industrialization of the early nineteenth, rulers referred to the Hercules-hydra myth to describe the difficulty of imposing order on increasingly global systems of labor. *They variously designated dispossessed commoners…, indentured servants…, pirates, urban laborers, soldiers, sailors, and African slaves as the numerous, ever-changing heads of the monster*. But the heads, though originally brought into productive combination by their Herculean rulers, soon developed among themselves new forms of cooperation against those rulers, from mutinies and strikes to riots and insurrections and revolution. Like the commodities they produced, their experience circulated with the planetary currents around the Atlantic. (3-4) [emphasis mine]

This reveals a paradox in the historical process of labor relations. Because the historical motley crew of working people were learning and working hard together and building cooperative capabilities and camaraderie, it would seem probable to the rulers that they would continue working hard together in building capitalist ventures. But a shift in the paradigm occurs. Their labor becomes too oppressive and the crew members realize they are being treated as objects by their capitalist overseers. These new "rulers" have attempted to create a

"mechanical" crew that will automatically do their bidding. But the motley crew members, watching the frightened rulers trying to control them, begin to understand that their own labor is the power that keeps the system functioning. It becomes apparent to this crew that they are being navigated by totalitarians (controlling fanatics, like Ahab), but their freedom is not so out of reach if they stick together. So they build their forces to revolt in order to liberate themselves.

Because the motley crew raises fear in the capitalists who have become wealthy on their "mechanical" labor, the owners portray the crew as cut-throat pirates, lawless and undisciplined troublemakers – or simpletons. The plantation owners and slave traders increasingly sense that when one revolt is crushed, another will appear even stronger in another geographical location and time, the hydra now having two heads instead of one. The revolts that occur in Saint-Domingue, for instance, are rightfully feared by plantation owners in the American South.

Southern leaders tried to contain the spreading damage from repetitive incidents of hydra expansion. The Stono Rebellion, starting in Charles Town, South Carolina in 1739, (during a period of great concern about lawlessness at sea) was one slave revolt that grew to about one hundred insurgents. In the aftermath, desperate to contain further revolts, the "terrified white South Carolinians" quickly made their slave laws stronger (Berkin 99-100), suspecting that the hydra's heads would multiply quickly. Yellin mentions a much larger slave revolt that followed at the turn of the century, the year 1800, in Virginia: "several thousand Negroes, evidently in league with the Haitian rebels, [were]…discovered" (681). Notice the fear of the hydra – that the Haitian insurgents were in contact with ("outside agitators" in 1960s terms) the Virginia slaves. During this time, word of revolt was spread by slaves, sailors, and, pirates, etc., subversively from France to Saint-Domingue, and from there to America, and back again.

Again, if Melville were alive today, he would recognize the significance of Linebaugh and Rediker's motley crew. Melville's crew is a "motley" crew in *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno* that at various points becomes the jester: singing and dancing on the deck of the ship, while "telling the truth to power" (Linebaugh and Rediker 27-28). At other moments, the crew members engage in serious bloody fighting with an ardor no less strong than that of the slaves in the Saint-Domingue revolution. One characteristic of the "motley crew" is its ability to work in the face of injustice, and its capability to confront its powerful enemy with a masked truth while seeming to submit at the same time. This capability is dependent on who becomes privy to the truth, which is carefully circumscribed by Frantz Fanon:

> For the people [the colonized], only fellow nationals are ever owed the truth…In answer to the lie of the colonial situation, the colonized subject responds with a lie. Behavior toward fellow nationalists is open and honest, but strained and indecipherable toward the colonists. Truth is what hastens the dislocation of the colonial regime, what fosters the emergence of the nation. (14)

The motley crew is aware that their plans for revolt will only come about from the level of the crew. The truth, therefore, remains within their circle. No matter what veiled truth they place before their oppressors, the latter remain blind to the full truth, and this is intentional on the part of the insurgents. Subterfuge and rebellion work hand in hand as the crew plans a more humane future.

The motley crew has arisen from a multitude of urban and maritime centers -- on the coasts of America, Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa -- and has achieved considerable class unity despite, and because of, the urban environments ashore that supply its multiethnic/ multilingual experience and skilled capacity. As international commerce expanded, many

shipboard members of the motley crew, in particular, would not easily accept the governance of an evil captain who, in addition to the normal risks and hardships of the seafaring life, would impose enormous additional burdens on the crew, such as withholding wages for long periods, or supplying very low rations (almost to starvation), or inflicting harsh punishments (Linebaugh and Rediker 150). These sailors refused the role of being "manufactured men." Due to the severe conditions, "sailors mutinied, deserted, rioted, and…resisted" (150). Tired of their burdens and realizing they were close to perishing, many sailors departed to join pirate communities when pirates approached to attack their ships – just as some may have done in the *Amistad* or *Creole* incidents. At a certain point, shortages of sailors began to affect commerce, and the English navy was sent out to crush the pirate ships along the coast of Africa, because the pirates were interfering with the international movement of goods and the all-important transportation of slaves from Africa to America or the Caribbean (170).

These more specific "pirate" motley crews were not only known for their adventures, but also for their violence. In *Benito Cereno*, Captain Delano occasionally suspects Don Benito of being a pirate, because he misinterprets Don Benito's secrecy, and fears some spontaneous attack. But Don Benito is simply following Babo's stage directions. At the conclusion of the narrative, Captain Delano and his own crew on the *Bachelor's Delight* prepare to recapture the *San Dominick* fugitive slaves after they revolt a second time. But Melville, in sympathy for the rebels, seems to ask: who really is the malicious "pirate"? Captain Delano's sailors gloriously charge onto the receding *San Dominick* to steal and pillage by killing some of the ex-slaves, re-enslaving many, and confiscating the 1000 doubloons of gold and silver, to perpetuate and expand the capitalist economy. The aggressive pirates in this case, the reader may discern, are not the re-enslaved Blacks and other *San Dominick* crew members, but Captain Delano and the

crew of his *Bachelor's Delight*. "The *Bachelor's Delight*," the reader may notice, has a frightening meaning – women slaves were often raped on slave ships. In this context, Captain Delano's "pleasant" moment of staring at the Negress's body (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 195) makes his comment quite ominous.

Yet, pirate communities had a more cooperative side, too, which exhibited the camaraderie of a motley crew that protected the interests of its members. They had their own separate but parallel societies which surprisingly included cooperation, democracy, and egalitarianism (equally sharing confiscated goods) (Linebaugh and Rediker 162-63). Due to their risky and intense experiences, they were "class-conscious and justice-seeking, taking revenge against merchant captains who tyrannized the common seaman" (163). Unfortunately, historical reports have been one-sided, telling only the story of their savagery without mentioning to what they are reacting. In Melville's *Benito Cereno,* Captain Delano's fearful view of pirates as competent but also ambiguous, deceptive, and dangerous comes across through the narrator's omniscient intrusion into his thoughts:

> Among the Malay pirates it was no unusual thing to lure ships after them into their treacherous harbors, or entice boarders from a declared enemy at sea, by the spectacle of thinly manned or vacant decks, beneath which prowled a hundred spears with yellow arms ready to upthrust them through the mats. (189)

Some historical reports, like the ones Delano may hear, tell only the story of the oppressor, not the story of those who may be fighting back against oppression by attacking a fanatical or cruel captain perhaps. Captain Delano is right to fear pirates for their aggression against their oppressors, but part of what he fears is also the world of democratic egalitarianism, and freedom on the wide ocean, which they represent, standing in opposition to the oppressing side of

capitalism. At all costs, for people like Delano, capitalism is prioritized. Yet despite the needs of commerce, when pirates take a ship, they make it the "common property" of all the pirates on board (Linebaugh and Rediker163). They often would create a "council" to represent the interests of "every man on the ship" (163), and to work with a pirate captain. Although pirates had a sordid reputation for violence in the confiscation of ships on the open seas, the oppressed crew members from commercial ships flying national flags knew the multi-ethnic non-nationalist accommodating pirate communities might be their only option for escape during revolt (and again, freed slaves often went to sea). The pirates represented a paradigm of freedom that stood in contradistinction to the capitalist's need for a subservient workforce.

The Alternate Ending: *Benito Cereno* as Sequel to *Moby-Dick*

If Wright did not use Mumford's book with its emphasis on Captain Ahab but turned to the *Pequod* crew through "mariners, renegades, and castaways" that also fascinated fellow-Marxist C. L. R. James, then it seems that Wright would be looking for an alternate ending, the sequel that Melville is writing for his *Moby-Dick*. Melville did not see his sea story as ended.

In this section, I will discuss *Benito Cereno,* written just a few years after *Moby-Dick,* a period closer to what Marxists have labelled the "second American Revolution" (the Civil War). To contend that Wright knows that Melville's story is not over, however, does not imply that Wright read *Benito Cereno*. I have found no evidence that he read other books by Melville, although he had a strong connection with *Moby-Dick,* did read a great deal, and did share the same values of the Black Atlantic that Melville shares. And secondly, this section is not saying that the alternate ending is itself a conclusion. *Benito Cereno* does not end the struggle of the motley crew and the Blacks in particular, but it is another reminder that the revolt from below

continues and is getting closer to the Civil War for Melville, and closer to the socialist revolution, with Blacks playing the leading role, for Wright. When *Benito Cereno* was published in *Putnam's* in a series of installments in 1855, the drumbeat bringing the country ever closer to war could be heard. A long article against compromising with slavery appeared in the same issue that contained the first installment of Melville's novella (Delbanco 230) (Delbanco says, "Readers today tend to encounter Benito Cereno in the neutralizing context of some 'Great Short Works' anthology, but its original appearance was in a partisan magazine committed to the anti-slavery cause" [230].)

Understanding *Benito Cereno* as a sequel to *Moby-Dick* is important for two reasons. First, it will allow the reader to see that it is not important that Wright may not have read *Benito Cereno,* because the kernel of the revolt in that work appears previously in *Moby-Dick*! – which I am assuming Wright did read. This will facilitate the idea that Wright senses a kinship with Melville's idea of revolt. Second, the reader will better understand the motley crew as a force, feared for its repetitive revolts. It is the carrying forward of the revolutionary process as revolt from *Moby-Dick* to *Benito Cereno*. Links between the two works will become evident as I examine four mariners (loosely construed), each focusing on a thematic link between the two novels: Cloots, creating the international camaraderie of the motley crew; Steelkilt, creating emerging revolt; Daggoo, exhibiting Melville's vision of Blackness; and Pip, initiating Black cultural music and dance.

Cloots comes on board. The first way in which Melville's *Benito Cereno* is a sequel to *Moby-Dick* is in relation to one dramatic "member" of the motley crew. At the time of the French Revolution and the revolts in Saint-Domingue, a Prussian political theorist, Anacharsis Cloots, was advocating for a specific world order that would eliminate the rule by nation-states

and provide for a cosmopolitan "universal republic" or "republic of mankind" (Bevilacqua 551). His theory gleaned from Rousseau's idea of human nature and proposed that people were inherently social and did not need the state in order to form community. Cloots thought the revolution had spawned the possibility of a world encouraging the universal unity of humankind and he was making speeches in France in the early 1790s encouraging his theory (553). This is the period in which the French Revolution was providing emotional energy for the revolts in Saint-Domingue. Melville, writing in *Moby-Dick* fifty to sixty years later, describes the crew of the *Pequod* in a way which dialectically joins Cloots's ideals with the motley crew:

> They were nearly all Islanders in the Pequod. *Isolatoes* too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each *Isolato* living on a separate continent of his own. Yet now, federated along one keel, what a set these Isolatoes were! An Anacharsis Clootz deputation from all the isles of the sea, and all the ends of the earth, accompanying Old Ahab in the Pequod to lay the world's grievances before that bar from which not very many of them ever come back. (132)

Here Melville has grasped the motley crew with their variety "from all the isles of the sea," and cooperation as "federated along one keel," and grievances as ready "to lay the world's grievances before that bar" (132). Soon in *Benito Cereno,* this motley crew will revolt because of their grievances against the tactics of totalitarians. Melville has resurrected the executed political theorist Anacharsis Cloots who advocated for just such an association of individuals in a universal humankind and for an erasure of the nation-state idea that seemed to imply separation. Therefore, by mentioning Cloots, Melville unites the motley crew from the French Revolution in

Moby-Dick to the Saint-Domingue revolt in *Benito Cereno*. In addition, history has shown that the frenzy of the French Revolution influences the rise of the Saint-Domingue revolution.

Wright would not have missed Melville's reference to the political theory of Anacharsis Cloots in *Moby-Dick*. Any advocate for an intersecting, universal, and international humankind would have been noticed by Wright as perhaps furthering his socialist ideals. Wright insists that in uniting around revolutionary ideas Blacks would be able to find significance in life:

> It was not…the underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred people into a whole. It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role. (Wright's essay in *The God That Failed* qtd. in Webb 119)

Wright's recognition of the forming of "community" and its associated sense of camaraderie as positive vectors indicate that he would have understood Cloots's "universal humankind" idea and would have felt kinship with Melville on this. In 1790, Cloots's revolutionary tendencies were out front when he marched into the French National Constituent Assembly, "accompanied by his own motley retinue of thirty-six foreigners to declare the world's endorsement of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" (Drysdale 321). Melville's mention of Cloots in *Moby-Dick* offers deference to the liberatory impulse that Wright surely would admire.

Melville views the idea of slavery as interfering with the possibility of an integrated vision and wholeness of American society. He hopes for a unifying whole society, which maybe verges on a Clootsian internationalism ("federated along one keel"). Despite Wright's distancing

himself from Mumford later and the latter's misunderstanding of the Civil War, Mumford does explicate well (in the book Wright owned) Melville's position regarding the need for eliminating the narrowness that breeds societal ills:

> The French Revolution had made this particular form of human degradation [i.e. slavery] unpalatable; like incest or tribal revenge, it could not be related to a modern society…[Melville] regarded the United States as a place where narrow tribalisms had been successfully dropped, where the entire blood of Europe joined together from a thousand sources, the country being not so much a nation in the old sense, as a world, a neighborly world; and he doubtless looked upon the Southern claim to independence as a return to tribalism and narrowness…Melville looked forward to a time when the world itself would be *federated into a whole*, so that the conflicts between peoples and tribes and communities, the inevitable and salutary conflicts, would not take place on the physical plane…but on the plane of culture. (Mumford 295-96). [emphasis mine]

It is a revolutionary tendency in Melville that lets him think about the world as a "federated…whole" at a time when conflict and divisive arguments over slavery are the norm in the antebellum period. And this revolutionary tendency encourages Melville's liberatory impulse regarding the slaves. Wright would notice that Melville, like himself, has a fascination with rebellion.

Steelkilt comes on board. A second link between Melville's two works is introduced as the idea of revolt in *Moby-Dick,* where the motley crew becomes familiar with revolutionary activity, which is then carried into *Benito Cereno*. As Cloots expanded the international camaraderie of the motley crew, Steelkilt initiates emerging revolt. (Notice that Cloots could be

discussed in terms of revolt too—he was not a social scientist or academic discussing the need for internationalism; he was on the barricades, and interestingly was executed for his participation in revolt.) *Moby-Dick's* Steelkilt offers a taste of the "new forms of cooperation" that the "motley crew" develops toward revolt: on the *Town-Ho*, a distinctly different ship from the *Pequod*, a member of the multiethnic crew, Steelkilt, refuses to sweep the floor after working strenuously for long hours with the rest of the crew. The mate, Radney, becomes enraged and tries to force the situation. Steelkilt jumps onto a "barricade" reminiscent of the French Revolution and declares that his own death would alert the crew to mutiny. With the crew cheering him on, Steelkilt cries out, "we are ready to work, but we won't be flogged" (274-75). Cooperative work is the business of the crew and the "motley crew" is proud of its skills at sea, but they are not mechanical men and the repeated oppression from superiors reaches a limit.

As this Steelkilt incident shows, the motley crew in *Moby-Dick* begins engagement with subversive activity toward revolt. Melville adds a significant twist: on shore at the Golden Inn news of the incident is leaked by a few of the crew to Tashtego, a harpooner on the *Pequod*. Tashtego relays the story to his fellow crew members later (265-66). The *Pequod*'s "motley crew" soon develops into a force and begins to plan its revolt, gaining encouragement from the news brought by Tashtego -- the motley crew's effort in the *Town-Ho* revolt infers a new revolt is possible. The whispering, which carries forward this subversive mutiny to another location and time, will again lead to another rebellion, this time perhaps on the *San Dominick* ship in *Benito Cereno*. When the reader enters Babo's drama in *Benito Cereno*, which is written just a few years after *Moby-Dick*, the motley crew has already revolted (for the first time), murdered its captain, Don Alexandro Aranda (note that the names Ahab and Aranda are similar – perhaps their personalities were too), taken over the ship, and enslaved Don Benito with his original crew

in order to return to Senegal. The conditions that bring the crew to the point of their initial revolt (prior to the start of the narrative) includes the oppression imposed leading up to and during the Middle Passage, and based in sentiments which have burdened the slaves psychologically and physically caused disease, grueling pain, and whipping.

Almost a century after Melville was writing in the 1850s, Wright's parallel perception of the resistance with which Melville empowers his character, Steelkilt, in the *Town-Ho* chapter of *Moby-Dick*, would reflect a motley crew that has a sense of liberatory energy as an oppressed working class bursting into revolution for the equality they hope to discover in the socialism Wright worked for. Therefore, Wright would know that Steelkilt's revolt in *Moby-Dick* would be carried to some revolt like it in *Benito Cereno*.

Daggoo comes on board. The third connecting link between *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, appears in a similar mix of phrasing exhibiting a certain specter of Blackness emerging on both ships. Melville refers in *Moby-Dick* to Daggoo, a Black *Pequod* harpooner as "gigantic" (131) and refers in *Benito Cereno* to Atufal as "gigantic" (181). To draw the connection even closer, he also refers to both as "colossal" (*Moby-Dick* 165; *Benito Cereno* 217). They are Black men much larger than life. Melville pursues the similarity further by referring to the "gold" earrings of Daggoo and the "wedges of gold" that used to appear in Atufal's ears (*Moby-Dick* 131; *Benito Cereno* 182). Gold can be a sign of nobility – and these two striking men are "quarried" (*Moby-Dick* 191) and sculpted out of "black marble" (*Benito Cereno* 217). Although almost surreally objectified, Daggoo and Atufal have a presence here to stay: two strong, beautiful, stunning immortal images – unconquerable.

However, Melville is not simply describing a set of *doppelgänger* symbols; rather, he is praising Black composure in the face of an unstable colonial system. When the small-statured

mate, New Englander Flask, stands on Daggoo's shoulders to have a wider view of the sea, the "barbaric majesty" (241) of Blacks (Daggoo) appears to be supporting the entire "mediocrity" (203) (Flask) of an exposed colonial system. And what a precarious position the two find themselves in, while the boat undulates with the waves: unsettling slave revolts surging against the calm of the plantation. Melville's opinion is obvious, when he states: "The bearer looked nobler than the rider" (241). Surely, Black dignity stands solidly above the landscape of a faltering economic system based on slavery.

Pip comes on board. Finally, the fourth link between Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno* is found in Melville's further tribute to Blacks, not just as dramatic symbols or proud remnants of a noble past, but as embodied vibrant culture shapers to be discovered in their song and dance. Melville, with a longstanding sense of great respect for Black culture, weaves aspects of music and dance from the *Pequod* to the next ship, beginning with Pip's use of the tambourine in *Moby-Dick*. In the "Midnight, Forecastle" chapter, one of the dancing sailors cries out to Pip: "Go it, Pip! Bang it, bell-boy! Rig it, dig it, stig it, quig it, bell-boy! Make fire-flies; break the jinglers!" Pip replies: "Jinglers, you say? – there goes another, dropped off; I pound it so" (189). Pip's tambourine seems to spiral into a faster beat as the "jinglers" come flying off and the sailors dance to the sound.

A sort of binding together of the two works takes place along cultural lines. Young Melville had read the book *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee* (Stuckey 14). If this text is discounted, writes Stuckey, "the startling connection between [*Benito Cereno*]…and *Moby-Dick* would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to perceive" (15). Melville, in *Moby-Dick,* broadly makes use of African spirituality in describing Queequeg's small idol and his meditation, and uses African dance and music in Pip's dancing and use of the tambourine, as well as

elaborating the dancing of the sailors of varied nationalities in the "Midnight, Forecastle" chapter (187-193). In *Benito Cereno,* then, Melville pairs the Ashantee rhythm music and dance to the hatchet polishers clacking the hatchets together (Stuckey 31-35). By showing that Captain Delano notices the "Ashantee Negresses" who "pull and sing" (*Benito Cereno* 218), Melville conveys the significance of women working and singing as members of the crew. Thus, one way in which *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno* are brought together is through Melville's use of Black cultural music and dance. And the dignity Melville provides Blacks in his writing in both *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno* will offset Captain Delano's white supremacist attitudes.

Melville read books on African culture in his youth (Stuckey 14) and attended Black parades, celebrations, festivals and performances in New York and Albany which involved Black cultural music and dance (22-23). Melville would have walked past Pinkster Hill (where Blacks would gather for the Pinkster Festival each year, performing music and dance) each day he attended Albany Academy, as well as heard and seen Blacks whistling on the streets (27). Thus, Melville drew strains of Black culture from his social environment to utilize in his writing. Wright may have noted some of these elements of Black culture in his reading of Mumford's book on Melville (perhaps) or in his reading of *Moby-Dick* later.

Wright identified Black culture in the late 1930s as rising out of a "folk consciousness" that the slave experience encouraged and was at this point held within a Jim Crow structure; but Wright also pointed toward approaching change by expressing the need for an increased "social consciousness" ("Blueprint" 198-99). The folk consciousness rested in "blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth" (197). Wright described this "folk consciousness" as "the fluid lore of a great people" (200) which Black writers could now meld "with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history" (200). Wright's idea of Black consciousness,

therefore, is one which is in the making – moving and changing. Wright, perhaps, would have liked Melville's perception of Black culture because it exhibited signs of Black consciousness, and had become by the mid-nineteenth century an integral aspect of American culture.

Like Melville's appreciation for the whistling tunes of Blacks, Wright, when he left the South for the urban North, was enthralled by "jive talk," which was the "fun, play, kidding, hiding things with words and stepping up the tempo of living through talk" (Webb 94). Wright listened to jive talk as Melville listened to Blacks whistling, both were a sort of speech that held a certain rhythm of life. Further, Melville's sensitivity for Black culture pertaining to the group activity of music and dance is similar to the sensitivity both he and Wright have for the group camaraderie and cooperativeness of the "motley crew" engaged in developing consciousness.

***Benito Cereno*: Revolt from Below**

Now that the reader has caught sight of a bridge by which *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno* can connect and reinforce the perpetuation of revolution, the revolt found in *Benito Cereno* is made capable of radiating outward, discovering similarities in the ideas of Melville and Wright, and connecting the novella to the Saint-Domingue revolt.

Although the motley crew obtains its first work training from the ruling class, revolt does not, and cannot, begin with the rulers. Wright and Melville each know that revolt can only come from below, originating in the crew. Andrew Delbanco, in his biography of Melville, shows that the tension in America's slavery debate is created by those with the power in society who rationalize the existence of slavery, but the revolt will come from the "objects" of those rationalized arguments:

> By the 1850s, pro- and anti-slavery polemics had become fierce and frequent: apologists who had once described slavery as a benign paternalism toward a

> childlike race now described blacks as beasts requiring strict oversight, while opponents of slavery declared that years of white cruelty would soon incite – and justify – black reprisal. (Delbanco 232)

Melville's proletarian "motley crew" in *Benito Cereno* builds its capability to rebel from below, with the cooperative work of the crew, not with the help of "do-gooders" such as Captain Delano. The motley crew initiates the first revolt in *Benito Cereno before* the beginning of the narrative. In the deposition at the end of the novella, the reader discovers that this revolt had occurred and that the slaves engaged in self-liberation.

Melville highlights the tension that exists after the initial revolt by setting up Babo, the "ringleader," as both playwright and performer, creating a Shakespearean-type drama with soliloquys and asides. Soliloquys like "[Babo's] wailing soliloquy enlightened [Captain Delano]" (*Benito Cereno* 213), when Babo appeared from the shaving scene with a cut on his face. Babo creates several "Asides"; he takes Don Benito "aside" and explains to Captain Delano that his master cannot handle excitement (177). When seeing Captain Delano's ship approaching, Babo quickly creates an elaborate play script and insists that everyone aboard take a part in order to keep the secret of the slaves' revolt from Delano. Babo will have them engage in a bit of theater: they will pretend that they are slaves but are allowed on deck; and they will threaten into complicity what remains of the Spanish crew. At the moment the curtain opens on Babo's overlaying drama (that hides his secret), the first revolt has already been accomplished. And the reader finds that "in the act of revolt the Negroes made themselves masters of the hatchway" (233), just as the Spaniards had guarded against the escape of their live cargoes. Babo takes charge, and with the struggling slaves subjugates the Spaniards. Carrying out his

new role, Babo kills many of Don Benito's crew. But he tells Don Benito the killings are to ensure the continuation of the liberty of the ex-slaves (235).

The capability to act the jester, as a type of masked revolt, appears in the prominent "shaving" scene. Babo, as slave, seems to be simply shaving Don Benito, doing a personal service for his master. But there is a serious complexity in the slave's actions: "the threatening servitude of the slave who might cut one's throat at every moment but who nonetheless is assigned the duty of passing the razor across his master's throat" (Fisher 97). At the same time that Babo, the slave, performs his lowly task, he is simultaneously threatening to kill Don Benito, who represents his master and colonial power – Spain, understood from the "flag of Spain" bib that Babo wraps around Don Benito's neck (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 209). Here, Babo, continuing to rebel from below, is performing for Captain Delano, essentially expressing: "watch us, your personal servants and slaves, who are carefully and caringly shaving our masters, but we are sharpening our knives too, below deck – off stage -- each of us sharpening our knives, and if you don't wake up to the new circumstances (the coming end of slavery and arrival of freedom), there will be consequences for you, the rulers of the old order." Babo is hiding not only that the slaves are free, but the method by which they have obtained their freedom. Babo's drama is masking Hegel's allegory, which is narrated just offstage. The rising Blacks are hiding their free status at the same time that they have mastered their former masters. During Babo's performance, the hatchet polishers continually rhythmically sharpen their hatchets and clack them together, with the sound unremittingly threatening.

(It would distract from the purpose of this chapter to attempt, here, much connection to Wright. Wright of course knew, brilliantly signified on, *Moby-Dick* but did not read *Benito Cereno* apparently. But Wright would enjoy the fact that Bigger also does some work with

knives below deck in the do-gooder Dalton home and Bigger also returns to the Dalton home to play a "role" deceptively encouraging the Daltons's belief that Mary was killed by a communist.)

At the conclusion of the *Benito Cereno* narrative the motley crew rebels again. Babo's plan is thwarted when Captain Delano attempts to return to his own ship and Don Benito jumps into Delano's boat. Babo jumps in next, and in the ensuing tussle, Delano discovers that Babo intends to kill Don Benito. As Delano with "his right foot…ground the prostrate Negro [Babo]" (*Benito Cereno* 226), the efforts of the motley crew's revolt are reversed. The ship's sternpiece image of rebellion -- the "dark satyr in a mask holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked" (166) -- becomes the white oppressor (represented by Captain Delano) stepping on the neck of the oppressed (Black Babo). But next, it appears that this second revolt will be won by the rebelling Blacks nevertheless. They fight from the level of the crew without the demands of their masters or capitalist overseers. When Delano sends a few of his crew after the receding *San Dominick*, the Blacks "hurtle" hatchets at the mates' boat and several of Delano's sailors are injured, despite the modern muskets of Delano's crew and the battle "stratagem" the mate implements (228). In the end, it is not the whites' strategic planning that holds the Blacks in check, but the exhaustion of the Blacks while cornered by superior fire power backing them into a "barricade of casks and sacks" (230). Those Blacks surviving are re-enslaved, and, it can be presumed, rebel again. As an integral part of the hydra activity of the motley crew, this particular revolt will influence other revolts that will take place beyond the completion of Melville's narrative. Sometimes the motley crew works with cunning and revolt, sometimes with bloody fighting.

Benito Cereno as Tribute to Saint Domingue Revolt –

The Black Masses Rise Up

The sense of revolt that Melville charges *Benito Cereno* with binds the work to an historical rebellion, the Saint-Domingue revolt. Since the Marxist Wright hopes for the self-liberation of those who are oppressed, he would appreciate any literary link to revolt. But Wright would especially like the specific utilization of the Saint-Domingue revolt because his soon-to-be Marxist friend, C. L. R. James, wrote such an important book on it -- *The Black Jacobins*. Melville's writing in *Benito Cereno* is offering something quite revolutionary, and C. L. R. James poses it as extraordinary:

> The transformation of slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organize themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement. ("Preface" *Black Jacobins* ix)

Early critics missed this extremely significant aspect of *Benito Cereno*, but later critics discovered and grasped it. Melville's *Benito Cereno* expresses the tension of the Saint-Domingue revolution. Yet, since its publication, critics have debated what Melville desired *Benito Cereno* to symbolize. Laurie Robertson-Lorant summarizes the transition from the early analysis into the later interpretation:

> Scholars…analyz[ed] it abstractly as an allegory of good and evil…giving negative connotations to black and positive connotations to white. [This is the viewpoint of Mumford] It took a nationwide civil rights movement [to discover]…Melville's genius in transforming Delano's original narrative into a

multilayered text that deconstructs racism to reveal the bias behind all historical documents composed by conquerors. (653n33)

The call for labeling Babo as "malicious" or "evil" is raised early in scholarly criticism by Harold Scudder (1928), who identifies Melville, himself, with Don Benito, feeling poorly because his publications are rejected, and who defines Babo as "the personification of malicious criticism" (531). Rosalie Feltenstein (1947) utilizes Scudder's perceptions, among others; she finds that "[Melville] turns Babo into a manifestation of pure evil" (247). Arthur Vogelback (1952), becoming even more intense and relying on both Scudder and Feltenstein, states that [Babo] in his pure deviltry, [is] a worthy double of Iago" (114). During this early period, the racial essentialism of whites tended to undercut any thought that Blacks could be virtuous seekers of the good. Lewis Mumford (1929), too, addressed the question of evil, having insisted: "In *Benito Cereno* the point is that noble conduct and good will…may seem sheer guile; and…that there is an inscrutable evil that makes the passage of fine souls through the world an endless Calvary" (246). He does not see the social context, only the moral division.

The more recent, and better, interpretation construes the work as connected to the Saint-Domingue revolution, where Blacks are rightfully freeing themselves from slavery and from the racist arguments of their masters. H. Bruce Franklin (1961) focused on references in *Benito Cereno* to the period of Spain's Charles V, but still noticed Melville's concern with Saint-Domingue. Jean Fagan Yellin (1970) finds reason to connect Melville's work to the Saint-Domingue revolution, rather than the *Amistad* or similar mutinies or uprisings in Melville's time even though she knows Melville takes notice of them. Most recently, Greg Grandin (2013) deviates from the norm and expands the criticism by concentrating heavily on the original

narrative of Amasa Delano on which Melville bases his *Benito Cereno* in order to explicate Melville's fear that racism may not be exterminated by simple abolition by do-good reformers.

Jonathan Beecher (2007) is placing our hopes specifically in Saint-Domingue in his criticism, perhaps basing some elements of his analysis on Yellin's interpretation. Beecher clearly delineates ways in which Melville intended a link to the Saint-Domingue revolution: "First, [Melville]…changed the name of the ship on which the revolt occurs from the *Tryal* to the *San Dominick*. And second, he changed the year in which the events took place from 1805 (when the Haitian revolution was over and Toussaint was dead) to 1799 (when Toussaint was the ruler of Saint-Domingue)" (44). In addition, Beecher sees Melville as combining two individuals, Babo and Mure, from the original *Tryal* account to form a new character "Babo" who is very similar to Toussaint L'Ouverture (44-45). Beecher's demarcation of the similarity in characteristics is perceptive:

> Like Toussaint, and unlike either the real-life Babo or the real-life Mure, Melville's Babo is small in stature. Like Toussaint, Melville's Babo is also incredibly resourceful and endowed with a penetrating mind – a mind that Melville's narrator describes as a 'hive of subtlety.' Finally, like Toussaint, Melville's Babo is both a gifted actor with an extraordinary sense of theater and an ultimately inscrutable individual. (45)

Melville links his *Benito Cereno* directly to the Saint-Domingue revolt. But without Toussaint the Saint-Domingue revolution may not have occurred because Toussaint took such a prominent leadership role in it. Hence, the following will provide some detail of aspects of Toussaint's life that led to his becoming a strong leader. In addition, since Melville is modeling

his *Benito Cereno* character Babo on Toussaint, I provide a brief comparison of the two to emphasize Babo's role as a revolutionary.

Toussaint's "father was an African chieftain" (Meeks 96; James 17). Unlike the typical slave, Toussaint was provided with the opportunity of working as a "steward of the livestock" on a plantation, where he gained "experience in administration, authority, and intercourse with those who ran the plantation" (James, *Black Jacobins* 91). In addition, different from the average slave, Toussaint, like Douglass, could read and write. He read selectively, but one book we know he read was Caesar's Commentaries on politics and military methods (91).

More significant still in Toussaint's reading list is Abbé Raynal's work on the economy and politics of the East and West Indies (James, *Black Jacobins* 91), which is a "stinging condemnation of slavery" (Meeks 96). Margaret Hunt understands the significance of Abbé Guillaume Raynal's *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies* (1774), which is a multi-volume work written as a "collective project" by Raynal and "cocontributors" (355). Hunt clearly perceives the work as "one of the most impassioned anti-imperialist and antislavery tracts of the eighteenth century" (355). Toussaint is in good company with others who read this significant work. Susan Buck-Morss makes the case that Hegel read Raynal's work early on and that it influenced his future writing (14-15). Willie Weathers seems to indicate that Melville was familiar with Raynal's work, although perhaps indirectly (480). In *The Black Jacobins*, first published in 1938, C. L. R. James indicates that he, too, read Raynal by showing that Toussaint "read and re-read" and studied this long work of Raynal (91). Referring to "the fire that burnt in Toussaint" (376), James states, "Others will arise, and others…[after] reading a stray pamphlet of Lenin or Trotsky as Toussaint read the Abbé Raynal" (377). James therefore implies that reading Raynal helped

turn Toussaint into a revolutionary. Although it is difficult to pinpoint whether Wright had read Raynal's volumes, Wright later would carry *The Black Jacobins,* written by his friend C. L. R. James and containing James's famous quote on Raynal, along with his other books on board ship from England to Africa on his first trip to Africa in 1953 (Webb 326).

The relevance to this discussion, of Raynal's work and those who read it, is not the expansive readership Raynal's texts were accorded but their revolutionary content and how knowledge derived from these volumes may have furthered the Saint-Domingue revolution. Buck-Morss places Raynal front and center in Hegel's developing theory, stating: "Hegel…is better informed about Caribbean slavery than he let it appear; indeed, Hegel remained a 'Raynalist' throughout his life" (14) And, it is Buck-Morss's goal that society will get "to the point where we cannot think Hegel *without* Haiti" (16). It would not be an undue exaggeration to say, then, that directly or indirectly, the revolutionary fervor of Raynal's work may have excited Melville's interest, and if Wright knew of it through C. L. R. James, he too would have felt its revolutionary appeal.

Melville's Babo, just like Toussaint, was able to read and write (*Benito Cereno* 237), thus standing out as different from other slaves. In the deposition at the end of *Benito Cereno,* it is explained that "[Don Benito] spoke to the Negroes…[and he] agreed to draw up a paper, signed by…[himself] and the sailors who could write, as also by the Negro Babo, for himself and all the blacks…to carry them [back] to Senegal" (237). It is of special note that Melville does not have Babo speak in informal vernacular, but in educated, clear conversation. Significantly, Wright provides a Bigger in *Native Son* who also speaks distinctly except when he acts submissively to Mr. Dalton at which times he fills his speech with repeated "yessuhs." This use of straightforward speech provides dignity to the characters. Thus, overall, Melville provides Babo

with the sense of authority, the administrative capabilities, and the language abilities of the dignified Toussaint.

Toussaint "manoeuvred with an uncanny certainty not only between local parties in San Domingo but between the international forces at work" (James, *Black Jacobins* 91). Babo, like Toussaint, seems to be everywhere at once. Toussaint always felt the necessity to be there, himself, on the spot "otherwise things never go well" (147). Babo and Atufal startle Delano several times. After lunch, Atufal is found to be standing guard when least expected, outside the cuddy door, and Delano is taken by surprise (*Benito Cereno* 217). Delano hears footsteps behind him and realizes Babo is not where he thought he was supposed to have been in the cabin with Don Benito (*Benito Cereno* 218). Babo, like Toussaint, routs the enemy wherever he is, creeping up on him unaware. Toussaint routed the enemy for the Spanish and later routed them for the French (James, *Black Jacobins* 143). But, in considering this incredible "black Sparticus" (Girard 140), the hidden aspects of Toussaint's career are downplayed. At times, Toussaint's rule was actually perceived as "dictatorial" (140) as when he "served as French governor of Haiti, instituting repressive labor practices to force former slaves to stay on plantations" (140).

Melville provides his Babo character with many of these characteristics, including an occasional dictatorial response. Babo, in *Benito Cereno,* is intelligent. When Don Benito tells Delano that he trusts his slave, Babo transforms his "previous grin of mere animal humor [his act] into an intelligent smile" (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 187). The dictatorial side of Babo only appears behind the scenes: Babo demands that Don Benito remain in lock-step with his play script. But Babo also is a liaison between Don Benito and Captain Delano, and between Don Benito and Atufal. When Don Benito retreats into his exhaustion, Babo takes the initiative to explain to Delano: "Master wouldn't part with Babo for a thousand doubloons" (192). Also,

Babo "insisted" that "one bottle of cider" be kept for Don Benito alone, out of the provisions Delano gave them (204). Maggie Montesinos Sale, who theorizes on slave revolt in *Benito Cereno*, unearths a Babo who is "intelligent," "ingenious," and is raised to the level of "creator" (168). Sale goes a step further to note that "Babo…works with a community that includes the oakum pickers, hatchet polishers, Atufal, and the 'Ashantee negresses' [and] his plan depends…upon not only the cooperation but the help of virtually everyone" (169). Babo, like Toussaint, works with his motley crew. Like Toussaint, Babo acts as leader and go-between. Babo encourages Don Benito to request Atufal, who is in irons and acting the part of slave as part of Babo's theater plot, to ask his master for forgiveness: Babo says "See, he waits your question, master" (181). When Atufal remains silent after Don Benito's question, Babo steps in to direct the proceedings by saying "Again, master; he will bend to master yet" (182). Like the historical Toussaint, Babo must maneuver between the different forces in the revolt.

Toussaint was good at inspiriting his troops. British and Spanish leaders attempted to bribe Toussaint's troops and steal them away, but they did not succeed because "the morale of the revolutionary army was too high" (James 148). And Toussaint was a "man of action" (James 147), just as the reader senses in Babo. Toussaint said of the "ranks" as well as "the chiefs": "they would brave any danger,…and they would follow me to the end" (147). Babo's motley crew does the same, following his prescribed drama and keeping it secret from Delano until the end.

C. L. R. James, in laying out the history of the Saint-Domingue revolution in *Black Jacobins*, describes the secrecy and coded signs kept by the rising slaves engaging in voodoo, in a form similar to Melville's use of Black music and dance, in their planning of and their carrying out of revolt:

> Voodoo was the medium of the conspiracy. In spite of all prohibitions, the slaves travelled miles to sing and dance and practice the rites and talk…[and] to hear the political news and make their plans. (86)

In *Benito Cereno*, just prior to the motley crew breaking out of the play into reality, music and dance accompany revolt preparations as the clashing rhythms of the hatchets provide a repetitive beat and the Negresses' wails spur on the rebellious spirit of the men. After Babo, acting as "captain of the slaves" (218), repeated the orders to the crew as Captain Delano gave them, "the blithe songs of the inspirited Negroes" (218) could be heard while they work and as the "women pull and sing" (218). Revolt is their primary concern and the planning for it involves the techniques of their blended culture; here, voodoo song and dance provides a cover for the planning process.

In 1791 near the beginning of the revolution in Saint-Domingue, Boukman, a high priest of voodoo, led 12,000 slaves, a huge number, in revolt: "The plan was conceived on a massive scale and they aimed at exterminating the whites and taking the colony for themselves" (James, *Black Jacobins* 86). Although the revolt did not completely succeed, it showed the capability and organization of the slaves, as well as the leadership role of Boukman, the first of many great leaders to follow (86). And Toussaint's revolution, coming just a few short years after Boukman, also will succeed for a better world later. The seeming lack of success of Babo and Atufal's revolt in *Benito Cereno*, might be interpreted in a similar light. The leaders of revolts in the future might be seen as building on what Babo, Atufal, and the slaves did in the present.

Toussaint was dealing with many oppositional forces simultaneously. The French, the Spanish, and the British were in conflict over the island at different points. The Blacks looked to Toussaint for support: "If the army was the instrument of Toussaint's power, the masses were its

foundation and his power grew with his influence over them" (*Black Jacobins* 151). The Blacks watched as the Spanish, on Saint-Domingue soil, blatantly murdered the French, including women and children (151). As C. L. R. James explains:

> Such were the models of civilization for the ex-slaves. Great tracts…were… devastated and burned. In the war areas…all starved. Little wonder that the black labourers were constantly in a state of insurrection. (151)

Toussaint watched and grieved as the Blacks were manipulated into joining forces with the different imperialist forces causing so many to die in the process. The British paid some Blacks to fight with them (151-52). But Toussaint "always addressed the blacks as French citizens" as France represented "liberty and equality" (154) and in this way countered the imperialist tendency.

The Blacks, doing their part as the feared hydra, staged a major rebellion near the beginning of the Saint-Domingue revolution, shortly after Boukman's revolt. After a voodoo ceremony in the forest during a tropical storm, the insurrection started: "Each slave-gang murdered its masters and burnt the plantation to the ground…[and] in a few days one-half of the famous North Plain was a flaming ruin" (James, *Black Jacobins* 88). Smoke and fire filled the air "for nearly three weeks" (88). The slaves knew that the plantations were the cause of their suffering and that the only way to stop it was to destroy them (88). James reminds his readers that "From their masters they had known rape, torture, degradation, and, at the slightest provocation, death. They returned in kind" (88). But James is clear that even the worst ferocity these Blacks used in attacking the whites did not come close to the atrocities visited on the Blacks originally (89). Similarly, but on a smaller scale, Melville's Blacks in *Benito Cereno* rise

up and kill Aranda and many whites, binding some and throwing them overboard. They, too, had had enough degradation.

Melville uses *Benito Cereno*, therefore, to explicate the work of Toussaint and the Saint-Domingue revolt. Although the revolt at the end of *Benito Cereno* is only a miniature of the Saint-Domingue revolt, Melville does make the slaves' hatchet-throwing exchange with Captain Delano's crew members zealous enough to remind us of the hydra. And although Babo is clearly a lesser figure than the world-historical Toussaint, Babo's directing leadership is almost inspiring. The conspiratorial planning of the crew appears through the narrator's expression of Captain Delano's perspective: Delano's fears of the "disorder" on the *San Dominick* infer the crew's readying for revolt.

Toussaint L'Ouverture's rule of Saint-Domingue comes to an end in his arrest, but his parting words reflect the hope which resides in the multiplying heads of the hydra: "In overthrowing me, you have cut down in San Domingo only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep" (James, *Black Jacobins* 334; Buck-Morss, (105n50). The ongoing rebellion process, itself, is more significant than the success of a specific uprising; another revolt will be forthcoming. Emphasizing this ongoing revolution to the current and next generation of Black writers, Wright speaks of "protest" and "revolt" in writing as the method to direct Black consciousness into the future.

CHAPTER III

BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS: WRIGHT'S CAMARADERIE AND REVOLT

> Surely this is the moment . . . to wonder out of what material can a human world be built. . . . Each step along this unknown path should be taken with thought, care, self-consciousness, and deliberation. When Negro writers think they have arrived at something which smacks of truth, humanity, they should want to test it with others, feel it with a degree of passion and strength that will enable them to communicate it to millions who are groping like themselves.
>
> - Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing"

Melville Borrows from Hegel and Douglass

The positioning of *Benito Cereno* as a sequel to *Moby-Dick* with the heightened activity of the motley crew culminating in revolt, in Chapter II of this thesis, prepared the reader for a deeper meaning of rebellion. Now, this chapter will explore how Melville borrows from Hegel to explicate the rising of the slaves to challenge their subjection. Further, in this chapter, I will explicate Wright's investigation into a new Black consciousness and Wright's positive agenda to encourage Black writers to revolt in writing. In a final section of the chapter, I will show a

parallel development of a unique art of writing that masks tears, which is shared by Melville, Wright, and French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. The fears, anxiety, and self-doubt, and the worries about meaninglessness and emptiness and abandonment which existentialism boldly discussed, were recognized by Wright as his own concerns as well; these were the underbelly of the tense experience lived by American Blacks behind the Veil. (Webb 280).

In Chapter II, I mentioned that Babo's drama in *Benito Cereno* is masking Hegel's allegory; but if this is true, Melville's knowledge of Hegel's dialectic must have arisen from some source. Although unnoticed by many Melville scholars, Hegel is on Melville's mind; Melville engages in late night discussions on "Hegel, Schlegel, [and] Kant" (Stuckey 36) with some literary friends, a group which includes the German philologist George Adler (10). And interestingly, one theme in Buck-Morss's book is that Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic is deeply formed by Hegel's awareness of Haiti and Toussaint. This connection cannot be stressed enough: Hegel was on Melville's mind, and Haiti was on Hegel's. This holds strong implications for Melville's writing in *Benito Cereno* as springing from his understanding of Hegel: Melville utilizes the Master-Slave dialectic and links the revolts to the Saint-Domingue (Haiti) revolution.

In addition, Melville is strongly affected in his understanding of Hegel through his reading of Douglass's narrative of his life as a slave. Sterling Stuckey, notable historian of slave culture, stresses the significance of this. From Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Melville gains inspiration from Douglass's tussle with his slave-breaker, Edward Covey (Stuckey 8; 86) and the slave's newfound capability of reversing the cycle of terror and oppression. Melville understands Douglass's use of Hegel's master-slave dialectic ("Lordship and Bondage," *The Phenomenology of Mind*) and embeds it in his writing of *Benito Cereno.*

Connections to Douglass are evident for Wright as well. While Melville, in 1846, is basking in positive critical acclaim after the publication of *Typee,* which reflects on a whaling voyage he has taken, and is about to publish *Omoo* in 1847, the grandfather of Richard Wright is born. Wright's grandfather was born into slavery, but escaped as a teen when he heard the news that one of his heroes, Abraham Lincoln, had been assassinated (Webb 12). Richard Wilson, for whom Richard Wright is named, had another hero, Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist leader and organizer (Webb 11-12). It might be guessed that the origin of Richard Wright's interest in revolt may be in his leftist connections, but bearing in mind Wright's ancestral connections, it may be necessary to consider that he may have had this added "indigenous" knowledge of his forebear's resistance to slavery, and an attachment to Douglass's ideals through this source.

Melville's choice of using Douglass's struggle constitutes an adoption of Hegel's dialectic. In Hegel's designation of the relationship between a master and a slave, the master initially sees himself as "for itself" and independent, while the slave initially sees himself as "within itself" and dependent on the master (Buck-Morss 54; Hegel "Fear" para. 194). Both the slave and the master are seeking recognition, but the slave, being objectified by the master, is viewed as "a thing" (54) which can be whipped to do work harder and faster -- thus the slave lacks recognition and is fearful. Paradoxically, the master finds that he erred and becomes fearful, because in making the slave into property, a *thing* which lacks human dignity, the master now cannot obtain the desired satisfaction of recognition from a *human being* (Cassuto 82). Yet, the slave, turning to notice the master's fear and realizing that the slave, not the master, is doing all the work -- is changing history -- finds a sought-after sense of "self-worth" (82-83). Thus, the

slave gains self-consciousness and becomes capable of throwing off the objectification to become human again (82-83). In this way, the slave gains recognition.

In his *Narrative*, Douglass takes Hegel's dialectic to a new level. Douglass is bound in an "impasse" with the slave breaker, Covey (Gilroy 60-62). Douglass, as slave, gains consciousness through his own agency against a brutal world, and accepts the possibility of death, in order to emancipate himself. Buck-Morss explains this risk-taking in laying out Hegel's argument: "In *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel insists that freedom cannot be granted to slaves from above. The self-liberation of the slave is required through a 'trial by death'" (55). Gilroy perceives that this is true, when he views Douglass's use of Hegel's dialectic as a "turn towards death as a release from terror and bondage…" (63), an acceptance of the risk of death that comes with the decision to revolt. Thus, by realizing in the tussle with Covey that the receipt of recognition is worth more than his own life, Douglass "humanizes himself" (Cassuto 91). It is this very process that rends Du Bois's Veil and eliminates double consciousness: with the receipt of recognition comes the knowledge of being both Black and the hope of the world. When Douglass enters the tussle with Covey and upturns the master-slave relationship, he subsequently senses he is now "a man" (Gilroy 63) -- the mask of double consciousness drops. The slaves who lack the courage to fight their master, perhaps because their circumstances are not quite so bad, prefer the "conqueror's version of reality to death and submit" (63). The successful revolt against their subordinated conditions would not be possible for the slaves without risking death when locked in the impasse, and Melville perceives this. [Notice that the Douglass-Babo-Wright tradition rends Du Bois's Veil. Remember that Du Bois's story of Black John ends with John killing the other John and then waiting helplessly for his executioners to arrive.]

Melville, like Douglass, strongly dramatizes the revolt process as an extension of the Hegelian dialectic in *Benito Cereno*. He deliberately complicates the usual white perception of the relationship of master and slave by using Hegel's master-slave dialectic. Babo is able to remove his master, Aranda, from the position of authority. This involves a dialectical process of a rising consciousness of the fearful slaves: Babo, Atufal, the Negresses, and the entire body of slaves. Before the narrative begins, they have been forced to be subservient to Aranda, Don Benito, and the likes of Delano, whites who delight in their position of power over slaves, mere "things" to those in power, commodities to be categorized, bought, and sold. One might imagine the horrific conditions of filth and disease and starvation in the hold of the ship that bring the slaves so close to death. But because of this brush with death, the slaves come nearer to the realization that the authority of the master holds no more power over them, that the master deeply fears them. And the slaves on the *San Dominick* hold the power within the capitalist system because they will provide its labor. The slave has the ultimate power and represents humanity's interests. Witnessing the rising consciousness of the Blacks, the whites begin to shake in fear, knowing the hydra is close. This can be seen literally (later), when the whites are forced by Babo to stare at the skeleton of their former friend and captain, Aranda; in shock and fear they cover their faces (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 237), realizing the hydra's capabilities.

Melville provides scant details of the initial revolt that occurs *before* his narrative begins, but the reader discovers in Don Benito's deposition at the end of the story that the slaves with Babo at the helm revolt against their master, killing Aranda and placing his skeleton as a figurehead on the ship. As if to institutionalize Black power and authority, Babo writes a declaration below the skeleton, "Follow your leader" (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 166), which not only threatens the whites with a similar death to Aranda's, but also seems to insist on the

Spaniards' cowering to the authority of their new leader, Babo. But, like Hegel, Melville understands a certain tension, a mutual fighting for recognition, between the Blacks and whites after the initial revolt, which implies more revolts to come.

Another type of tension also appears in *Benito Cereno*: is Babo a slave or a master? One critic, Elizabeth Wright, holds the view that Melville portrays Babo at that moment when "Babo …[is] simultaneously slave and master" (99). Within the play that Babo wants Captain Delano to perceive as reality, Babo is still a slave. Babo is slave to Don Benito as he plays his part: shaving Don Benito, giving Don Benito a "cordial" (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 174), "engaged rubbing…out" a stain on "his master's velvet sleeve" (204), or taking "his handkerchief out of his pocket for him" (170). But when the play is removed at the end of the narrative, Babo is redefined in the deposition as having been master. At that point, reflecting back on the events of the day, Babo is seen as having been master in control of Don Benito and the conditions on the ship, yet he also was slave to Don Benito in his drama. Thus, Babo can be perceived as both slave and master.

Although Babo and Don Benito are locked in a struggle for recognition, the pull between Babo and Captain Delano complicates this struggle. When Don Benito and Delano eat lunch in the cabin, Babo stands behind Delano's chair, not Don Benito's. Although the narrator explains that this is done so that Babo can see Don Benito's face and "anticipate his slightest want" (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 215), Babo's position, or character part in the play, is now Delano's slave. Since both Captain Delano and Don Benito are cut from the same cloth so to speak, being conceived by the slaves to be both extensions of the arm of the slave owner, they can be equated relative to Babo's Hegelian struggle. If Babo is locked in a Hegelian impasse with Captain Delano, it is as though Don Benito stands in Delano's place.

Thinking again of the scene when Captain Delano issues orders to the sailors but finds that Babo is repeating each order after Delano expresses it (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 218), what appears to be Babo dutifully assisting Delano, is actually Babo struggling to maintain his position as "captain of the slaves" (218). Babo wishes to be recognized as both human and in his leadership position. He is struggling in a Hegelian tussle with Delano for recognition. Therefore, Melville's thought is on Hegel and Douglass's struggle, as he complicates his *Benito Cereno* with the master-slave dialectic.

Philosopher Buck-Morss views Hegel as understanding that although slavery may go back generations for a given slave, a slave's freedom is dependent on personally "willing it" and becoming conscious of owning that freedom (61). But Buck-Morss is even more specific when she states, "It is clear that Hegel is speaking here of modern slavery [Haiti, not ancient Egypt], and clear that consciousness of one's freedom demands that one *become* free, not only in thought, but *in the* [present] *world"* (61). Melville shows in *Benito Cereno* that the reversal between Babo and Don Benito in terms of master-slave is not enough; Babo cannot simply remain the master he has become. Babo and the ex-slaves must become free "in the world." Just as it is evident that Hegel directly connects his ideas on freedom to the revolution in Haiti (Buck-Morss 62), so too must the act of full rebellion in the Saint-Domingue revolution provide the slave with freedom "in the world." It cannot be half-hearted nor can it be abstract, in the distant memory or in a distant future.

In *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History,* Buck-Morss delineates a paradox of the Enlightenment, that Melville also understood, and Wright, as will be shown, surely did later. (There is not just a dialectic between a particular slave master and a particular slave. There is

also a dialectic between the entire Enlightenment-inspired capitalist economic system on the one hand and, on the other, a massive slave population staring back at it.) The paradox runs like this:

> Freedom…was considered by Enlightenment thinkers as the highest and universal political value. Yet…[at the same] time…the economic practice of slavery…was increasing [and]…came to underwrite the entire economic system of the West, paradoxically facilitating the global spread of the very Enlightenment ideals that were in such fundamental contradiction to it. (21)

The Enlightenment prided itself on reason and rationality, the cornerstones of freedom. While the Enlightenment thinkers were expressing these ideals of rationality but repeating that the slaves were the exception and needed to be cared for like helpless children, the slaves meantime are building their rational consciousness to attain their own freedom. (And Melville shows that Babo can run the ship with superior rationality and ironically can stage a play on the master-slave.)

This freedom-slavery paradox confronts especially the modern thinker with a difficult duality. Buck-Morss's paradox, showing the tense contradiction between capitalist society enjoying and valuing its "freedom" while simultaneously encouraging the slave system, finds slavery enhancing capitalism yet depleting capitalism's core value of freedom. It is ironic, but extremely significant, that a Black man, Richard Wright, is one of the individuals who most eloquently explicates this paradox in theoretical writing and in his fiction. In a speech Wright forwarded to Constance Webb (most likely asking for a fellow-Marxist's perceptions and input), Wright lays out a historically oriented explication of the whites' self-contradictory (irrational) position in relation to Blacks. Wright's analysis fits well with Buck Morss's analysis seventy years later, because he describes an historically evolving split which became the norm in the

minds of whites: a division between claiming a legitimate slave-master status, on the one hand, and simultaneously, on the other hand, feeling a commitment to the idea that all people have a natural right to freedom which includes a provision for dignity. This contradiction encouraged the creation of rationalizations by these masters, arguments that led to theorizing a racial hierarchy that removed the enslaved to a safe, comfortable distance – far beneath them. The confusion was so great in the minds of whites, thinks Wright, that they became convinced that they were actually somehow aiding Blacks by yoking them to the slave system, by subjugating them. This way of thinking, this use of rationalizations, thus became ingrained in society as commonplace. In this way, the moral sense of the masters was turned inside out, such that, as Wright indicates, they confused treating Blacks right (with humanity) with doing them wrong. ("Roots and Branches" 8).

Not just an individual slave owner, but the very Enlightenment itself with its emphasis on rationality, freedom of choice, and free labor in the marketplace, cringes before the master/slave dialectic.

It appears that Wright understands the Buck-Morss paradox. Wright hits home on the argument that is appearing in criticism over the last five or ten years concerning similar discourse related to this paradox. Laurent Dubois, in his article, "An Enslaved Enlightenment: Rethinking the Intellectual History of the French Atlantic," takes notice of that criticism and describes it this way:

> A number of the classic…thinkers of the French Enlightenment have been…on the receiving end of a blistering set of critiques…concern[ing]…the seeming contradiction between their celebration of natural rights and their open

justification for, or lack of, direct criticism of the Atlantic slavery that was a bedrock of their societies. (4)

Wright indicates in his speech manuscript, interpreted above, that those very masters of the slaves were the same people who swore by the rights of all men, which they learned from the Enlightenment thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau in France and John Locke in England. According to Laurent Dubois (and Susan Buck-Morss), reflecting on the work of Laurent Estéve and Louis Sala-Molins, it seems that Rousseau was very much for the rights of all but placed African slavery in such a separate category that he entirely missed it. As Dubois explains it, "although Rousseau frequently and incisively critiqued concrete examples of inequality and tyranny in his society, he conspicuously avoided any attack on slavery as it actually existed" (5). Turning slavery into a metaphor, Rousseau avoids speaking of real slavery (Buck-Morss 33). This sense of contradiction comes to the surface in Wright's description. Not surprisingly, given his concern for Black liberation and his Marxism, Wright insightfully is expressing a strikingly parallel explanation of Buck-Morss's paradox, with all of its Hegelian implications.

Wright's Journey: Discovering Black Consciousness

The rising consciousness of the oppressed Blacks was developed in the first section of this chapter. This next section will illustrate Wright's sense of a developing Black consciousness, which he hopes to convey to aspiring Black writers. Also, a rather unique way in which Melville's and Wright's ideas run parallel will be explicated. In this parallelism, in fact, Wright will be viewed as similar also to a third writer, Wright's friend later, Jean-Paul Sartre, in regards to the art of writing, specifically in the masking of tears.

Wright makes explicit in *How "Bigger" Was Born* that *Native Son* is an intensely psychologically probing work. Melville's writing in *Moby-Dick* also has a commitment to

deciphering the psychology behind human action, and in *Benito Cereno* a psychological response appears through the violent reactions of the slaves. Yet, while Melville's Babo and Atufal are quite conscious of their plans to reverse their oppression and return to Africa, Wright's Bigger does not possess a raised consciousness. He is predominantly governed by impulses and emotions. This will become evident as Wright's Bigger is placed beside Melville's Babo for comparison here.

Today, decades after the changes prompted by the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the sense of a raised Black consciousness is often taken for granted. Yet, Bigger, in the late 1930s, is portrayed by Wright as a young ghetto Black man, who does not seem to have the know-how to grasp his historical position on a higher plane in order to act with other Blacks in the formation of Black cultural identity. He has been severed from his ancestors' folk consciousness of the past, yet is not being offered anything to replace it with in a modern world. Melville's Babo, on the other hand, remains close to his African past and strives to work with Atufal and with the other slaves who follow him to revolt, in hopes of returning to Africa. Thus, Babo's contribution to a raised Black consciousness is to recognize the past as a path to the future. And yet Arnold Rampersad ventures to say "Wright may be seen as a Melvillean, with 'Benito Cereno' forming a kind of prediction of *Native Son* – that is, with Babo predicting Bigger Thomas" (Schultz, "Note 5" 652; Rampersad, "Shadow" 166). Bigger, unlike Du Bois's John, does not wait to die after killing his white boss' child.

Although it may seem odd to compare Bigger and Babo, characters portrayed in different times and disparate circumstances, the psychology behind their actions may prove instructive. On a basic level, they are similar in skin color, being both Black, and are each part of a motley crew: Bigger has his gang and Babo has his community of revolutionary slaves. Although

Bigger tends to be swept along by his emotions, Babo is quite the independent intelligent thinker, like Toussaint whom he represents. However, Rampersad makes clear that "both men are singularly without a sense of ambivalence about their attitude to the white world and the America they know" ("Shadow" 166). Bigger, for instance, thinks of the private investigator, white Mr. Britten, as his "enemy" (Wright, *Native Son* 155, 162). Bigger also converses with his gang member, Gus, about "old white landlords" not providing enough heat (16) and how whites prevent Blacks from becoming pilots (17). It is evident, page after page, that Bigger perceives whites as the "other," in fact as the oppressor. As for Babo, his hatred of his white oppressors shows up in his commanding several Ashantees to murder the torn body of Captain Aranda above deck in his presence (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 235-36). As Rampersad mentions, no ambivalence appears in either character. But Bigger still relies (at least until the final sections) on fear and anger, rather than planning a future, while Babo pressures Don Benito in the hopes of returning the crew to Africa.

If the reader examines Babo's role in the shaving scene in *Benito Cereno* and Bigger's part in bullying Gus in the *Native Son* gang scene, the razor and knife implicate the characters in attempted violence. Bigger "placed the knife at Gus's throat" (38) in a threatening manner, just as Babo passed "the steel…nigh the throat" of Don Benito and "the razor drew blood" (210). When Rampersad uses the word "predicting," the notion of approaching violence comes to mind, but also the complex feelings of fear, anger, and rebelliousness (Rampersad, "Shadow" 166; Wright, "How" 436, 448). In *Benito Cereno,* the reader expects the violence of a slave rebellion, while in *Native Son,* in parallel fashion, the violence that erupts between gang members is also to be expected. But the violence in both cases *interrupts* the camaraderie, between the Spanish sailors and Babo, on the one hand, and between Bigger and Gus, on the other.

Wright conceives of a motley crew that values camaraderie. Wright attempts to decipher the internal workings of the Black consciousness which depends on community; the early stage of cooperation that the motley crew develops through work acts in a similar way. Wright's own search for answers regarding this consciousness is rewarded in a small way one day when waiting in a Chicago welfare office at a point in his life when unemployment has forced him to apply for public welfare (Webb 102-103). Wright notices a building community of the people in the waiting area:

> They had not known one another before they had come here…had lived as individuals, each somewhat afraid of the other…now life had tossed them together, and they were learning to know the sentiments of their neighbors for the first time; their talking was enabling them to sense the collectivity of their lives…all over the country these millions of defeated people were coming together in relief stations and talking. Black minds were shedding illusions. (Webb 103)

Wright understands this tendency toward community in the members of the motley crew and the process which facilitates their rising level of consciousness. The motley crew as a "collectivity," shedding illusions, provides people a path to find meaning in their own lives. Wright felt this personally early on, while working with others and beginning to gain a sense of community, but in this case the motley crew also has a jester-like quality: "I reported each night at ten, got a huge pail of water, a bushel of soap flakes and, with a gang of moppers, I worked…I could talk, joke, laugh, sing, say what I pleased" (*Black Boy* 216). Like sailors mopping the ship deck, the gang of boys mopped hallways, feeling the comradeship of being a motley crew, which included the jestering of subversive laughter and song behind the boss's back.

The yearning "to belong" and "play a responsible role," that Wright finds in the Biggers of the world, can be viewed as significant aspects of those who desire the comradeship of a motley crew:

> There was in the back of their minds…a wild and intense longing…to belong, to be identified, to feel that they were alive as other people were, to be caught up forgetfully and exultingly in the swing of events, to feel the clean, deep, organic satisfaction of doing a job in common with others. ("How" 440)

Not only does Wright peer into the lives of Blacks to discover the psychology of their desire for group acceptance and the responsibility of making history, but Wright understands his own inclusion in this historical process:

> Trade union struggles and issues began to grow meaningful for me…I approached all of these new revelations in the light of Bigger Thomas, his hopes, fears, and despairs; and I began to feel far-flung kinships, and sense with fright and abashment, the possibilities of *alliances* between the American Negro and other people possessing a kindred consciousness. ("How" 441)

Wright begins to find meaning in his own life as he starts to see this comradeship in the gang, the motley crew, expanding to link internationally as a shared experience and consciousness. Wright, steeped in Marxist thought, would have felt that sense of camaraderie which builds as workers accomplish their work side by side, cooperating toward a common goal. (It is worth noting again that some "alliance" takes place between Bigger and Jan, the white communist, as *Native Son* concludes.) Melville provides a "motley" crew on the *Pequod*, including sailors from all over the globe. Wright would love this sense of internationalism, as he would hold with the slogan "unite and fight" (Webb 144), since he is part of an international

workers movement (the chant at the time probably would have been "Black and white – unite and fight"). Wright would agree with Melville regarding the close, cooperative work of the crew.

During the mid-1930s, Wright was developing a theory of Black consciousness and writing several pieces as steps in fleshing out his idea. One document he called "Personalism," which he incorporated into a speech for a conference (Webb 137-38). The other is his "Blueprint for Negro Writing," designed to encourage Black writers to utilize their "folk consciousness" to accept and move beyond a "cultural nationalism" ("Blueprint" 199) into a new international consciousness. This enlightened Black consciousness would involve the "emergence of a new culture in the shell of the old" (198). From the "common life" experience of folklore a realization of value and meaning will appear. The point of consciousness which will produce in Blacks the realization of "*meaning* in their suffering," will result in the "doom" of the very civilization that forced that suffering into being (198). It is then that revolution will build and take on meaning and writing will take on its "historical function," and "new goals" will be formulated (197). In the second chapter, earlier, the motley crew was pictured as beginning to perceive itself in a new light with new capabilities. These advancing capabilities would reach a point where "the working peoples' will to defy the handed-down order of things and…[the] desire [for] a new regime that can accommodate their own social objectives" (Adéèkó 80) is put into action. The social implications of this new paradigm must be conveyed within the development that has taken place in this process. It would, in a sense, be a lie on the part of Black writers to ignore the world-historical "revolutionary significance of these nationalist tendencies" ("Blueprint" 199). Hence, revolt in writing takes on significance.

Wright could envision Black insurgents on the barricades of a future *Pequod*. He would encourage any oppressed people to struggle and revolt from below. He would admire Melville's liberatory impulses. In 1934, Wright wrote two poems, one called, "I Have Seen Black Hands" and the other, "Rest for the Weary," which were both about proletarian revolutionary upsurge. "Black Hands" states:

I am black and I have seen black hands
Raised in fists of revolt, side by side with the white fists of white workers,
And some day – and it is only this which sustains me --
Some day there shall be millions and millions of them,
On some red day in a burst of fists on a new horizon! (qtd. in Rowley 77)

Rowley interprets these poems this way: "[Wright] wrote about workers usurping the places of the capitalists. On paper, at least, he could reverse the power structure" (77). Wright's encouragement of Black writers to take on a sense of revolt often came in the form of his own revolt in writing.

In 1935-36, Wright was part of the South Side Writer's Group in Chicago and his "Blueprint" was one of the manuscripts discussed. Of importance today, when reading "Blueprint," is that "for the first time in American history, black writers were coming together to discuss their task as black writers" (Rowley 117). As discussions were taking place, Wright must have sensed that some members of the workshop were considering his document to be a manifesto of the group. But Wright kept the group's aspirations balanced. When they decided on Marxist consciousness to frame their writing concerning the masses of Blacks, Wright stated, "Marxism was merely a starting point" (Rowley 117). When the group grasped onto Black nationalism, Wright insisted that "they would not restrict themselves to this. Their literary

heritage was European, white American, and Negro" (117). The discussions about "Blueprint" by these Black writers brings to the surface Wright's own strong background in having read European and American white and Black writers. It also expresses Wright's sense that life is larger than a narrowly conceived Marxist thought, alone, can contain. Gilroy sees that there is an extremely limiting aspect to "ethnic particularism and nationalism" (4), the very element Wright may be taking issue with here. Gilroy also notes that thinkers in the black community have rejected these attitudes "in favour of a global, coalitional politics in which anti-imperialism and anti-racism might be seen to interact if not to fuse" (4). This seems to be what Wright means when he says the Black consciousness must accept, but move beyond "cultural nationalism" ("Blueprint" 199). Wright's hope is that Black consciousness can escape the racism and double consciousness (Wright's "curtain") it has been forced to deal with at length, and through revolt in writing become capable of locating itself in the camaraderie and cooperation of that "global, coalitional politics" (Gilroy 4).

Wright, Melville, and Sartre: Masking a Tear

The case was made earlier in this chapter that Melville utilized Hegel's master-slave dialectic in *Benito Cereno*, but Melville not only understands Hegel's dialectic, he believes in the moral imperative that slaves should revolt to liberate themselves. Laurie Robertson-Lorant shows that Melville infers this through his narrator's discourse in *Benito Cereno*:

> The slaves' objective – to commandeer the ship and sail to Senegal, where they could be free – was morally justified. They had to revolt and kill their owner and most of the Spanish sailors, except those whom they needed to navigate the ship, or they had no hope of regaining the freedom that was their natural right. (351)

Wright, too, sees this moral imperative as a necessity. He would understand the *content* of Melville's narrative of rejecting oppression, but Wright would also agree with Melville's *rhetoric* of rejecting oppression in two ways: first, Melville is rhetorically rejecting slavery politically, and second, he is rhetorically rejecting, through revolt, his own oppression as a writer whose genius his contemporary readership and critics have failed to recognize. Melville understands the "physical" struggles of slaves like Douglass against slave-breakers like Covey, but also, as a writer, perceives the "linguistic…written acts of resistance [in slave narratives]…[that] meant far more to readers of the day and generations to follow" (Sundquist 31). Melville's relatives are so conflicted, and he finds himself in a northern Abolitionist culture which is torn between Garrison's "moral suasion" (changing the hearts of the Southerners) and Douglass's imperative to fight the slave breakers. Melville is not just writing about a revolt, he is revolting for himself in the writing process, just as Wright encourages Black writers to do. Writing, for both Melville and Wright, is not only the medium to make small changes, it is changing the world to save themselves.

For Wright, writing is a way to see, think, and feel (Webb 157). The act of writing, though, is not only an aesthetic for him, but, importantly, a way of "revolting," meaning a method of infusing the desire for action onto the reader (Webb 138; Wright, "Personalism"). In his unpublished writing about the theory he calls "Personalism," Wright mentions the ways in which Black writers would benefit from writing "revolt" into their works. But "Personalism" means something more to Wright: it is "a model for the relationship between the individual and society,…[where] the 'community' that is the literary work he sought to create might also be a metaphor for social community" (Miller 269). This metaphor simultaneously links Wright's camaraderie in writing to his building of camaraderie among Blacks in active life. It appears that

Wright, understanding the intricate link between writer and readership, intends a method of writing which defies the *status quo,* and enlists the support of the reader in the development of Black consciousness on the part of the writer.

Constance Webb, Wright's biographer and friend (and wife of C. L. R. James), describes the night that Wright realizes a significant error he has made in his approach to writing. That night, Wright picked up a letter again, which he had received from Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Although it was a kind letter, "the revelation that the book [Wright's collection of essays, *Uncle Tom's Children*] had made the President's wife *unhappy* plagued Richard" (Webb 168). Wright had created the conditions for his white audience to shed tears. He knew that by allowing his readers to weep, they would repent their previous attitudes, but would also feel relieved and would dispense with the "necessity for action, for trying to change the conditions under which black people lived" (Webb 168). Wright suddenly recognized "that [he]…had made an awfully naïve mistake" ("How" 454). With a new sense of determination, Wright describes in "How Bigger Was Born" that he would never again make the mistake he made in *Uncle Tom's Children.* He would never again write "a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about" (454). His next book "would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears" (454). This attitude on the part of Wright seems superficially cold, perhaps. Yet, he did not want tears to wash away his intent for societal change.

Melville, in *Benito Cereno,* in another great prediction of *Native Son,* eschews tears too. Robertson-Lorant indicates that "Melville indicts slavery without sentimentalizing either the blacks or the whites" (350). Melville's use of irony naturally allows him to accomplish this. It is ironic that the slaves are Aranda's "property" although they are free to roam the deck, and it is

also ironic that Delano believes Don Benito and Babo might be planning something piratical when it turns out that Delano and his American crew act as pirates toward the revolting slaves at the conclusion. This powerful ironic writing, while avoiding drawing tears from their readership, is important to both Wright and Melville, and Wright would understand a bit of his own literary theory in Melville.

Six years after the publication of his *Native Son*, Wright's friend and French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre seems to pick up on Wright's idea of avoiding the eliciting of tears from readers. In the course of writing about the writer-reader relationship in "What is Literature?" Sartre states:

> A bare tear is not lovely. It offends. A good argument also offends, as Stendhal well observed. But an argument that masks a tear that's what we're after. The argument removes the obscenity from the tears; the tears, by revealing their origin in the passions, remove the aggressiveness from the argument. (33)

Wright realized the importance of the "argument that masks a tear" as the intent of writing and desired to put his thoughts into writing very early on. Sartre seems to express Wright's thoughts regarding the purpose of writing: once the author makes the decision to write, to speak, the writer is already intending for change to take place. Sartre explains that by the act of speaking, "I reveal it to myself and to others in order to change it" (22). Wright views writing as a very dialectical process, and one which, by involving revolt, can change the conditions and consciousness of the Black population. In other words, writing can change history, makes history. Wright is very perceptive of his writing process, especially regarding *Native Son:*

> Always, as I wrote, I was both reader and writer, both the conceiver of the action and the appreciator of it. I tried to write so that, in the same instant of time, the

> objective and subjective aspects of Bigger's life would be caught in a focus of prose. And always I tried to *render, depict,* not merely to tell the story. ("How" 458)

This tight relationship between writer and reader is necessary for revolt to occur in writing and in life. Wright knew that if the reader did not pick up on what he was saying, action would not take place. Sartre, who only a few years later will ask Wright to provide a Forward for his play about the American South, "The Respectful Prostitute," sensed that the dialectical relationship between writers and their audience provides freedom for each. For Sartre, "the writer appeals to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work" ("What" 46). It is only through the reader, Sartre would say, that the writer can find her own "essentiality" in relation to her work: and to feel "essential in relationship to the world" is why we write (39). Surely, this is one reason why Wright engages in the writing process – to feel "essential" in the development of Black consciousness, his own consciousness.

Wright's desire to increase his understanding of literature and the writing process is the reason why he joined a communist John Reed Club in the 1930s. When the Party shut down the club, Wright protested but to no avail (Rowley 86). His social circle had expanded with the Reed Club and he had learned much; he did not want the experience to abruptly end. Then, a few friends came together to form a writer's workshop in 1934. They met once a week at a white man's house, where they would tear each other's work apart. Wright felt that this process brought a sense of objectivity that was needed for a writer (Rowley 88-89; Wright "early draft of *Black Boy*"). During these sessions, he learned more about the art of writing, but "he was also learning about his future readers. He needed to know how white readers responded to his writing" (89). He would benefit from this knowledge in writing *Native Son* later. (He will only

find the writers' group he really wants in France later, when he begins emerging as a world figure.)

Wright felt a complex relationship with modernity. In his writings, he recognized the "problem of his own hybrid identity as a modern man" (Gilroy 162). Although, for instance, some in left circles in France found Gertrude Stein's writing distasteful, Wright on the other hand, alert to the possibilities of dealing with modernity, took a liking to Stein's and other modernists' writings. He liked the "experimental use of language and the technical innovations…in James Joyce, Stein, and the poetry of T. S. Eliot (Rowley 103). One experimental aspect of Wright's work, *Lawd Today!* is that it occurs within a twenty-four hour period, just like Joyce's *Ulysses* (103). (One proto-modernist aspect of Melville's *Benito Cereno,* although written earlier in the mid-nineteenth century, is that it takes place within a short twenty-four hour period.)

Although Wright in the 1930s often felt as if his hours for writing were too carefully earmarked by the Communist Party's political work, he also gained writing experience by working as a correspondent for the Communist *Daily Worker*. The topics of his articles ranged from protests of the attack on Ethiopia and protests in Harlem of lynchings in the South, to support of the Scottsboro boys and rent strikes (Rowley 128). Notice that these are politically motivated articles. Wright's sense of revolt is evident in his ability to move people to action through journalism, circumventing guilt-relieving pathos.

Whether to draw tears through a rhetoric of "moral suasion," or whether to engage in political polemic became an issue in the mid-nineteenth century slavery debate (Brown 533). During the late 1840s, when Melville was busy writing, William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass toured through the state of Pennsylvania, meeting with abolitionists and speaking to

audiences trying to turn the tide of public opinion against slavery. White Garrison and Black Douglass agree on the basic immorality of slavery, but their means of changing the tide of opinion in America differs to a great degree (549). Like Melville (and Wright later) and his turning away from the drawing of tears from his readership, Douglass moves away from Garrison's method of "moral suasion" as a means for obtaining his ends. Garrison draws laughter and tears from his audiences (537). Douglass, despite Garrison's objections, founds a Black newspaper *The North Star* (549). Garrison's newspaper the *Liberator* spreads Garrison's "moral crusade" (549), while Douglass supports political parties (the break-away Free Soil Party and the new Republican Party, which would lead the Civil War) and pursues the political avenue to abolish slavery. Douglass's choice can be seen in his physical struggle with the slave-breaker Covey, and Douglass will later famously advocate arming the slaves during the Civil War. Douglass, after he gains freedom, certainly does appeal to moral sentiments in his speeches and writings, but he will not wait with Garrison until the population is persuaded morally in order to end slavery. Political revolt is Douglass's pursuit, and it is this method, "political action," that succeeds in abolishing slavery in America.

Wright, and Melville before him, perceive in art a way to bring political change. Wright understands that underlying political change can come to America only if the consciousness of Blacks can develop, for "the Negro" must be retained as an integral part of America. Even Black folksongs, as Du Bois had shown in his *Souls of Black Folk*, are doubly woven into America's culture – "always both American and black" (Gilroy 91). But Melville has to overcome an obstacle. While Melville pursues his writing, his relatives attempt to press him toward political employment for a steady income. What his relatives do not realize is "writing *was* a political career" in Melville's case (Robertson-Lorant 348), and *Benito Cereno* in particular is "clearly

filled with political resonance" (Shima 302). Melville is affected by the political happenings of his time and has an astute understanding of these occurrences within history. He may find writing to be a personal "psychological" support, as Wright will too, but "deep down he still believed art had the capacity to change the way Americans perceived reality, and he still imagined he could influence the course of history with his pen" (Robertson-Lorant 348). As artists, both Melville and Wright were intense, intellectual thinkers, who wrote with the sweep of historical generations in mind.

Wright perceives the confusion in the minds of the petit-bourgeois artists of his time. He sees them as being confronted by two worlds – fascism and capitalism – and simultaneously as lacking a clearly defined ideological orientation or familiar past experiences to meet the demands of societal change (Wright, "Personalism" 2-3). Because of their uncertainty, Wright indicates, these artists feel much dissatisfaction with life (2). This denial of satisfaction takes hold of the artist, as it grasps Wright's Bigger, and makes life barren. Yet, through artistic expression, Wright explains, these writers are able to grasp the values they feel are missing in their lives and meld them into their art as a mechanism for survival (2). It appears that the art of Wright and of Melville fit this dialectic. Both seem to embolden their art with political values that strengthen their own psychology and provide their readers with ideals to live by.

Wright, producing speeches and manuscripts in the mid- to late-1930s, senses the coming of war with its divisiveness. Fascist ideology is growing and reveals strains of stagnation ("Personalism" 1). The risk of the individual becoming lost amidst the desperation of receding values and the possibility of a future cut short weighs heavily on society (1). Looking back to Melville, here too in the 1850s, a sense that war (the Civil War) is approaching is embodied in the strife felt in political debates: the South has such different interests from the North and the

slavery issue sits at the fulcrum of the disparity. Confronting the tensions of their eras, Wright and Melville each hope to instill strength in their readership to deal with rising societal complexities.

The tensions of the antebellum years are visible in Melville's writing. When he writes *Benito Cereno*, he highlights it with a dialectical irony. Although the central focus of the novella is a revolt against the cruelty of slavery, the narrator tells the story from Captain Delano's white supremacist perspective. The conspicuous absence of the details of the first full revolt (a serious vigorous assault) that takes place before the narrative begins allows Babo's theatrical performance to appear as if "God had set the whole Negro to some pleasant tune" (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 207). But Melville's intent is clear later, when the narrative is taken to its conclusion and "the Negro" (248) is placed at the center of Don Benito's and the reader's concern, and Babo's bloody head speared atop a pole is left staring into the eyes of the white audience (249). Although the conclusion of the narrative finds that Babo "met his voiceless end" (249) and the silence of "the Negro" is caused by the narrator's racial essentialism which attempts to prevent the Blacks from telling their own story, Melville's message is ironic but clear: the Blacks' revolt is a central point of this novella.

Conclusion

Lewis Mumford, in his assessment of *Benito Cereno* in his own book on Melville, uncritically leaves the Blacks voiceless. He stresses Melville's treatment of Don Benito and Captain Delano, while minimizing the slave issue. Although Mumford mentions that the ship is "manned by negroes" (*Herman Melville* 244) and all is in "disorder even among the black boys" (245), he does not express the urgency of Melville's antebellum concern over slavery. Perhaps Alan Nadel has perceived Mumford correctly regarding the Civil War period. In his book,

Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon, Nadel censures Mumford regarding the contents of his book, *The Golden Day*: "In a book of well over 50,000 words, aimed at comparing the antebellum American mind to the postbellum, there are not 500 words dealing with slavery and/or blacks" (93). Nadel continues:

> Mumford stresses this optimistic strain [that America is a one-of-a-kind experiment in morality], but ignores…that this American experiment was undertaken in the face of an overwhelming problem, which initially almost prevented the forming of the union: the presence of slavery in half the colonies. (93)

In conclusion, it has been shown that by undertaking an undialectical optimism about America's destiny, Mumford missed two extremely significant aspects of the antebellum period. By keeping his eye on the captains, first Ahab in *Moby-Dick* and then Don Benito in *Benito Cereno*, the crew and its sentiments slipped out of his vision. In viewing the Civil War as a tragic bloody slaughter that held no significance for breaking through the contradictions of the Enlightenment, Mumford left the slaves, the Blacks, without a voice. Schultz, by accepting and explicating Mumford's views, also replicates Mumford's error; she misses the Black canon, W. E. B. Du Bois in particular, and she misses the Black struggle which Melville clearly sees – a history of revolt on the Black Atlantic which predicts Richard Wright's book. She further seems to think Bigger's story of revolt ends with him on the water tower ledge seeing the *Pequod* go down. Yet, Bigger and Wright live on past Ahab: the crew miraculously survives to rebel again, just as Steelkilt predicted.

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