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Alexandro Aranda's skeleton displayed as the ersatz figurehead of the *San Dominick* and Babo's severed head impaled on a pole are perhaps the two most striking images from Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*. The deliberate public exhibition of the bodily remains of both the Spanish slave owner and Senegalese rebel mastermind is central to the turn and resolution of Melville's novella; yet these scenes are significant deviations on the part of Melville, who otherwise based his story on an episode from Amasa Delano's memoir *Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, in which the American captain thwarts a revolt onboard a Spanish slave ship.[1] The narrative's presentation through the limited perspective of the American captain Amasa Delano makes *Benito Cereno*, according to the prevailing reading by critics such as Carolyn Karcher, "an exploration of the white racist mind and how it reacts in the face of a slave insurrection."[2] Delano's notorious misreading of the racial dynamics of the *San Dominick*, a misreading of the slave revolt

due to the Africans' deft masquerade that plays into his assumptions about black inferiority and white superiority, appears symbolic of the failure of white epistemological mastery. This essay proposes to examine the scientific knowledge that structures the authority of Delano's gaze and, in turn, naturalizes his sympathies toward those he observes. The gruesome spectacle of the corpses of Aranda and Babo points to the novella's exploration of the intersection of nineteenth-century everyday visual culture with race science's dependence upon a morbid corporeality that elevates some bodies as ideals and reduces others to objects.

The publication *of Benito Cereno* in 1855 situates Melville's writing amid the fraught interdependence between visual culture and race science. Through the influence of science on nineteenth-century American visual culture, faces, heads, and skulls acted as the visible material signifiers not just of character and ability but also of differences within the hierarchy of the human that affirmed the supremacy of whiteness. The overlapping disciplines of physiognomy, phrenology, and craniology affirmed vision as a technology of scientific judgment; these now maligned "head sciences" allowed for the development of the respectable fields of anatomy, psychology, and neuroscience but also influenced race science and the theory of polygenesis: the separate evolution of each "race." Johann Kasper Lavater's physiognomic study of faces as the reflection of the soul gave way to Frank Josef Gall's more scientific phrenology, a critique of the head whose external bumps quantified the inherent faculties of the brain. The widespread acceptance of phrenology in nineteenth-century America derived from the work of phrenology's proselytizers such as the Scottish lawyer George Combe, who wrote *The Constitution of Man*, one of the bestsellers of the era, with 200,000 copies sold before the Civil War, and the American Fowler family, who published numerous pamphlets on practical phrenology and undertook lecture tours and public demonstrations.[3] The promise of a scientific knowledge that would train the individual to enable self-knowledge and, therefore, self-improvement was crucial to the successful dissemination of phrenology's precepts. Coeval to phrenology's life as a popular science, the study of skulls was practiced by esteemed craniologists such as Samuel George Morton, expanding the analysis of individual heads to the mass collection of data for a practice of comparative anatomy that correlated differences between civilizations and groups of people to evidence polygenesis. These scientific discourses helped to train the average American gaze in the techniques of scientific visual evaluation, combining the expertise of the Foucauldian clinical gaze with a culture of everyday

panoptic scrutiny, thereby providing widespread justification for racial prejudices naturalized to be as evident as sight itself.

Science drew on art and, in turn, art drew on science.[4] The scientific dependence on the visual as a primary tool of analysis meant the proliferation of images of faces, heads, and skulls in order to illustrate theory: one edition of Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* boasts 360 engravings on its title page, while practitioners of popular phrenology used its iconic diagrams of the head's faculties and organs for advertising their services.[5] *Crania Americana*'s expensive large folio format imbued Morton's ethnological findings with gravitas and delivered the impact of John Collins's 78 striking lithographs depicting the scientist's extensive skull collection.[6] Similarly, the scholarly *Types of Mankind* includes several foldout color prints that display schematic renditions of the faces, skulls, and characteristic fauna associated with each race's place of origin. Incongruous to modern standards of evidence, the title page of *Types* declares that its research is drawn from "ancient monuments, sculptures, and paintings" as well as the expected crania, but the dependence upon art, under the presumption of mimetic representation, recurs throughout the head sciences: phrenologists regularly displayed busts and paintings at their demonstrations to affirm the timelessness of their principles and to present the visages of deceased famous individuals as examples.[7]

Art in this period, however, was shifting in response to phrenological principles. Artists such as Hiram Powers and Augustus Saint-Gaudens were influenced by phrenology's popularity, altering their busts and paintings in order to give their sitters flattering phrenological portrayals.[8] These aspirational likenesses indicate the bias of science's reliance on the visual: the faces of white, moneyed subjects have the privilege of signifying an idealized individuality, while racialized or otherwise othered faces are violently reducible to types. In his approach to ethics, Lévinas unintentionally channels the head sciences' fixation with their preferred object of study; according to the philosopher, "The face is meaning all by itself," and its epiphanic alterity demands an ethical relation.[9] But this assumption about irreducible alterity runs into the unexamined problem of universality that Deleuze and Guattari critique in their discussion of faciality. Although the face acts as a way of tying meaning to a subject, the assumed face is "your average ordinary White Man": "Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face."[10] The chosen faces and heads of physiognomy and phrenology are of idealized white men reaffirmed as normative ideals by science. Tellingly, in one comparative diagram *Types* presents the contrast

between racial norms and deviations by placing the caricatured faces of black men beside those of primates, while the representative face of whiteness is the classical bust of Apollo Belvedere.[11] The visuality of race science betrays the divide between those who can be identified and those one can identify *with*.

Melville can be counted among those interested in both science and art; his reading included many works on art history by such luminaries as John Ruskin and Giorgio Vasari alongside scientific texts like Darwin's journal and Cuvier's *The Animal Kingdom*.[12] Melville owned about four hundred individual prints. As for his knowledge of the head sciences in particular, during his trip to England in 1849 he purchased Lavater's *Essays* for ten shillings, and an 1854 letter to Richard Lathers indicates the return of Lathers' copy of Combe's *Constitution*.[13] Melville's final published work, *Timoleon*, explores his love of art through poetry; he also explored the corporeality of science in his novels.[14] *Benito Cereno* was published serially in a literary periodical dedicated to both subjects, *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art*, in which Melville published numerous other works such as "Bartleby the Scrivener." The journal included regular updates about the fine arts and discussions of science. When *Types of Mankind* appeared in 1854 as a salvo for the proponents of polygenesis, the July edition of *Putnam's* engaged in an extensive review of the book that ends up in agreement with its racist findings. "Is Man One or Many?" accepts the use of art as evidence for the unchanging and separate nature of the races based on "different physiognomies" that "enable us, for the most part, to distinguish them at a glance."[15] In January 1855, however, "Are All Men Descended from Adam?" returns to the debate and argues for monogenesis, while still retaining physiognomy as the distinctive but mutable characteristic of racial difference.[16] *Benito Cereno* was published in the last three issues of that year to a readership conversant in visual culture as well as antebellum debates about scientific racism.

Before the truth about the *San Dominick* is revealed to the clueless Delano, *Benito Cereno*'s narrative focus stays oppressively close to the American's perspective, showing how his eye, and therefore literal point of view, is informed by the expectations of race science. Upon his introduction, Delano's sight is emphasized in relation to the Spanish ship: "viewed through the glass," the ship is a confounding object as he "continued to watch her," and "the longer the stranger was watched the more singular appeared her maneuvers."[17] Once Delano was onboard, his "one eager glance took in all faces, with every other object about him"; and

when he first looks specifically at the people who are the ship's cargo, the old African men are described as having "heads like black, doddered willow tops."[18] Throughout his guided tour of the ship, the captain's gaze is drawn to faces and heads as organized receptacles of legible meaning, but he parses them unevenly according to race: white faces are recognized and privileged with gazes that can be returned, while black faces are erased, ignored or downplayed, and often rendered simply as heads.

While the physiognomic face holds the holistic representation of individual humanity, the head in phrenology, if one is not in the position to be pandered to by its practitioners as a subject of admiration, quantifies one's position as an object of study. During one of many instances when Delano is on the verge of revelation, he "stands with eye directed forward" and believes the Spanish sailors "returned the glance and with a sort of meaning. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, but again seemed to see the same thing." When he then enters the scene, he looks only to white faces for answers, with "his eye curiously surveying the white faces, here and there sparsely mixed in with the blacks," and, after failing to get answers from a Spanish sailor, he looks "round for a more promising countenance but seeing none, spoke pleasantly to the blacks to make way for him."[19] Prioritizing white faces, he barely registers black faces. The only black face he lingers on is the steward Francesco's: "while the complexion of the mulatto was hybrid, his physiognomy was European—classically." The disjuncture momentarily throws off Delano's surety, but when he asks if Francesco "always proved a good, worthy fellow," Cereno's affirmative answer helps to reestablish the physiognomic connection between face and character, as well as the American's belief in white racial superiority's beneficial effect on the lower races in all areas.[20]

This contrast in physiognomic worthiness is most apparent in how Delano sees Babo's face only in relation to Benito Cereno's while the captain pays attention to Cereno's face in its own right. Initially, Babo's visage is rendered as a "rude face, as occasionally, like a shepherd's dog, he mutely turned it up into the Spaniards"; later, when Delano questions the relationship between Spaniard and African, "Babo, changing his previous grin of mere animal humor into an intelligent smile, not ungratefully eyed his master" who affirms the man's value to him.[21] The American repeatedly notices Babo's preoccupation with Cereno's facial expressions, reading it as a slavish attentiveness to Cereno as a worthy subject. By contrast, Delano scrutinizes Cereno's visage during their interactions, noting numerous nervous tics, such as when Cereno's "face lighted up;

eager and hectic, he met the honest glance of his visitor" or "his pale face twitching and overcast." He is finally comforted by the physiognomic reading of his fellow captain's race and peerage: "he was struck by the profile, whose clearness of cut was refined by the thinness incident to ill-health, as well as ennobled about the chin by the beard. Away with suspicion. He was a true offshoot of a true hidalgo Cereno."[22] Science assuages Delano's anxieties by familiarizing the dangerously uncanny sights of the slave ship.

The narrative turn in *Benito Cereno* is said to be the moment when Cereno jumps over to Delano's boat and reveals that the Africans are actually the masters of the ship. This moment has been construed as the shattering of Delano's racist delusions of white mastery. Yet I want to suggest that with the discovery of Aranda's skeleton and Babo's eventual beheading, race science and its connection to structures of power are not so easily dismantled. Delano's "flash of revelation" leaves the captain "now with scales dropped from his eyes," but his recognition of Babo as revolt leader does not constitute a break from the American's way of looking and thinking based on race science: he views Babo's "countenance lividly vindictive, expressing the centered purpose of his soul" as still a transparently legible sign.[23] The potency of visual signifiers informed by scientific racism endures with the public presentation of the dead. When the conflict between the Africans and the combined forces of the Americans and Spanish begins, Aranda's remains are discovered lashed onto the *San Dominick*:

> Suddenly revealing, as the bleached hull swung round towards the open ocean, death for the figurehead, in a human skeleton, chalky comment on the chalked words below, FOLLOW YOUR LEADER.

Despite acting as "death for the figurehead," Aranda's bones are not a mere death's head. As an entire skeleton instead of a skull, even in death the former slave owner has the privilege of not being reduced to the singular scientific object of Melville's day. When Cereno cries out at the sight—"'Tis he, Aranda! My murdered, unburied friend!"—he both identifies and identifies with the man's bones.[24] The skeleton both retains Aranda's individuality and symbolizes memento mori, an unacknowledged racialized universality that privileges white bones. The white skeleton stands out, "seemed beckoning the whites to avenge it."[25] The legal deposition after the battle indicates Babo's knowing manipulation of the uneven visual signification of Aranda's bones: starting with Cereno, Babo

takes each member of the crew to the remains and asks "whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should think it a white's," threatening that unless the Spaniards help the Africans, they "shall in spirit, as now in body, follow [their] leader." In response, "each Spaniard covered his face," a gesture of racial physiognomic recognition.[26] But Aranda's skeleton as a symbol succeeds in rallying white Americans and white Spaniards alike, and eventually after their victory the slave owner's remains are given the dignity of burial in the vaults of St. Bartholomew, reflecting the living status of their owner.

Babo's beheading functions as the abjected racial reversal of Aranda's death. While both remains are publicly displayed in order to terrorize their respective racial communities with the consequences of following their leader, one can compare the divergences between white and racialized bodies in their postmortem treatment and attendant visual signification: Babo's "body was burned to ashes" leaving only his head, while Aranda's intact "recovered bones" rest in peace. Placing Babo's head on a pole, "that hive of subtlety," in part reflects the phrenological fetishization of the head as the material object of visual analysis; as Delano emphasizes, the African's "brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt."[27] His severed head reflects the multivalent violence of race science; one can trace the shift from living face to mute head to eventual skull specimen.[28] Ann Fabian points out the contemporaneous correlation between Nat Turner's rebellion, during which "slaveholders executed suspected plotters and stuck their heads on stakes" as warnings, and Morton's skull collection for *Crania Americana*, which included "heads of African tribal leaders who led a bloody resistance to settlement on their lands by former American slaves" plucked from their stakes in Liberia for scientific research.[29] The authoritative science that informs Delano's gaze and confirms his racial prejudices is based on empirical data wrested from exhumed bodies and is a product of national and colonial projects. While the purported objectivity of science attempts to sanitize the means of its production and its resulting effects, Melville's *Benito Cereno* returns context to the effects of race science on the American way of looking, reminding us that representative violence is inevitably linked to other forms of brutality. As for Babo, a man who fought to escape the violence of being rendered property, in death becomes an object that may eventually find use as a scientific example. Although silenced, his head's accusing gaze "met, unabashed, the gazes of the whites," glaring up toward the vaults where slave-owning Aranda's body rests, as a reminder of this injustice and, perhaps, the inability of

violence to completely control the proliferation of visual culture's meanings.[30] If the display of Aranda's white bones could rally the sailors, who might be inspired, rather than deterred, by Babo's skull?

Notes

1. In the memoir Aranda dies by being thrown overboard while Babo is killed during the fight between the Americans and the Africans. It is Babo's son Muri who survives to be beheaded along with the remaining handful of African men.

2. Carolyn Karcher, *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 128.

3. George Combe, *The Constitution of Man Considered in Relation to External Objects* (Boston: Carter and Hendee, 1829).

4. Many thanks to the Center for Historic American Visual Culture 2014 summer seminar for giving me the opportunity to research this section at the American Antiquarian Society. This research was supported by a graduate research travel grant from the American Studies program at Cornell.

5. Johann Kasper Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1789), vol. 1, i.

6. Samuel George Morton, *Crania Americana* (Philadelphia: Dobson, 1839), i.

7. Josiah Clark Nott and Louis Agassiz, *Types of Mankind* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1854).

8. Colbert, Charles, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 41, 152.

9. Emmauel Lévinas and Philippe Nemo, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 86.

10. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 178.

11. *Types of Mankind*, 458.

12. Merton M. Sealts, *Melville's Reading* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 89, 102, 55, 54.

13. Douglas Robillard, *Melville and the Visual Arts* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1997), x; Herman Melville, *Journals*, ed. Howard C. Horsford and Lynn Horth (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 24; Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 260.

14. Samuel Otter, *Melville's Anatomies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

15. "Is Man One or Many?," *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art* 4, no. 19 (July 1854): 9.

16. "Are All Men Descended from Adam?," *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art* 5, no. 25 (January 1855): 79–88.

17. Herman Melville, *Melville's Short Novels*, ed. Dan McCall (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 35, 36.

18. Ibid., 38.

19. Ibid., 58, 59, 60.

20. Ibid., 75.

21. Ibid., 39, 54.

22. Ibid., 46, 53, 52–53.

23. Ibid., 85.

24. Ibid,, 86.

25. Ibid., 88.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 88, 93.

28. During the scene in which Babo shaves Benito Cereno, which Delano otherwise reads as a tableau of slavish devotion, for a brief moment the American "in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white a man at the block" (74). While Babo as headsman hints at the possibility of the reversal of race science's gory obsessions, this subversion cannot be realized and, instead, is inverted by the end with Babo as the man at the headsman's block.

29. Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 4.

30. Melville, *Short Novels*, 102.