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Chapter 1 |The Babo Problem:

White Sentimentalism and Unsympathetic Blackness in Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno*

I have a proposal: what if we considered Babo instead of Bartleby in our discussions on Melville’s explorations of refusal? I seek to shift attention from the scrivener to the enslaved. There is a popular tendency to uphold Bartleby as Melville’s universal figure of non-compliance: he is imprisoned and eventually dies for his adherence to his signature phrase “I would prefer not to” with no further explanation about his enigmatic resistance. This “Bartleby problem,” Wendy Lee concludes of the insensible unfeeling scrivener, “recapitulates both the philosophical question of how a person lives if he does not move as well as the ethical challenges of recognizing or tolerating such a being.”¹ Yet while Bartleby frustrates, he is still intelligible as a subject with affective interiority, however inaccessible. At the beginning, the narrating lawyer laments that there cannot be “a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature,” a testimony to his faith in the validity of Bartleby’s unavailable life.² Despite the scrivener’s recalcitrance, the lawyer attempts to extend every possible generosity to this fellow white man he cannot understand—echoing American captain Amasa Delano’s sympathies toward the withholding Spanish enslaver Benito Cereno in Herman Melville’s 1855 novella. These are not sympathies ever offered to Babo and the other enslaved Africans who face death if they rebel against chattel slavery’s system of social death. Adam Smith’s fellow-feeling can recognize those like Bartleby as an unfeeling but still human foil; after all, the story closes with the universalizing exclamation, “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!”³ Reevaluating unfeeling through the scope of what Kyla Schuller terms the biopolitics of feeling allows us to attend to its queer, racialized,

¹ Lee, “The Scandal of Insensibility; or the Bartleby Problem,” 1411.

² Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 17.

³ Melville, 54.

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and gendered modes and genealogies that carry different risks and rewards in their challenging of the sentimental politics of recognition. “How does it feel to be a problem?” according to W.E.B. DuBois, is the unspoken question asked of him as a Black person in the United States.⁴ What might the Babo problem teach us about the racial mapping of feeling and unfeeling?

“Faithful fellow! cried Capt. Delano. “Don Benito, I envy you such a friend; slave I cannot call him.”⁵ Amasa Delano believes his heart is in the right place when he praises Babo to Benito Cereno on the basis of the enslaved Senegalese man’s loving care for the white enslaver. Set off the coast of Chile *Benito Cereno* is based on an episode from the real-life Amasa Delano’s memoir *Narrative of Voyages and Travels* (1817). The novella follows the white captain of the American *Bachelor’s Delight* who believes he is helping a Spanish slave ship in distress. During the transfer of supplies the captain is disquieted by the Black majority and the absence of white authority figures like enslaver Alexandro Aranda, who is said to have been struck down by illness. Nonetheless, his sympathies are with the *San Dominick’s* captain Benito Cereno who behaves strangely despite the close ministrations from the enslaved Babo. Whenever Delano becomes suspicious, he is reassured by Babo’s performances of tender devotion. When the baffled American finally takes his leave the tale of weather woes and illness turns out to be a guise for the true plot: Benito Cereno leaps after Delano with Babo close behind, dagger in hand, a shocking revelation for the American which overturns his assumptions about who was the captive and who was the master. While the Americans fight alongside the Spanish to recapture the ship and re-enslave the Black fugitives, the canvas hiding the bow of the *San Dominick* falls aside to reveal that the mutiny substituted the enslaver Aranda’s skeleton for the original figurehead of Christopher

⁴ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3.

⁵ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 67.

Columbus. After the victory of enslavers and colonizers the reader is presented with selections from the legal deposition of the events. Order appears to be restored: the narrative focalization returns to the two captains now true friends while the surviving African men, women, and children are remanded into chattel slavery and Babo is publicly executed. Traumatized Benito Cereno's death soon follows. Throughout most of the novella, the third-person narration stays close to Delano's perspective, attentive to the shifts in his inner life during these events – but this intimacy is inflected by an undertone of ironic detachment. Upon Delano's introduction the captain from Duxbury, Massachusetts is said to be “a person of singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man.”⁶ His point-of-view captures something quintessentially American about his heart-felt understanding of the world – and his own goodness.

Sentimental Delano embodies Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous affective injunction from the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852 three years prior to *Benito Cereno's* serialization: “There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race.”⁷ Despite not sharing Stowe's abolitionist beliefs, Delano does not misrecognize the contradiction between Babo as enslaved by Cereno and Babo as friend to Cereno: Melville captures what Saidiya Hartman has identified as the structuring paradox of the legibility of Black humanity to whiteness predicated upon Black subjugation. Although ostensibly acknowledging Babo's humanity, Delano only recognizes the enslaved man through his affective performances of labour for his enslaver, the true

⁶ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 55–56.

⁷ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 452.

(Unpublished working paper from *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth Century America* under contract with Duke University Press in the Perverse Modernities series) Yao 4 recipient of the American's sympathies. Through this triangulation, Delano affirms himself as sympathetic. The rebellion of Babo and his fellow Africans, however, violate the terms of this affective recognition across difference: to play off of Denise Ferreira da Silva's terminology, the fugitives show themselves to be disaffected rather than affectable. Following his right feelings, the good American leads the violent suppression of the African uprising onboard the Spanish slave ship and restores the enslavers' authority over the fugitives, leading to Babo's beheading. While for Stowe the universality of right feeling leads to the right kind of politics that benefit the whole of humanity, Melville disrupts this instrumentalist assumption: the captain's "benevolent heart" is inextricable from the racialized and gendered system of American governmentality over hierarchies of feeling and humanity.⁸

Delano's perception of Babo as sympathetic enslaved "friend" degrades into his view of the Black man as unsympathetic villain. "Unsympathetic" is a word that cuts both ways in its negation: to not have sympathy for others means forfeiting recognition as deserving of sympathy. Here I am interested in how *Benito Cereno* offers us ways to understand the white sentimental politics of recognition that demands the affective labor of Black peoples and other minoritized peoples as the condition and the limit of their humanity toward the fantasy of universality.⁹ For many critics the narrative's careful attention to Amasa Delano's misunderstanding of the racial dynamics of the *San Dominick* have made the novella an

⁸ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 56.

⁹ See Rei Terada's expressive hypothesis from *Feeling in Theory* which posits that the expression of emotion creates the illusion. See also Martin Manalansan IV on the disaffection of Filipinx professional care givers in the global economies of emotion work. More generally, Lauren Berlant: "At the same time, biopolitical systems of supremacy often call on the problem populations – such as women, people of color, queers, and youth, but this too will vary – to have emotions for the privileged, to be vulnerable, expressive, and satisfying in the disturbance. If they withhold they are called inscrutable, which is a judgment against a form of composure that on other bodies would be honored as good manners, and is often deemed good manners in the servant class" in "Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*," 197.

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examination of the hermeneutics of racism.¹⁰ If, as Shirley Samuels writes, “Sentimentality is literally at the heart of nineteenth-century American culture,” so too is racism literally and figuratively at the heart of the narrative.¹¹ *Benito Cereno* critiques Stowe’s sentimentalism and its legacies: as per Peter Coviello’s insights, “for Melville Delano is first and foremost a sentimental reader, whose racism and incompetence in fact follow from his sentimentality.”¹² I take Delano’s psychic life as a case study in how structures of feeling reveal the constitutive scalar relationship between the individual and public politics of recognition: his perspective lays bare his affective investments in existing hegemonies.¹³ Feeling is never simply the private affective capacity of the individual but constitutive of public national sentiments and their political projects of belonging, interlocked with colonial and imperialist transnational intimacies of labour and domination.¹⁴ The narrator challenges the reader to question whether the American’s “benevolent heart” might influence his “quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception” – slyly phrased that any answer “may be left to the wise to determine.”¹⁵ Indeed, implicitly the reader is challenged as to whether they will be affected by Delano or disaffected from his structure of feeling.

If feeling is a fundamental technology of biopolitical domination, then we need to historicize and theorize unfeeling as affective indexes of dissatisfaction and dissent toward survival and resistance. In reading Babo through Delano, my inquiry is concerned less with the limits of white sentimentalism toward the ideal of a truer universal, but more to attend to how white sentimentalism suppresses and renders illegible the emergence of alternative structures of feeling that would threaten its posturing as universal. Recognition, as Frantz

¹⁰ As Carolyn Karcher puts it, “an exploration of the white racist mind and how it reacts in the face of a slave insurrection.” Karcher, *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville’s America*, 128.

¹¹ Samuels, *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, 4.

¹² Coviello, “The American in Charity: ‘Benito Cereno’ and Gothic Anti-Sentimentality,” 163.

¹³ See Raymond William’s *Marxism and Literature* and Charles Taylor’s *The Politics of Recognition*.

¹⁴ See Lauren Berlant, Lisa Lowe, Laura Wexler, Glenn Hendler, among others.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

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Fanon argues in the colonial context and Glen Coulthard in the settler colonial, operates as an apparatus for the production and maintenance of power.¹⁶ Following the work of da Silva and Wynter, my discussion questions the ideal of the universal human race that I argue is intertwined in the sentimental discourse of universal feeling which produces the politics of recognition: the African uprising signals the insurgent potential of the assumed failures of action and expression by disaffected peoples of color.¹⁷ Trace references to Indigenous and Asian resistance hint at the global, comparative dimensions of anticolonial struggles. Attending to the structural centrality of antiblackness, I open this book with this analysis of Babo's disaffection consequent to the formational demands for Black people's affectability given what Sianne Ngai calls animatedness, the expectations for their excessive affects and demonstrative physicality. Babo's refusal of the terms of this social contract renders him in Delano's eyes as its antisocial negation: the unfeeling spectre of unsympathetic Blackness that does not seek inclusion, but liberation from the American's structures of feeling that are founded upon the violent subsuming of racialized affects. No expression of Black affect is deemed truly legitimate.

Within the biopolitics of feeling, the perception of inappropriate, diminished, or even absent affects by the marginalized are vilified because these affective modes of turning away challenge the engulfing dynamics of agency, causation, and circulation braided in the discourse of universal affect as the expressive marker of the human. *Benito Cereno* explores the scientific and legal discourses of white sentimentalism that regulate the legibility of racialized affects under the coercive auspices of universal feeling during the long nineteenth-century in the United States. Rather than acting as correctives to unjust science and law,

¹⁶ See Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*.

¹⁷ See Wynter's *On Being Human as Praxis* ed. Katherine McKittrick and da Silva's *Toward a Global Idea of Race* and "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ - ∞ or ∞ / ∞; On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value." See also Rei Terada's *Looking Away*.

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sympathy and sentimentality were constitutive of scientific and legal discourse, moralizing their authoritative claims as structures of oppression.

In this chapter I consider the novella's two most striking images – Spanish enslaver Alexandro Aranda's skeleton and Senegalese rebel leader Babo's severed head – in terms of the overturning and restoration of expected visions of power, material artifacts of the scientific racism and unjust laws that undergird Delano's sentimental worldview. These visual displays stand out as significant deviations from the real Amasa Delano's memoir. The asymmetrical treatment of Aranda's and Babo's remains are linked to the treatment of racialized bodies as scientific specimens and as demonstrations of legal authority, illustrating the performances of scientific and legal discursive power in visual and material culture. Through its ironic distance from Captain Amasa Delano's affective certainty of what feels like the natural order, Melville's text makes visible the messy biopolitical violences of sentimentalism that the rise of scientific objectivity and legal formalism cannot fully occlude. Through its attention to Captain Delano's affective interiority in relation to the public spectacles of the skeleton and the severed head, I argue that *Benito Cereno* articulates the sentimental processes behind the politics of recognition in long nineteenth-century America that continue to influence fantasies of justice in the cultural imagination.¹⁸ Delano imposes this cultural imperialism as his benevolent international intervention, a forceful translation into his American paradigm from not simply the Spanish language but also Spanish colonial, Latin American, and African contexts.¹⁹

This chapter has two main divisions that trace different institutional apparatuses that make up the American biopolitics of feeling: the first, the influence of scientific discourse,

¹⁸ This bringing together of Melville and science with the visualization of sentimentalism's violences owes much to the influences of Otter, *Melville's Anatomies*; Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism*.

¹⁹ Downes, "Melville's Benito Cereno and the Politics of Humanitarian Intervention."

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and the second, the authority of legal discourse. Delano's way of seeing, his literal point-of-view, draws upon popular scientific discourse that justifies his sympathies toward those he observes through obsessive attention to faces and heads as signifiers of affective interiority and, therefore, humanity. These optics of recognition are informed by the influences of physiognomy, phrenology, and craniology on visual culture – fields of scientific study whose legitimacy would wax and wane over the century that were founded upon the violation of predominantly Black and Indigenous peoples' bodies.²⁰ Race science is the overt manifestation of the sciences writ large as the biopolitics of feeling: hierarchies of being and agency based on the capacities to feel and be affected within a scientific episteme itself founded upon sentiment and sympathy in its thought, methodology, practice, and rhetoric. On the level of the individual, these disciplinary knowledges are in turn naturalized as structures of feeling. Delano's gaze is directed by his heart: his view of the backwardness of the Africans is informed by his nostalgia for his childhood framed by an imagined cultural past of undisturbed Black primitivism and white nobility. His sense of self as a sympathetic subject within this hegemonic structure of feeling depends upon the emotional labour of Babo and the other Africans as affectable, tractable affirmations of his own humanity. Babo's orchestration of the *San Dominick*, however, subverts these demands for racialized affectability: he manipulates anxieties about the display of emotional expression as signifier of subordinated affective interiority. Rather than a break from white epistemological mastery, however, this revelation demonstrates the ways in which the demand for sympathetic Blackness is positioned against the fear of unsympathetic Black resistance whose illegibility to white sentiments gestures beyond the horizons of dominant structures of feeling and their limited politics. During the ensuing conflict, the sight of the enslaver Aranda's skeleton

²⁰ See Otter, *Melville's Anatomies*.

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rallies the Spanish and Americans in defense of their shared affective investments in defending whiteness against the possibility of Black liberation.²¹

After the battle, the narrative shifts from Delano's everyday individual politics of recognition to its imperialist, institutional counterpart with the Spanish legal deposition recounting the African revolt and the legal restoration of order that validates Delano's American sense of the world in transnational context. The rationale undergirding the illusion of objective distance provided by the legal documents is the same sentimental rhetoric shared by race science, a call for universal justice predicated upon that same natural order structured upon racialized abjection. In his depiction of Delano and his crew helping the Spanish to remand the Africans back into slavery, Melville addresses the ongoing turmoil around the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 during his writing: the narrative condemns both proslavery lawyers who euphemize chattel slavery through sentimentalism and those complicit liberal moderates like his own father-in-law Boston Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw, who infamously upheld the Act to deny fugitive Thomas Sims a writ of *habeas corpus*. Babo's head on a pole contrasts the display of Aranda's skeleton: the law renders one justice, while the other is obscene. The subversive display of Aranda's skeleton is overthrown by the closing spectacle of Babo's head as a symbol of order restored in the world: the fugitive leader dismembered into a craniological specimen suitable for race science's appropriation as evidence, tautologically reaffirming what the American felt was right all along. In closing I speculate on the place of racialized affects in Melville's portrayal of a world invested in white feelings, a conclusion inflected by Afropessimism: founded upon the erasure of any index of Black dissent and self-determination as unfeeling, the world of the novella cannot represent any

²¹ See Paul Downes's reading of the novella via the politics of humanitarian intervention. Downes, "Melville's Benito Cereno and the Politics of Humanitarian Intervention."

possibility of the alternative structures of feeling that could be galvanized by Babo's gaze defiant even in death.

I. The Seeing Mania: Science, Sentiment, and the Structuring of Recognition

If we follow philosopher Adam Smith's figuration of sympathy as fellow-feeling, one can say that Amasa Delano understands himself as a feeling fellow. From the beginning of *Benito Cereno* his sight is emphasized in conjunction with his signature "good nature."²² The *San Dominick* "viewed through the glass" is an object of intrigue as the captain "continued to watch her" and "the longer the stranger was watched the more singular appeared her maneuvers," but despite possible suspicions that might arise from these observations he does not fear evil from the Spanish ship.²³ The narrative focalization stays close to the American's unfolding perception of events: he is obsessed with faces and heads as signifiers of meaning, showing how his eye, and therefore, literal point-of-view, is informed by the expectations of race science. By shifting the original account of Captain Delano's encounter with the Spanish slave ship *Tryal* from 1805 to the fictionalized 1799, the 1855 novella's temporal scope captures the visual developments of the various race sciences, from the field of physiognomy from the late eighteenth century through to the sciences of phrenology and craniology popular in American culture by the mid-nineteenth. Through *Benito Cereno* we can trace the historical contours of the politics of recognition on the individual level of how one sees and is seen in everyday life.

In *The American Phrenological Journal* (1846) Orson Squire Fowler announces the visual impact of the popular science: "Its observations so thoroughly interest as to create a *seeing mania* which scrutinizes everybody and every thing. And the more you learn of it, the

²² Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 55.

²³ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 55.

more it will promote still further observation.”²⁴ The phrenologist’s phrase “seeing mania” articulates what Jonathan Crary has more broadly argued is the rise of the modern techniques of the observer.²⁵ 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 of differences within the hierarchy of the human. The overlapping disciplines of physiognomy, phrenology, and craniology affirmed vision as a technology of scientific judgement. Despite their present-day disavowal as racist pseudosciences, these once-respectable fields enjoyed varying degrees of institutional credibility; their research and paradigms laid the groundwork for the development of the disciplines of anatomy, psychology, and neuroscience.²⁶ These interlocking discourses helped to train the average American eye 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.

²⁴ Fowler, “Analysis, Adaptation, Location, and Cultivation of Individuality,” 331.

²⁵ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*.

²⁶ The late eighteenth-century field of physiognomy, based on the work of the Swiss writer Johann Kaspar Lavater, promoted the observation of faces and other outward physical traits as an objective means for judging the inner self and revealing the soul. For Lavater, this also meant the visible differences between peoples, for “That there is national physiognomy, as well as national character, is undeniable,” although he admits “it will, sometimes, be very difficult to describe scientifically (*Essays on Physiognomy* 85). Phrenology gave physiognomy the more rigorous and scientific description the latter lacked: stemming from the work of German physicians Franz Josef Gall and his disciple Johann Gasper Spurzheim, phrenology adapted the principles of physiognomy into a more materialist critique of the head whose external bumps reflected and quantified the inherent faculties of the brain, presumed to be the seat of human ability. Their analyses combined physiognomy’s privileging of the critical eye with the authenticating tangibility of haptic evidence. The widespread acceptance of phrenology in nineteenth-century America stemmed from the work of phrenology’s proselytizers such as the Scottish lawyer George Combe, whose *The Constitution of Man* (1823) was one of the bestsellers of the era with 200,000 copies sold before the Civil War, and the aforementioned Fowler family who printed numerous pamphlets on practical phrenology and gave many lecture tours and public demonstrations (Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection* 23). The promise of access to scientific knowledge that would train the individual in the ability to interpret everyday life and 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 like Ivy League scientist Samuel George Morton, expanding the visual analysis of individual heads and faces to the mass collection of data about comparative anatomy in relation to the differences between civilizations and peoples. Such research provided the phenotypical evidence for the ethnological theory of polygenesis, also known as the “American School,” which boasted Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz as its most prestigious advocate: one of the most notorious examples of scientific racism, its central claim was the separate origins of each “race.”

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.²⁷ One edition of Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* boasts three hundred and sixty engravings on its title page: practitioners of popular phrenology used these iconic diagrams of the head's faculties and organs to advertise their services.²⁸ In contrast to the small, lightweight physiognomic and phrenological manuals printed to maximize distribution and affordability, *Crania Americana*'s expensive folio format imbued Samuel George Morton's ethnological findings with gravitas and delivered the impact of John Collins's striking seventy-eight lithographs depicting the scientist's extensive skull collection. The scholarly *Types of Mankind* by Josiah Clark Nott and George R. Gliddon, which boasted contributions from scientific authorities like Samuel Morton and Louis Agassiz, includes several foldout color prints that display schematic renditions of the faces, skulls, and characteristic fauna associated with each race's place of origin. The titular "types" are meant to be instantly recognizable by their displays of distinctive anatomy: "how indelible is the image of a type impressed on a mind's eye!" proclaims the tome.²⁹ 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 used busts and paintings at their demonstrations in order to affirm the timelessness of their principles and to use the visages of deceased famous individuals as examples.³⁰

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*.

²⁹ Nott and Gliddon, *Types of Mankind*, 412.

³⁰ Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America*.

Art in this period, however, was shifting in response to phrenological principles. Hiram Powers was inspired by phrenology in his sculpting and even distributed the movement's pamphlets, while the popularity of the science mean that artists were pressured, in the case of Augustus Saint-Gaudens, or, like Henry Inman, savvy about altering their busts and paintings in order to give their sitters flattering phrenological portrayals.³¹ These aspirational representations 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 faces are 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.³² But this assumption about the 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."³³ In one exemplary 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.³⁴ The chosen faces and heads of physiognomic and phrenological texts and demonstrations are of idealized white men reaffirmed as normative ideals by science.

This hypocrisy reflects what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls the analytics of raciality that produced the modern configurations of global power and ethics: nineteenth-century Western science transposed the Enlightenment ideals of universality and self-determination

³¹ Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America*, 41,152.

³² Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, 86.

³³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 178.

³⁴ Nott and Gliddon, *Types of Mankind*, 458.

into the biopolitical systems of knowledge that recast social and bodily differences and processes into exterior manifestations of inherent differentiation that still took whiteness as the human universal. The specific genealogies of racism in American science from the shift from eighteenth-century theories of environmentalism and difference to the codified biological racism of the nineteenth-century have been well-documented.³⁵ The role of scientists' individual sentiments, disavowed as corrupting biases according to modern standards of scientific objectivity, tend to be at the forefront of these histories of scientific racism. Sentiment and science, however, mutually reinforced discursive justifications for racism.³⁶ Rather than the antithesis to the assumed cold rationality of science, sentimentalism was fundamental to scientific thought, practice, and methodology in ways we are still understanding. In her ground-breaking work Jessica Riskin draws attention to the key role of affect in the development of scientific empiricism in the eighteenth- through nineteenth centuries. According to Riskin, "Ideas, emotions, and moral sentiments alike were expressions of sensibility," leading to what she calls "sentimental empiricism":

by tracing emotions to sensory experience, [sentimental empiricism] implied that moral sentiments might be subjected to empirical scrutiny and manipulation, which was the foundation assumption of the moral sciences. However, by the same logic

³⁵ Significant histories of scientific racism include Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*; Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind : American Race Theory in the Early Republic*; Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind; the Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*; Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America 1815-59*.

³⁶ For instance, Fredrickson identifies what he calls "romantic racialism" that informed both pro- and antislavery positions through the approach of white sentimental benevolence that associated Blackness with childlike good nature. Thus, Fredrickson comments that for proslavery scientific advocates, the "stereotype of the happy and contented bondsman" was propaganda that justified chattel slavery for the sake of the enslaved based on their nature and even allowed for conditional sympathies toward them (*The Black Image in the White Mind* 52). Despite its authoritative posturing as objective, the institution of American science itself was a gendered and racialized practice that, as shown by Dana Nelson in *National Manhood*, grew out of the affective affiliations between white male scientists framed through national sentiment.

applied in reverse, sentimental empiricism also infused empirical experience, and therefore natural science, with sentiment and moral import.³⁷

While focused on French scientific developments, Riskin gestures towards its influence in the American context: Benjamin Franklin's popularity in France, she suggests, was in no small part due to his use of sensibility in science.³⁸ Following these insights into the place of sentimentalism as scientific concept, Kyla Schuller argues for our attention to the overarching biopolitics of feeling: "Sentimentalism," she states, "in the midst of its feminized ethic of emotional identification, operates as a fundamental mechanism of biopower."³⁹

Sentimentalism was then and is now more than a moral or aesthetic or rhetorical mode: feeling is a technology of domination, molding bodies and populations as part of political projects. Revising da Silva's terms and drawing upon the multivalent meanings bound up in the term "affect," I focus on affectability as the principle and process of this differentiation: the affective – those who have agency over feeling and can act upon others; and the affectable – those whose feelings are reactive and are susceptible to the affective. According to this system, to feel improperly or not feel at all as a marginalized individual, therefore, implies inferiority if not outright failure in the terms of affectability, ultimately exposing their conditional legitimacy as a human subject. At the same time, these demonized transgressions against the biopolitics of feeling suggest a space outside of the recognition of this sentimental governmentality: disaffected, rather than affectable, in all its affective, causal, and political senses.

If we look to the writings of the scientists themselves we can see how they understood their racism through sentimentalism towards the ideal of universal humanity that produced,

³⁷ Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment*, 2,5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

³⁹ 2.

even as it purported to erase, human difference and the abjection of the racialized based on affectability. Returning to Lavater, his take on national physiognomy sowed the seeds of race science with his assertion that “each must be ennobled according to its primitive nature,” reassuring those lower on the racial hierarchy that they “Yet ought not the lowest of the human race be discouraged” for they were equally beloved to God; after all, Lavater’s work proclaims itself on its title page to be “designed to promote the knowledge and the love of mankind.”⁴⁰ Phrenology helped to systematize the connection between science and emotion: the major classes of the phrenological organs include those called the “sentiments” by Combe, and the “affective faculties, or feelings” by the Fowlers, which, in echoes of affect theory, “Every faculty stands in relation to certain external objects.”⁴¹ Morton solicited an essay from George Combe for *Crania Americana* where Combe’s comments on sympathy as the principle behind the phrenological organs feature alongside the lithographs of the skulls of Indigenous peoples who had been murdered in the recent Seminole War. Combe writes without irony, “Sympathy is not a faculty, nor is it synonymous with moral approbation. The same notes sounded by ten instruments of the same kind, harmonise, blend softly together, and form one peal of melody.”⁴² Under the same benevolent auspices, the Fowlers published lectures and pamphlets on the manipulation of the domestic feelings for better marriages and improvement of the race. Of course, these works on hereditary descent include statements on racial difference according to phrenological principles. The Fowlers could espouse without contradiction that “The avenues to the human heart are the same in all... all yield to the power of love; all love their children,” while also claiming in the same tract that the “colored race is characterized quite as much by the tone of their feelings, the peculiarities of their

⁴⁰ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 85, 127.

⁴¹ Combe, *The Constitution of Man Considered in Relation to External Objects*, 57.

⁴² Combe, “Phrenological Remarks on the Relation between the Natural Talents and Dispositions of Nations, and the Developments of Their Brains,” 290.

intellects and expressions, as by the color of their skin.”⁴³ In *Types of Mankind*, race science and slavery justify one another through a compassionate appeal to greater good: “the Negro thrives under the shadow of his white master, falls readily into the position assigned him, and exists and multiplies in increased physical well-being.”⁴⁴ Dedicated to Morton, *Types* opens with a memoir of the founding skull collector as a sensitive soul: we are told that he had “nervous temperament, delicate fibre, acute feelings, and ardent sympathies.”⁴⁵ Much like Delano guided by his benevolent heart in his racism, these proponents of race science fashioned themselves and their scientific theories as sympathetic through the sentimental subordination of racialized others.

I.II Amasa Delano’s Sentimental Perspective: Narrative Focalization and Race Science’s Seeing Mania

The 1855 publication of *Benito Cereno* situates Melville’s writing amidst this fraught intersection of visual culture and race science framed by the cultural impact of Stowe’s sentimentalism leading up to the Civil War. Melville himself can be counted among those interested in both science and art: his reading included many works on art history by luminaries such as John Ruskin and Giorgio Vasari alongside scientific texts like Darwin’s journal and a volume of Cuvier’s *The Animal Kingdom*.⁴⁶ Melville himself owned about four hundred individual prints and his final published work *Timoleon* explores his love of art in poetry.⁴⁷ As for Melville’s knowledge of these sciences in particular, during his trip to England in 1849 he purchased a copy of Lavater’s *Essays* for 10 shillings and an 1854 letter to Richard Lathers indicates the return of Lathers’ copy of Combe’s bestselling *Constitution*

⁴³ Fowler, *Hereditary Descent: Its Laws and Facts, Illustrated and Applied to the Improvement of Mankind*, 33, 34.

⁴⁴ Nott and Gliddon, *Types of Mankind*, xxxiii.

⁴⁵ Morton, *Crania Americana*, xxi.

⁴⁶ Sealts, *Melville’s Reading*.

⁴⁷ Robillard, *Melville and the Visual Arts : Ionian Form, Venetian Tint*, x.

of *Man*.⁴⁸ In an August 16, 1850 letter to publisher and editor Evert A. Duyckinck, he jokes to his friend about the pandering of phrenologists: “A horrible something in me tells me that you are about dipping your head in plaster at Fowler’s for your bust.”⁴⁹ Editor Lynn Horth speculates that Melville’s knowledge of the phrenological Fowlers may have been as early as 1835 due to the active practices of the brothers and their students in Albany and Lansingburgh; for instance John C. Hoadley, Melville’s brother-in-law, had his head examined by Lorenzo Fowler.⁵⁰ Both science and art are woven into the foreground and background of Melville’s life and work.

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 debuted numerous other works such as “Bartleby the Scrivener” and *Israel Potter*, included regular updates about the fine arts, politics, and discussions of science. When *Types of Mankind* appeared in 1854 as a salvo for polygenesis’s proponents, the July edition of *Putnam’s* engaged in an extensive discussion of the book that ends up in agreement with its claims. The review “Is Man One or Many?” ends up on the side of polygenesis, accepting 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.”⁵¹ In January 1855, however, the essay “Are All Men Descended From Adam?” argues for monogenesis in part on the basis of the “mysterious sympathy which inspires whole nations with the emotions of a single man,” while still maintaining physiognomy as the distinctive characteristic of racial difference.⁵² *Benito Cereno* would be published in the last three issues

⁴⁸ Melville, *Journals*, 24; Melville, *Correspondence*, 260.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 167–68.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵¹ “Is Man One or Many?,” 9.

⁵² “Are All Men Descended From Adam?,” 88.

of that year to a readership conversant in contemporary visual culture as well as antebellum debates about scientific racism.

Captain Delano would have been readily identifiable as a participant in the popular race science's "*seeing mania*," that biopolitical technology of sentimental recognition. Once aboard the *San Dominick*, Delano's "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 Africans picking oakum are described as having "heads like black, doddered willow tops."⁵³ Throughout his guided tour of the ship, the captain's gaze is drawn to faces and heads as organized receptacles of legible meaning and personhood, but he parses them unevenly according to race: white faces are continually recognized and privileged with gazes that can be returned, while Black faces are continually erased, ignored or downplayed, and often rendered simply as heads with the status of objects. While the physiognomic face expresses the holistic representation of individual human interiority, 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 abilities as an object of study. During one of many instances when Delano is on the verge of revelation about the ingenious racial masquerade, he "standing with eye directed forward" 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."⁵⁴ When he then enters the scene, he only looks 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

⁵³ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 59.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 83–84.

none, spoke pleasantly to the blacks to make way for him.”⁵⁵ By affectively prioritizing white faces, Black faces barely register for him as subjects.

The visual evidence of race science gives reassuring authority to Delano’s racist sympathies and directs his interactions while sentiment simultaneously acts as the tool that naturalizes science by allowing its ideological influence almost invisibly to shape “the blunt-thinking American’s eyes.”⁵⁶ His recognition of Black people is contingent upon them as affectable and animated projections of his own feelings. After noting the oakum pickers, with “that first comprehensive glance” that “rested but an instant upon them,” he also notices the hatchet-polishers who have “the raw aspect of unsophisticated Africans,” and frames their labors as “the peculiar love in negroes of uniting industry with pastime.”⁵⁷ The same snap judgment of Delano’s first glance onboard the *San Dominick* combines race science’s evaluation of Black inferiority with sentimentality’s euphemizing of enslaved labor as a particularly insidious approach to antiblackness. Rather than viewing Blackness as evil, Delano’s condescending stance pacifies Blackness as a benign childlikeness: “There is something in the negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one’s person” in subservient roles stemming from “the great gift of good-humor.”⁵⁸ He takes as proof the phrenological and craniological “evidences” of racial differentiation and ability, reproducing their sentimental logics. According to the division of the affective and the affectable, these peoples are suited for servitude due to “the docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind, and that susceptibility of bland attachment sometimes inhering in indisputable inferiors” and accordingly sympathetic whites “took to their hearts, almost to the

⁵⁵ Ibid., 84, 85.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 98.

exclusion of the entire white race, their serving men, the negroes.”⁵⁹ If even depressive types like Samuel Johnson and Benito Cereno can benefit from having their very own enslaved African, Delano muses to himself, how would such an enslaved person “appear to a benevolent one?”⁶⁰ For Delano, Babo’s attentions to the Spanish captain spring forth from “that affectionate zeal which transmutes into something filial or fraternal acts in themselves but menial; and which has gained for the negro the repute of making the most pleasing body servant in the world.”⁶¹ Slavery becomes a mutually beneficial relationship in this mindset; despite his origin in “free” Massachusetts, Northerner Delano’s sentiments are akin to those of Southerner George Fitzhugh who, in his infamous defense of chattel slavery *Sociology of the South*, argues “Slavery opens many sources of happiness and occasions and encourages the exercise of many virtues and affections which would be unknown without it. It begets friendly, kind and affectionate relations.”⁶² Inasmuch as expressions of feeling are held as evidence of humanity, recognition for Black people depend upon their emotional labor oriented towards the sustaining of whiteness.

For the American, his fond attachment to the flat visual signification of Black bodies acts as a reminder of nature’s racial hierarchies as the structuring principle of the world he believes in: just seeing a Black person quells his suspicions whenever anything threatens to disrupt his sense of order. In one such moment of anxiety, Delano’s observation of an unnamed Black woman and her child cheer him by playing to his sympathies about the proper roles allotted by gender and race. Viewing them as “a pleasant sort of sunny sight,” he at once dehumanizes and sentimentalizes both bodies through the language of nature in what

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 62.

⁶² Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society*, 96.

Coviello calls “a kind of sentimental apotheosis”⁶³: she is “like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock,” a “dam,” while her child is a “wide-awake fawn” and “its hands, like two paws” while trying to nurse like a piglet, “its mouth and nose ineffectually rooting to get at the mark; and meantime giving a vexatious half-grunt.”⁶⁴ Even though a strange man is gawking at her breasts, the woman “started up, at a distance facing Captain Delano,” and pretends not to see him, “as if not at all concerned at the attitude in which she had been caught,” reinforcing his sense of confident voyeurism as the observer rather than the observed.⁶⁵ By showering her child “with maternal transports, covering it with kisses,” she elicits a smug sentimental response from the captain who converts Black motherhood into the mammy trope: “There’s naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love, thought Captain Delano, well pleased.”⁶⁶ The scene recalls for us Hartman’s insight into the paradox of recognizing the humanity of the enslaved:

This incident prompted him to remark the other negresses more particularly than before. He was gratified with their manners: like most uncivilized women, they seemed at once tender of heart and tough of constitution; equally ready to die for their infants or fight for them. Unsophisticated as leopardesses; loving as doves. Ah! Thought Captain Delano, these, perhaps, are some of the very women whom Mungo Park saw in Africa, and gave such a noble account of. These natural sights somehow insensibly deepened his confidence and ease.⁶⁷

This moment is pure embellishment on Melville’s part with no equivalent encounter with African women or children in the historical Delano’s account. While there are hints of the

⁶³ Coviello, “The American in Charity: ‘Benito Cereno’ and Gothic Anti-Sentimentality,” 164.

⁶⁴ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 86.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

woman's agency in her performance to distract the interloper, Delano views Black maternal love existing only for his spectatorship and emotional gratification. Respect for Black families only goes so far: during the tale about the fever and lack of water that has devastated those onboard, the narrator makes the sly comparison that while "whole families of the Africans" have perished, by contrast "yet a larger number, proportionately, of the Spaniards."⁶⁸ When up against white injury, Black mortality will never be enough to draw white sympathy. Here Melville's addition indicts the overlap between the sentimentalization of slavery and the heteronormative family in such texts as Fitzhugh's that used the oppressive construction of the domestic sphere to argue for the validation of slavery through the naturalness of familial affection. Fitzhugh claims that slaves "are part of the family, and self-interest and domestic affection combine to shelter, shield and foster them," and later clarifies his stance against women's rights through recourse to the same truth that "the family government, from its nature, has ever been despotic."⁶⁹ The final touch in the passage is Delano's mention of white explorers of Africa like the Scottish Mungo Park and the American John Ledyard, bringing together sentimentalism and ethnographic knowledge through reminders of the transnational scope of systemic antiblackness.⁷⁰

I.III The Antiblackness of White Nostalgia

The subversive performances of the rebel Africans mirrors Delano's expectations of the natural order of those who affect and those who are affectable in which white feelings are coddled by Black emotional labor. The relationship between Babo and Benito Cereno is the exemplar of this sentimental dynamic for Delano: in his sustained reading of the interactions

⁶⁸ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁹ Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society*, 81,46.

⁷⁰ In the original *Putnam's* publication the reference is to the Scottish Mungo Park. In Melville's revisions for *The Piazza Tales*, however, he changes the reference to the American explorer John Ledyard which brings the colonial dimension closer to the US context.

of the two men, the American triangulates his own desire for Black subservience to whiteness through nostalgia for both his personal past and an inherited cultural past, tying together his idyllic New England childhood with the brutality of the Atlantic Slave Trade. Ann Douglas's influential critique identifies nostalgia as a key component of sentimental discourse: sentimentalism "attempts to deal with the phenomenon of cultural bifurcation by the manipulation of nostalgia," exemplified by the death of little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,⁷¹ The pathologized affect of nostalgia has been theorized as less a longing for a place than a time: such a desire, according to critics such as Linda Hutcheon and Fredric Jameson, acts as a temporal projection that is always political in its manipulation of history.⁷² Or, bluntly, "nostalgia is history without guilt" states Michael Kammen.⁷³

Delano only recognizes Babo's Black face in relation to Benito Cereno's white face as a nostalgic reflection of the American's own sense of self in the world. This contrast in perceived physiognomic worthiness reproduces the biopolitical hierarchy of differences in emotional expression and affective agency: Babo's feelings are taken to be of a lower instinctual order, merely reactive and responsive to the governing influence of Cereno's expressions. Upon their initial encounter, Babo's visage is rendered as a "rude face, as occasionally, like a shepherd's dog, he mutely turned it up into the Spaniard's" and 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.⁷⁴ The American repeatedly notices Babo's preoccupation with Cereno's face, reading this attention as a slavish attentiveness to Cereno

⁷¹ Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 12, 4.

⁷² Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern"; Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 688.

⁷⁴ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 60, 79.

like a dog to his owner. This sentimental canine metaphor for the Black man's performance of emotional labour later resurfaces through different reformulations that precipitate the captain's nostalgia for his own childhood. The American associates the incoming boat *Rover* from his ship with recollections of his younger self "Jack of the Beach" and describes the boat "as a Newfoundland dog" docked by his Duxbury, Massachusetts home, with its loving loyalty like "a good dog; a white bone in her mouth."⁷⁵ Only good things happen to good people, Delano reassures himself – "Who would murder Amasa Delano? His conscience is clean" – and soon after he views Babo's emotional performance as external confirmation mirroring his internal affirmation of the moral order. He is "met by Don Benito's servant, who, with a pleasing expression, [was] responsive to his own present feelings," this physiognomic validation recalling his earlier reading of Babo's canine devotion to Cereno – but now he is acknowledged to have the power of affectability, with the capacity to be an "owner" of both dogs and enslaved peoples.⁷⁶

Childhood memories based upon disavowed Northern antiblack racism return to more explicitly reinforce Delano's nostalgic associations about Black servitude when he watches Babo shave Cereno:

At home, he had often taken rare satisfaction in sitting in his door, watching some free man of color at his work or play. If on a voyage he chanced to have a black sailor, invariably he was on chatty and half-gamesome terms with him. In fact, like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Ibid., 91.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 99.

Fitzhugh, in his sociological defense of slavery as “healthy, beautiful, and natural,” declares “A man loves not only his horses and his cattle, which are useful to him, but he loves his dog, which is of no use. He loves them because they are his.”⁷⁸ To the nostalgic American, Babo’s solicitous care of Cereno can only be a reflection of loving loyalty like that of a dog’s; during dinner Delano continues to repeatedly view Babo’s attention to Cereno in canine terms, “the black was still true to his master, since by facing him he could the more readily anticipate his slightest want” and “He only rested his eye on his master’s.”⁷⁹ The degraded place of Blackness in race science is validated in his structure of feeling as fond nostalgia for his bucolic New England past, a vehicle for his feelings about the natural order that reinforces his own identity in that system. Little wonder that at one point, despite his upbringing in the “free” North, Captain Delano tries to purchase Babo for fifty doubloons to fulfill this fantasy of being pandered to by Black emotional labor for epistemological and ontological affirmation. In this fixation with seeing Babo’s face first in orientation to Cereno’s and then his own emotional needs, we can see these readings as iterative reassurances that the expression of Black feelings can only exist for whiteness, warding off the unthinkable possibility of Black self-determination even on the scale of Babo’s affective interiority. The Senegalese man is required to be effacing and is, himself, effaced.

By contrast, Delano continually scrutinizes the subtleties of Cereno’s face for deeper meaning and agency because he does not question the validity of the man’s affective interiority. During their interactions Delano is attuned to numerous tics of Cereno’s physiognomy such as when his “face lighted up; eager and hectic, he met the honest glance of his visitor” or when “his pale face [appeared] twitching and overcast.”⁸⁰ Although many on

⁷⁸ Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society*, 81, 46.

⁷⁹ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 105, 107.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 69, 77.

the ship desperately clamour for the visitor's attention when he first boards, he gravitates to the captain in order to "[assure] him of his sympathies."⁸¹ As fond as Delano may be of Babo, he never addresses him directly or offers him the same care he repeatedly proffers Don Benito who appears to scorn it. When he thinks the captain might be treating Babo cruelly, he has a rare negative view of slavery: "Ah, this slavery breeds ugly passions in man. – Poor fellow!" he laments, and "was about to speak in sympathy to the negro" – only to stop himself and return to his sentimental understanding of the institution, framing it as "a sort of love-quarrel, after all."⁸² Unlike the limited affects Delano can recognize in Babo, Don Benito is allowed to display a rich range of emotional expressions that even include the negative – alienating "reserve," "inkept and unknown emotion," "cold constraint" – and still retain the American's sympathies.⁸³ For instance, after skepticism about the explanation for the sad state of the *San Dominick*, he "drown[s] criticism in compassion, after a fresh repetition of his sympathies" to Cereno.⁸⁴ When enslaver Alexandro Aranda is mentioned as a casualty of the supposed fever that took its toll on the ship's populations, Cereno's "heart-broken" air causes Delano to believe "he divined the cause of such unusual emotion" and quickly reaffirms his identification with him. The American shares his own loss of a friend at sea: "I think that, by a sympathetic experience, I conjecture, Don Benito, what it is that gives the keener edge to your grief."⁸⁵ Indeed, such "fresh repetition of his sympathies" are repeatedly extended by Delano regardless of the other man's indifferent expressions or suspicious behaviour.

⁸¹ Ibid., 60.

⁸² Ibid., 103.

⁸³ Ibid., 63, 73, 79.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 71, 72.

Even when contemplating the possibility of Don Benito's mendacity, following the perversity of sentimental race science, Amasa Delano views Don Benito as superior in all facets to Babo and the other Africans – and still finds the man sympathetic. Worried that something undefined is wrong on the *San Dominick*, he cannot attribute agency to the Africans: “the whites, too, by nature, were the shrewder race” while the Blacks “were too stupid.”⁸⁶ Reluctant to concede the possibility of superior Black intellect, Delano prefers to imagine whiteness as villainous rather than viewing it as imperiled. After entertaining the elaborate speculation that Cereno might be an imposter, Delano turns to a physiognomic reading of his fellow captain for reassurance:

Glancing over once more towards his host – whose side-face, revealed above the skylight, was now turned towards him – 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.⁸⁷

For Delano, Don Benito's face reads as testimony of his superior breeding as a hidalgo, a member of Spanish nobility: racial notions of inheritance come into play as phenotype becomes synonymous with character, ability, and morality. More than the supporting evidence supplied by others on the ship, Delano trusts his fellow captain's “very expression and play of every human feature, which Captain Delano saw” and, to his mind, “seemed impossible to counterfeit.”⁸⁸ Ultimately, he concludes, “who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguering in against it with

⁸⁶ Ibid., 88, 89.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 81.

negroes?”⁸⁹ Delano’s anxieties about the dangerously uncanny sights of the slave ship are comforted by visual reminders of white supremacy.

While Babo’s enslavement evokes a personal nostalgia for Delano, hidalgo Cereno’s nobility exemplifies another dimension of nostalgia’s idealization that ties the American’s experience with the domestic chattel slavery to its transnational colonial networks. Don Benito’s wan refinement speaks to both nostalgia’s romanticizing powers as well as its original medical definition as a wasting disease.⁹⁰ Delano sees him as “the Spanish captain, a gentlemanly, reserved-looking, and rather young man to a stranger’s eye, dressed with singular richness.”⁹¹ Later, he returns to Cereno’s attire as sartorial emphasis of the innate gap between the Spanish captain and the meagrely attired Babo:

The Spaniard wore a loose Chili jacket of dark velvet; white small-clothes and stockings, with silver buckles at the knee and instep; a high-crowned sombrero, of fine grass; a slender sword, silver mounted, hung from a knot in his sash – the last being an almost invariable adjunct, more for utility than ornament, of a South American gentlemen’s dress to this hour.⁹²

The incongruity of his decadent dress complements his aristocratic fragility, making him deserving of Babo’s obsequious care: the costume reminds Delano of “the image of an

⁸⁹ Ibid., 89.

⁹⁰ Nostalgia, the word whose etymology was coined from the Greek *nosos* “return to the native land” and *algos* “suffering or grief,” originated in 1688 with Johannes Hofer’s medical dissertation about the phenomenon as a wasting disease that endemic to young people, particularly in the military, who wish to return home. The German doctor writes, it is “sympathetic of an afflicted imagination,” connecting the brain to the body, “originated by arousing especially the uncommon and everpresent idea of the recalled native land in the mind” (Hofer, “Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia,” 380). Nostalgia shifts from a physical medical condition in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to a psychological one in the twentieth; in this analysis, Linda Hutcheon comments that nostalgia’s power “comes in part from its structural doubling-up of two different times, an inadequate present and an idealized past,” this distance “sanitizes as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent” (“Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern.”).

⁹¹ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 60.

⁹² Ibid., 68.

invalid courtier tottering about London in the time of the plague.”⁹³ He is able to grasp that the Spanish captain is under some form of duress, an “involuntary victim of a mental disorder,” but translates his ailments into a walking diagnosis of the original medical meaning of nostalgia, doubly representing the nostalgic past that Delano himself yearns for: “This distempered spirit was lodged, as before hinted, in as distempered a frame.”⁹⁴ The American’s attraction to the inequalities of Old World aristocracy is not depicted as hypocrisy, but as the standard exception built into New World democracy: when giving out water Delano “complied, with republican impartiality as to this republican element, which always seeks one level, serving the oldest white no better than the youngest black; excepting, indeed, poor Don Benito, whose condition, if not rank, demanded an extra allowance.”⁹⁵ The ironic phrase “republican impartiality as to this republican element” indicts this false egalitarianism: Delano’s nostalgic fantasies highlight how American democratic ideals are bound up with transnational histories of the slave trade that cannot be disavowed as the sole responsibility of European nations. His racism is given authoritative weight by visual scientific evidence and is filtered through his desires for both a personal past as well as a cultural past, the romanticized racial hierarchy of genteel servitude and *noblisse oblige* embodied by humble Babo and hidalgo Don Benito.

The fluid resilience of Delano’s racist structure of feeling allows for the creative flexibility of his interpretations of race science even in the literal face of challenges to the logics of the systems that justify his bigotry. Other than Babo in his canine deference, of the few named Black characters he notices Atufal, who is represented in a way that emphasizes only brute physicality: “the moving figure of a gigantic black.”⁹⁶ The only Black face he

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 63, 62.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 94.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 72.

lingers on is the steward Francesco's because he is of mixed race: "Captain Delano observed with interest that while the complexion of the mulatto was hybrid, his physiognomy was European – classically so."⁹⁷ The disjuncture momentarily throws off Delano's surety about the visual distinctiveness of racial hierarchy. He struggles to adapt the precepts of his understanding of race science despite misgivings about miscegenation:

"Don Benito, whispered he, "I'm glad to see this usher-of-the-golden-rod of yours; the sight refutes an ugly remark once made to me by a Barbadoes planter; that when a mulatto has a regular European face, look out for him; he is a devil. But see, your steward here has features more regular than King George's of England; and yet there he nods, and bows, and smiles; a king, indeed – the king of kind hearts and polite fellows."⁹⁸

He must affirm the inherent superiority of whiteness through the royal association, but when "a regular European face" is cast in darker skin, he must justify Francesco's lowly social position. The result is a compromise: Delano asserts Francesco's comparative nobility among the enslaved, but framed by the same obligations for racialized emotional labour as "the king of kind hearts and polite fellows."⁹⁹ When he asks if Francesco "always proved a good, worthy fellow," Cereno's affirmative answer helps to re-establish the physiognomic connection between face and character.¹⁰⁰ Miscegenation then, for Delano, has to be reformulated in order to fit his pre-existing views about race: of course the "mulatto" steward has to be good, "[f]or it were strange, indeed, and not very creditable to us white-skins, if a little of our blood mixed with the African's, should, far from improving the latter's quality,

⁹⁷ Ibid., 104.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

have the strange sad effect of pouring vitriolic acid into black broth; improving the hue, perhaps, but not the wholesomeness.”¹⁰¹ Even though he does not want to completely condone miscegenation, to deny Francesco’s heritage would mean to surrender a belief in the righteous goodness of the natural order. Thus, he ends up imagining a white version of the one-drop rule that does not allow Francesco to ascend in the racial hierarchy, but maintains the American’s uninterrupted faith in the white racial superiority’s beneficial effect on all aspects of the lower races.

I.IV Unsympathetic Blackness as Revolt

The narrative takes a turn when it is revealed that the Africans are no longer cargo, but actually the masters of the slave ship. The reveal of Aranda’s skeleton bookmarks this section much as Babo’s execution closes the novella. Yet Delano’s sentimental dependence on race science are not so easily overcome: the battle does not break his ideology so much as display its persistence. Before setting back to his ship, he casts a glance over the slave ship and smiles: he “saw the benign aspect of nature” in the aesthetic charm of the setting sun framing the tableaux of enslavement anchored by “the chained figure of the black.”¹⁰² Pleased by this sight, Captain Delano reacts to Cereno’s farewell with “instinctive good feeling.”¹⁰³ He leaves with his affirmed sense of self as sympathetic because of his right feelings toward his fellow captain even if not fully recognized in his goodness: “a sort of saddened satisfaction stole over Captain Delano, at thinking of the kindly office she had that day discharged for a stranger. Ah, thought he, after good actions one’s conscience is never ungrateful, however much so the benefited party may be.”¹⁰⁴ This resentment resurfaces in

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 113.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 113, 114.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 113.

the initial chaos when Cereno makes his frantic escape onto the American boat: Delano reverts to his earlier suspicions about the agency of white villainy and Black unthinking subservience. He exclaims that Don Benito is a “plotting pirate” and sees Babo’s pursuit of his enslaver as “apparent verification” of his perception of the events before him:

the servant, a dagger in his hand, was seen on the rail overhead, poised in the act of leaping, as if with desperate fidelity to befriend his master to the last; while, seemingly to aid the black, the three white sailors were trying to clamber onto the hampered bow. Meantime, the whole host of negroes, as if inflamed at the sight of their jeopardized captain, impended in one sooty avalanche over the bulwarks.¹⁰⁵

Even at this moment, he cannot acknowledge the possibility of Black agency and resistance. The Spanish captain is still understood as the primary agent of the action, while Babo must be responding out of his love for his enslaver. Likewise, the Africans’ reaction must be in sympathy with Don Benito, framed as an instinct built into their racialized bodies as part of nature’s hierarchies of the affective and the affectable.

With “the scales dropped from his eyes” at the last possible moment, Delano finally recognizes Babo as leader of the revolt rather than loyal slave; however, this revelation does not constitute a break from the American’s way of seeing.¹⁰⁶ Babo attacks not only the two captains but the literal and figurative heart of this sentimental order: “dagger presented at Captain Delano’s heart, the Black seemed of purpose to have leaped there as to his mark.”¹⁰⁷ Disarmed by Delano, Babo then switches to a second dagger aimed “at the heart of his master, his countenance lividly vindictive, expressing the centered purpose of his soul;” here, the Senegalese man’s face is finally acknowledged but is still read as a transparently legible

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 115.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 116.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 115.

sign of his limited interiority according to the standards of race science.¹⁰⁸ In retaliation Delano “smote Babo’s hand down, but his own heart smote him harder.”¹⁰⁹ This successful defense symbolizes Delano’s reaffirmation of the sentimental order: “his own heart” is still centered as the valid locus of feeling and action. Delano’s sympathies resume as before: he acts with “infinite pity” for Cereno’s safety.¹¹⁰ The sentimental politics of recognition remains intact with Black faces still not fully acknowledged: during the ensuing battle the Black rebels’ “red tongues lolled, wolf-life from their black mouths.”¹¹¹ In comparison within the same paragraph similar facial contortions by the white sailors are described thusly: “the pale sailors’ teeth were set.”¹¹² The recognition of agentic and moral capacity are still subjected to the terms of legibility according to race science.

The potency of visual signifiers informed by scientific racism endures with the public presentation of the dead: the white skeleton of Don Aranda acts as a rallying spectacle for the Spanish and the Americans alike on the basis of their shared affective identifications with whiteness in defense of Black enslavement and the world order it produces. 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.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 116.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 117, 120.

¹¹² Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 117, 120.

¹¹³ Ibid., 117.

Despite acting as “death for the figurehead,” Aranda’s bones are not a mere death’s head, but an entire skeleton instead of a skull: even in death, the former enslaver has the privilege of not being dismembered down 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.¹¹⁴ The skeleton both retains Aranda’s individuality and signifies *memento mori*, that unacknowledged racialized universality that privileges whiteness, even white bones.¹¹⁵ After the victory of whiteness, the enslaver’s remains are given the dignity of burial in the vaults of St. Bartholomew, reflecting the living status of their owner. For all of Babo’s clever control over American racist expectations, the hierarchy according to race science has been reaffirmed by the Africans’ defeat to the combined forces of white American and Spanish sailors.

The uprising confirms that the suppression of the spectre of racialized disaffection is the condition that sustains white sentimentalism and the biopolitics of feeling. If feeling is the marker of humanity, unfeeling is the abjected opposition to that false universalism. Adam Smith’s colonial theorization of sympathy expands the moral sentiment from personal virtue to the principle of sociality on a global scale. Unlike the true feelings of white Western peoples,

Barbarians, on the contrary, being obliged to smother and conceal the appearance of every passion, necessarily acquire the habits of falsehood and dissimulation. It is observed by all those who have been conversant with savage nations, whether in Asia, Africa, or America, that they are all equally impenetrable, and that, when they have a mind to conceal the truth, no examination is capable of drawing it from them.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America*, 206.

¹¹⁶ Smith, 208.

Frustrated by this recalcitrance, Smith attributes the failings of sympathy and expressiveness to the disaffected peoples of Asia, Africa, and America impacted by the violences of colonial projects rather than reconsidering whiteness as the affective universal with the power of recognition over the rest – and the majority – of the world. When Captain Delano first surveys “all the faces” of the *San Dominick*, the narrator relates that upon boarding ships, “especially a foreign one, with a nondescript crew such as Lascars or Manilla men,” the effect of those “strange costumes, gestures, and faces” is enigmatically “unreal.”¹¹⁷ Before resting his gaze upon the heads of the elderly Africans, this homogenized history of exploited non-white labour – “Lascars or Manilla men” referring to sailors predominantly from India and the Philippines but also including other Asian, Arabic, and East African peoples – is an important reference: they are “nondescript,” the individuality of character wiped from their faces. Reminders of the global dimensions of dissent against empire and whiteness by Indigenous peoples and peoples of color recur, framing Delano’s fear of Black resistance. During his early concerns about deception, he recalls that “Malay pirates” have a reputation for luring in foreign ships into their harbors or creating a false display on their decks to entice boarders “beneath which prowled a hundred spears with yellow arms.”¹¹⁸ Amid the battle of the *San Dominick* the Ashanti warriors are described as “delirious black dervishes.”¹¹⁹ The fugitives’ concerted attack with their hatchets is said to be “Indian-like,” perhaps recalling the Indigeneity stripped from these Africans by enslavement.¹²⁰ Positioned against sympathetic Delano who, as a feeling fellow, sympathizes with Benito Cereno, Babo betrays his obligations to feel for his enslaver and therefore transgresses the terms of recognition: he is unsympathetic. This is a risk that he and the other Africans accept for their chance at

¹¹⁷ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 59.

¹¹⁸ Melville, 80.

¹¹⁹ Melville, *Melville’s Short Novels*, 116.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 118. See T.J. Tallie’s forthcoming book on settler colonialism and African Indigeneity in the context of Natal.

liberation. The corollary to the uncivilized reactive feelings attributed to racialized and colonized peoples is the paradoxical fear of their affective agency: that, like Babo and his people, underneath the appearance of affectability they might be unfeelingly disaffected from the biopolitics of feeling.

II. The Legal Politics of Recognition towards Fantasies of Justice

The absence of law seems to typify the encounter between Captain Amasa Delano and those onboard the *San Dominick*: set off the southern coast of Chile, this environment is said to be notable for “the lawlessness and loneliness of the spot.”¹²¹ The purported “true history of the *San Dominick*’s voyage” claims to emerge through the legal documents compiled, certified, and declared “as much as is requisite in law” by a Don José de Abos and Padilla, “His Majesty’s Notary for the Royal Revenue, and Register of this Province, and Notary Public of the Holy Crusade of this Bishroptic, etc.”¹²² Melville sets up a sharp contrast between the novella’s beginning and ending: opening with a state of nature to closing with the state of law underscored by Babo’s execution. Following sentimentalism as a form of governmentality, however, we can understand this shift as the harmony between the everyday individual politics of recognition, focalized through sentimental Delano’s scientifically-informed gaze, and the formal state politics of recognition, wielding juridical authority and violence.

The shadow of the law haunts the entirety of the narrative: critics from Jean Yellin and Carolyn Karcher have noted how the histories of Black resistance like the Haitian Revolution, the *Amistad* case, and Nat Turner’s rebellion inform Melville’s writing about

¹²¹ Melville, 161.

¹²² Ibid., 120, 121.

Babo's attempted mutiny.¹²³ The specifics of this legal and political context are inextricable from the novella's serial publication: thanks to Frederick Law Olmsted's editorship *Putnam's* was the first major national publication to take a stand against slavery. The effects, debates, and activism surrounding the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 frame the novella: the three parts of *Benito Cereno* in 1855 appeared alongside several articles about race and slavery, such as pieces on the Kansas-Nebraska Act and a review of Frederick Douglass's autobiography.¹²⁴ These urgencies implicated even Melville himself: his father-in-law Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw famously upheld the Fugitive Slave Act in Boston. The narrative depicts the regulatory formalized violences of the biopolitics of feeling: the legal deposition and ensuing execution of Babo acting as a continuation of, rather than a rupture from, white epistemological mastery naturalized and produced through the culture of sentiment. In this light, *Benito Cereno* dramatizes the inherent limitations of the politics of recognition as a tool for social change—from the perspective of those like Delano who through their right feelings enforce the conditions of the institutions that maintain and depend upon Black enslavement and other forms of injustice.

Analyses of the debates about slave law often tend to take as fact the abolitionist characterization of themselves as right feeling versus the unfeeling proslavery apologists. The sentimentality of abolitionist novels and rhetoric exemplified by Stowe were seen to combat the cold-hearted cruelties of slave law through the appeal to the affective politics of recognition. In his discussion of Stowe and slave law, legal scholar Alfred Brophy claims,

¹²³ Legal scholar Robert Cover claims that Melville sets the ideal narrative conditions for testing abstract ideas about revolution and isolating the evils of slavery: "Finally the high seas themselves had something of the law of nature about them" (*Justice Accused: Antislavery and the Judicial Process* 108-9). In her reading of Delano as exemplar of American legal reasoning Susan Weiner unpacks a central paradox: "Melville explores how the law fails to find legal solutions to critical crises and instead subverts justice in the name of order" (*Law in Art: Melville's Major Fiction and Nineteenth-Century American Law* 117).

¹²⁴ Yellin, *The Intricate Knot: Figures in American Literature, 1776-1863.*, 216.

“Abolitionists sought a jurisprudence based on love, while the proslavery responders emphasized the role of law in maintaining order.”¹²⁵ He alludes to the clash between natural and formalist approaches to the law where legal formalism’s emphasis on the mechanical application of principles for deductive judgments is held to be complicit in the maintenance of the legality of slavery. In his history of American law, Morton J. Horwitz maps the shift from thinking about law in general as the cultural expression of the universal principles of natural law to legislation as policy that regulates society and governs moral behaviour. Legal formalism framed the law through “the appearance of being self-contained, apolitical, and inexorable”; in other words, granting the illusion of objectivity to the legal protection and production of existing social inequalities.¹²⁶ Echoes of the construction of scientific objectivity as an apparatus of authority are no mere coincidence: as Horwitz declares, “the attempt to place law under the banner of ‘science’ was designed to separate politics from law, subjectivity from objectivity, and laymen’s reasoning from professional reasoning.”¹²⁷ Brophy asserts that the development of legal formalism came out of what he condemns as the “cool legal inhumanity” of proslavery discourse: “Where abolitionists believed that emotion might lead one to the correct path, proslavery writers believed that rigorous logic and application of practical morals were necessary. In their opinion, it was logical, dispassionate thought that ensured that best results for society.”¹²⁸ Likewise, Robert Cover argues that the 1840s and 1850s saw the *revanche* of formalism in regards to slavery, in which “The more mechanical the judge’s view of the process, the more he externalized responsibility for the

¹²⁵ Brophy, “Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Critique of Slave Law in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” 456–57.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 457, 480.

result.”¹²⁹ Sentimentality and sympathy would seem to be the antithesis of proslavery arguments in their connection to the dispassion of legal formalism’s prominence.

In its critique of Stowe’s call for right feeling, *Benito Cereno* unpacks the congruences between Delano’s sentimental belief in the goodness of the natural world justified by race science and the underacknowledged role of sentimentalism in the defense of the legal institution of slavery exemplified by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Delano’s way of seeing, according to Susan Weiner, reflects American legal reasoning insofar as both “posits a realm of knowledge that is objective, clear, and readily accessible.”¹³⁰ This legal knowledge and practice, however, grew out of the culture of sentiment as Melville himself was well aware. Merton Sealts lists the 1849 edition of Samuel Warren’s *Moral, Social, and Professional Duties of Attorneys and Solicitors* among the books owned and read by Melville.¹³¹ Far from a dispassionate system of rules, in the first lecture Warren positions the legal profession as part of the greater sentimental project of social management. The public’s relationship to lawyers is an intimate one: they “open to you the most secret recesses of our hearts,” and “To your eyes are exposed hearts bleeding and quivering in every fiber.”¹³² In response to the needs of the public, lawyers must give “sympathizing words of counsel and guidance.”¹³³ The feelings that animate the law are not cold, but sentiments refined for the benefit of the sympathetic body of civilized society: “The law is the power by which civil society is constituted, and sustained in existence; overpowering the unruly elements of our fallen nature; with heaven-born energy converting the savage into the citizen.”¹³⁴ Lawyers are motivated by this higher, inborn emotion: “The love of society, gentlemen, is an original

¹²⁹ Cover, *Justice Accused: Antislavery and the Judicial Process*, 234.

¹³⁰ Weiner, *Law in Art: Melville’s Major Fiction and Nineteenth-Century American Law*, 117.

¹³¹ Sealts, *Melville’s Reading*, 103–4.

¹³² Warren, *The Moral, Social, and Professional Duties of Attorneys and Solicitors*, 17.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

instinct of tendency of our nature,” negotiating between private emotion and public sentiments for the greater good.¹³⁵ Balancing liberty and authority is at the heart of the legal professional’s duty. Driven by the “spirit of affection and reverence for our free institutions,” lawyers have the authority to negotiate feelings: “Our hearts are trained into a patriotism and loyalty which warm, which enlighten, which strengthen the character, and discipline the will.”¹³⁶ The modern professional lawyer must discipline his emotions in order to participate as an integral part of sentimental society. Moreover, this superior feeling does not obviate law’s kinship with science: “the law necessarily and gradually assumes the aspect and acquires the character of a complicated science”; indeed, Warren speaks approvingly of the “scientific lawyer.”¹³⁷ Much like the scientist, the American lawyer’s professionalization meant the importance of the sympathetic: the civilized governing of one’s own feelings and others toward the regulation of greater society, affirming one’s biopolitical position as affective rather than affectable.

Although legal formalism was wielded in slavery’s favour, proslavery apologists, like their abolitionist opponents, were just as dependent on appealing to the moral and social force of natural law; to recall Fitzhugh’s sociological study in support of slavery, he uses the law as metaphor for his sentimental principle, “Love for others is the organic law of our society.”¹³⁸ Lawyer Thomas R.R. Cobb justifies slave law as the natural law befitting that state of nature proposed by race science. Cobb’s *An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery in the United States of America* extensively engages *Types of Mankind* along with the other research done by Morton and his colleagues. The future Confederate officer and founder of the University

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 28.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 118, 33.

¹³⁸ Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society*, 248.

of Georgia School of Law frames the enslavement of Black people as natural and good through claims that combine concerns for their physical and emotional well-being,

that a state of bondage, so far from doing violence to the law of his nature, develops and perfects it; and that, in that state, he enjoys the greatest amount of happiness, and arrives at the greatest degree of perfection of which his nature is capable. And, consequently, that negro slavery, as it exists in the United States, is not contrary to the law of nature.”¹³⁹

Fellow lawyer George S. Sawyer’s *Southern Institutes* also defends the institution of slavery through the same references to Morton, Nott, and Agassiz, illustrating the marriage of the sentiments of natural law with the justification of legal formalism. He posits a “philosophy of both the natural and civil law” for organic harmony and order.¹⁴⁰ In a curious approach to precedent and legal formalism, Sawyer argues that the place of slavery in the Constitution and the existence of laws about slavery in itself serve to prove “that the negro race, by universal consent of the civilized, are considered a separate and distinct race of beings, suited only to their own peculiar state and condition.”¹⁴¹ By this circular logic,

Inferiority is the position in which nature has placed them; and so long as they are in the same community with the whites, laws and institutions necessarily have been, and must be adapted to them in that condition. It is not the statute law that creates slavery, but it is rather an adaptation of itself to the precious condition in which it finds the slave.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Cobb, “An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery in the United States of America,” 51.

¹⁴⁰ Sawyer, *Southern Institutes; Or, An Inquiry into the Origin and Early Prevalence of Slavery and the Slave-Trade*, 16.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 233.

To support slavery comes from right feeling: love for the Union and the nation, for he opens stating, “It is the duty of every friend of the Union as well as of every true lover of his country, to cast his mite of oil upon the troubled waters,” but most importantly, love for the slave, “If there is one spake of true philanthropy, if there is one sincere emotion of friendship and kind regard for the welfare of the slave, known to the Anglo-Saxon race, that exists in its greatest purity and most unalloyed state in the benevolent heart of the Southern master.”¹⁴³ After relating an anecdote about the tender care given to a dying old slave by his owner, in echoes of Delano’s desire for the overlap between dogs and Black people, he compares this “kindred sentiment” to feelings toward “some faithful old dog or horse, that has long since passed his days of usefulness.”¹⁴⁴ In contrast to the sympathetic enslavers, he alleges that the hypocritical North has an “entire want of social sympathy”: there is only “cold, distant, and repulsive feeling for the negro race in the free States.”¹⁴⁵ References to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* abound: after recounting the death of a free Black family by cholera in the North, he asks rhetorically, “But where was Senator Bird, Honest Old John Van Trompe, Simeon Halliday, Phineas Fletcher, Giddings, and Senator Chase?”¹⁴⁶ Apparently the abolitionists are too busy “transporting Eliza and her little Harry, by underground railroad, to Canada.”¹⁴⁷ Insofar as sentimentalism is a technology of biopower, in the struggle over slavery both sides claimed that affective weapon as their own: with the authority of universal feeling at stake, accusations of unfeeling served to invalidate the opponent by denying the recognition of the other’s purported right feelings.

¹⁴³ Ibid., iv, 224.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 226.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 230.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 229.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

Captain Amasa Delano, however, is from the land of the abolitionists so scorned by Sawyer and Cobb. Melville is attuned to Delano's hypocrisy as a Northerner who both fondly reminisces about how in Massachusetts he took "rare satisfaction in sitting in his door, watching some free man of color at his work or play," while earlier having asked to buy Babo for fifty doubloons.¹⁴⁸ Delano complicates any moral righteousness the North might have about slavery and the treatment of Black people. A year prior to the first issue of *Benito Cereno*, Boston minister Nehemiah Adams published *A South-Side View of Slavery*, a defense by a Northerner that would go through multiple editions. He claims to write sympathetically "as a lover and friend of the colored race," structuring the book on his own unfolding experience of staying in the South based on the question, "How am I to feel and act?"¹⁴⁹ Adams continually emphasizes how the enslavement of Black people inspires sympathy in the enslaver, who "love them greatly and feel an intense desire to protect them."¹⁵⁰ In fact, "Southern hearts and consciences, I felt reassured, were no more insensible than mine. The system had not steeled the feelings of these gentlemen."¹⁵¹ Chattel slavery is not viewed as an antiblack system of abuse and degradation, but a sympathetic institution: "good and kind treatment of the slaves is the common law," so he claims.¹⁵² Like many pro-slavery advocates, Adams devotes an entire chapter to critiquing the falseness of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and, in curious affinity with modern antiracist critiques, accuses Stowe of racism in her portrayal of Topsy: "I was angry with myself to find how I had suffered poor Topsy to form my notions of childhood and youth among the slaves."¹⁵³ Ironically, *South-Side* was published by Ticknor and Fields, the same Bostonian company that would later reissue *Uncle*

¹⁴⁸ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 213.

¹⁴⁹ Adams, *A South-Side View of Slavery*, 8, 9.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 161.

Tom's Cabin in 1862. Delano embodies the sentimental hypocrisy of Northerners like real-life fellow Massachusetts citizen Nehemiah Adams.

The novella demonstrates this lack of paradox as the constitutive relationship between the everyday legality of the institution of slavery and sentimentalism as articulated by Hartman. Upon the first sighting of the *San Dominick*, the ship is said to be “a Spanish merchantman of the first class, carrying negro slaves, among other valuable freight,” the description neatly categorizing the Africans as animate commodities.¹⁵⁴ When Delano rationalizes the apparent unruly state of the ship’s passengers, he observes that like “a transatlantic emigrant ship, among whose multitude of living freight are some individuals, doubtless, as little troublesome as crates and bales” while others are more recalcitrant.¹⁵⁵ Delano can recognize Babo as such a piece of “living freight” according to the system where Black bodies are made into fungible property even while he praises him wholeheartedly, telling Cereno, “I envy you such a friend; slave I cannot call him.”¹⁵⁶ Thus Adams can declare without a hint of irony that selling human beings is “not a reckless, unfeeling thing,” and scorn the phrase “chattel slavery,” complaining “it is obvious that this unfeeling law term has no counterpart in [Southern] minds, nor in the feelings of the community in general.”¹⁵⁷ Likewise, Sawyer speaks in echoes of Melville’s “crates and bales” comparison: “The idea of a person becoming property, a mere chattel or thing, as a brute, a bale of merchandize and the like, subject to be bought and sold, is but a fiction of law, for mere form of convenience, that has no counterpart in reality.”¹⁵⁸ The body of the slave, he declares, is “a sacred trust placed

¹⁵⁴ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 57.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁵⁷ Adams, *A South-Side View of Slavery*, 72, 73.

¹⁵⁸ Sawyer, *Southern Institutes; Or, An Inquiry into the Origin and Early Prevalence of Slavery and the Slave-Trade*, 312.

in the master's hands by law for their mutual good."¹⁵⁹ Objectification perversely produces humanization: as the novella indicates, it is precisely through the legal degradations of slavery that people such as Adams, Sawyer, and Cobb can view Black people with limited sympathy and even affection.

II.II Fugitive Feelings: Acts of Disaffection and the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850

For an enslaved person to escape became not just a matter of loss of property for the owner, but a deeply felt personal offense and a threat to the entire biopolitical order validated by race science and slave laws. Once Delano realizes Babo's masquerade, there is no question that the Americans will help the Spanish to quell the revolt that threatens them on an existential level. A new term emerges that is inflected by the contemporary legal frame of thinking: fugitivity, a concept which Fred Moten and Stefano Harney associate with Blackness as that which defies governmentality.¹⁶⁰ The *San Dominick* becomes the "fugitive ship," while the Africans are parsed as "the fugitives."¹⁶¹ This framing of the revolt in the terms of fugitivity, with even the once-slave ship now turned traitor to its original cause, speaks to the compulsion to remand escaped slaves exemplified by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. As part of the Compromise of 1850, an attempt to ameliorate growing antebellum tensions, the Fugitive Slave Act was signed into law by President Millard Fillmore on September 18th and was passed with a House vote of 109 to 76.¹⁶² The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 drew its validation from Article 4 Section 2 Clause 3 of the Constitution, which gave enslavers the right to pursue escaped slaves, and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which specified the surrender and rendition of fugitive slaves.¹⁶³ The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 313.

¹⁶⁰ See Moten and Harney on fugitivity in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 117, 118.

¹⁶² Campbell, *The Slave Catchers; Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860*, 23.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 5, 8.

expanded and made more efficient the previous laws: the law was to be executed by commissioners appointed by the United States Circuit Courts; moreover, US marshals were tasked with aiding the commissioners and could be fined one thousand dollars if the fugitives were to escape in their care while commissioners were incentivized to remand fugitives to owners since they would earn \$10 if they did, and only \$5 if they did not.¹⁶⁴ As Stephen Middleton puts it, “Federal marshals were thereby made into de facto slave catchers, strategically stationed across the North to act on behalf of slave owners in hunting down runaways.”¹⁶⁵ Enslavers were allowed to pursue fugitives either with a warrant or to even recapture them without due process; moreover, the marshals and their deputies are authorized “to summon and to call to aid the bystanders, or *posse comitatus* of the county” in order to aid with the recapture of fugitives, and “all good citizens are hereby commanded to aid and assist in the prompt and efficient execution of this law, whenever their services may be required.”¹⁶⁶ Both neutrality and resistance are criminalized, for Section 7 thoroughly addresses the possibility of any action in aid of a fugitive or to the hindrance of slave catchers: such individuals would be punished by a fine of up to a thousand dollars and imprisonment up to 6 months.¹⁶⁷ Thus, recapture was nationalized as a social duty to maintain peace and cohesion in the Union and, symbolically, in the state of affairs presented as the natural order by the slave laws. Delano does not hesitate in his responsibility to Benito Cereno to recapture people as living property; he even incentivizes his own sailors on this mission as potential commissioners with both money and the economic value of the Africans

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶⁵ Middleton, *The Black Laws: Race and the Legal Process in Early Ohio*, 202.

¹⁶⁶ Congress, An Act to Amend, and supplementary to, the Act entitled “An Act respecting Fugitives from Justice, and Persons escaping from the Service of their Masters,” approved February twelfth, one thousand seven hundred and ninety-three.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

as freight: the ship “and her cargo, including some gold and silver, were worth more than a thousand doubloons. Take her, and no small part should be theirs.”¹⁶⁸

Reading the shadow of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 in *Benito Cereno* does not just further ironize Melville’s exploration of the racist complicity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s sentimentality, but his own uncomfortable proximity with what Thomas Brook describes, in his discussion of Melville and the law, “a way of thinking shared by many people in power during the antebellum period.”¹⁶⁹ With his decision to refuse a writ of *habeas corpus* to Thomas Sims in Boston after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Melville’s father-in-law Lemuel Shaw holds the dubious distinction as the quintessential antislavery Northern judge who upholds the institution of slavery. The links between Melville and Shaw were both familial and financial: Shaw was friends with Melville’s father since 1820 and was engaged to Melville’s aunt before her untimely death; Herman married Shaw’s daughter Elizabeth in 1847; Shaw gave Melville loans and financial advice for travel as well as a New York residence in 1847 and a farm in Arrowhead in 1850; Melville borrowed books through Shaw’s library membership at the Boston Athenaeum; Shaw helped Melville find work and supplied introductions abroad in 1849.¹⁷⁰ Critics like Steven Winter read Melville’s writings like *Billy Budd* as an indictment of his father-in-law’s profession: according to Winter, Melville “well understood what kind of man his father-in-law, the revered judge, really was. He was an exceedingly ugly man.”¹⁷¹ Cover, too, assesses Shaw in light of *Billy Budd*, but perhaps overstates Shaw’s abolitionist leanings when discussing his decision to uphold the Fugitive Slave Law: “The effort cost Shaw untold personal agony,” in this “horrible conflict

¹⁶⁸ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 118.

¹⁶⁹ Thomas, “The Legal Fictions of Herman Melville and Lemuel Shaw,” 117.

¹⁷⁰ Weiner, *Law in Art: Melville’s Major Fiction and Nineteenth-Century American Law*, 12.

¹⁷¹ Winter, “Melville, Slavery, and the Failure of the Judicial Process,” 2474.

between duty and conscience.”¹⁷² By way of contrast, Leonard W. Levy claims, “there is nothing in the cast of the man’s mind, temperament, or associations suggesting that his judicial obligation to enforce Congressional law necessarily conflicted with his personal opinions.”¹⁷³ Nonetheless, whatever reservations the writer himself had about his generous father-in-law, the dedication of Melville’s first novel *Typee* reads: “To Lemuel Shaw, Chief Justice of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, this little work is affectionately¹⁷⁴ inscribed by the author.”¹⁷⁵ The complicities of the biopolitics of feeling are intimate.

Shaw’s moderate antislavery writings demonstrate the negotiation of the right kind of feelings for the right kind of people that ultimately would not challenge the system of chattel slavery.¹⁷⁶ I look to two of Shaw’s public writings cited by constitutional legal historian Levy as the primary examples of Shaw’s antislavery thought, which emphasized moderation, national security, and gradualism. In his June 11th 1811 address to the powerful Humane Society of Massachusetts, a body of distinguished doctors, lawyers and ministers founded in 1791, Shaw praises their philanthropic efforts that are “interwoven with the best and strongest feelings of [their] hearts.”¹⁷⁷ He admires their “proudest triumphs to science,” but the topics of his speech are “the moral views, to the benign influences on the heart.”¹⁷⁸ Shaw appeals to the shared mission of universal sympathy that draws these esteemed men of society together for the sake of humanity:

How beneficial an exercise of the heart, to cherish and invigorate that powerful principle of universal sympathy, which, originating in the tenderest affections of

¹⁷² Cover, *Justice Accused: Antislavery and the Judicial Process*, 5.

¹⁷³ Levy, *The Law of the Commonwealth and Chief Justice Shaw*, 91.

¹⁷⁴ The English edition has “affectionately” while the American Revised edition has “gratefully” (Bryant 275).

¹⁷⁵ Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, xli.

¹⁷⁶ Thanks to American Studies for the research grant that allowed me to read the Lemuel Shaw papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹⁷⁷ Shaw, *A Discourse Delivered Before the Officers and Members of the Humane Society of Massachusetts*, 5.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

domestic life, embraces at length in the arms of its charity, every individual of the human race?¹⁷⁹

The human race is differentiated through degrees of “moral excellence” that raise the civilized man “in the scale of being, little lower than the angels” as opposed to “in the dust with the brutes.”¹⁸⁰ The “brutes” are not explicitly identified, but the divide of affective and affectable is clear. Shaw turns to the abolition of the British slave trade as his first example of the moral development of mankind: he frames it as a battle against “the power of interest, of prejudice, of corruption, to darken the mind, and paralyze [sic] the feelings, of an enlightened, liberal, and benevolent community,” but now “better principles have been diffused, and better feelings impressed.”¹⁸¹ Fighting for the “righteous cause of the injured African” reflects “infinite honor, not only to its advocates but to human nature” – with no recognition of the particulars of Black experiences, well-being, or self-determination.¹⁸² Shaw asserts that the names of William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson will be “remembered and repeated, in the peaceful villages of Africa, until her native sons shall learn to emulate the virtues, whilst they aspire to the attainments of such illustrious men” – but, of course, these iconic abolitionists were white Englishmen with nary a mention of the ongoing efforts by Black and white abolitionists in his own country.¹⁸³ In fact, the speech completely avoids any mention of slavery and abolition in the United States. Abolition was not about Black emancipation: Black suffering is taken as an occasion for the exercise of white virtues to affirm those civilized white men as sympathetic. As per the biopolitics of feeling, there was a distinct limit to the Humane Society’s universal sympathy: abolition was not a cause they supported.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 9.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 12.

In his 1820 “Slavery and the Missouri Question” for *The North-American Review* Shaw claims to deplore the American slave trade while simultaneously complaining that critiques of the domestic institution of antiblackness by outsiders “wound our feelings.”¹⁸⁴ He calls for a moderate, gradualist approach in order to accommodate for the sensitivity of white feelings that must be centered at the expense of Black suffering: “Slavery, though a great and acknowledged evil, must be regarded, to a certain extent, as a necessary one, too deeply interwoven in the texture of society to be wholly or speedily eradicated.”¹⁸⁵ According to Shaw, there is a correct emotional stance for approaching the topic:

It should be approached with great calmness and good temper, with great firmness of purpose, with pure, enlightened, and benevolent feelings; but at the same time with that sober and discriminating benevolence, which regards not merely absolute right, but attainable good, and which in the eager pursuit of a desirable end, will not blindly overlook the only practicable means of arriving at it.¹⁸⁶

He calls upon his audience to reconsolidate themselves as those affective, civilized individuals on the top of the human hierarchy through the adoption of a milquetoast ethical orientation toward chattel slavery that would not disrupt the system they benefit from. Despite inveighing against the Atlantic Slave Trade as a “continued series of crimes,” this man of superior sympathies demurs on the matter of domestic chattel slavery by claiming that institution is a separate issue and subject to states’ rights.¹⁸⁷ As for addressing the circumstances of free Black people, he basically shrugs his shoulders. Segregation arises due to policy and history, but also “impassable barriers, by mutual and long cherished feelings of

¹⁸⁴ Shaw, “Slavery and the Missouri Question,” 138.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

contempt, detestation, and revenge,” as if Black dissatisfaction and anger were an equal culprit in upholding systemic racism.¹⁸⁸ In fact, Shaw’s eventual 1849 decision in *Roberts v. The City of Boston* would be cited as precedent in no less than the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision legitimizing racial segregation.¹⁸⁹ Melville had no further to look for a model for Amasa Delano than a man such as his father-in-law for an example of the sentimental hypocrisies of Northern racism.

Legal formalism’s illusion of self-contained inevitability washes Shaw’s hands of personal culpability in his decision to uphold the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850: sentimentalism’s biopolitics validated and propagated as objective reality. Likewise, the purported truths of the legal deposition in *Benito Cereno* retroactively authenticate the ideological foundation of Delano’s conviction in “good nature”: the legal documents are said by the narrator to be “the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it.”¹⁹⁰ The deposition takes over the narrative, with Melville reproducing the dry style of the excerpts in the original Delano’s memoir with their performance of distanced objectivity. The document reconstructs the events for the historical record: the deposition recounts and authenticates the slave revolt from the white perspective, revealing Babo’s agency and leadership in the mutiny only in order to vilify both him and his people. Even though Delano’s perception of the *San Dominick* was wrong, his authority remains and his worldview confirmed through the document’s affirmation; as Dennis Pahl comments, the deposition “epitomizes the entire history in the way it tries to totalize events while at the same time revealing its own particular violences.”¹⁹¹ This official history mimics the role of precedent in legal decisions: they affirm a particular take on the present through the citation

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁸⁹ Thomas, “The Legal Fictions of Herman Melville and Lemuel Shaw,” 123.

¹⁹⁰ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 120, 135.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 180.

of an authoritative past and thereby structure the future. The conclusions drawn and resulting verdict only confirm what was already known about the place of white mastery and Black subservience; Melville's use of these documents, as Weiner observes, reflect how his contemporary society "used the law to reinforce the already established fact of slavery."¹⁹² The overbearing presence of the dry deposition dominates the end of the novella with its importance and length, reflecting the overbearing role of the juridical with such necropolitical power over the enslaved. Chattel slavery's ongoing violent histories are sanitized as the legal status quo.

Through the deposition we can track the workings of the state apparatuses behind the official politics of recognition where we have to read against the grain to understand Black agency. Here, the law works in tandem with science as twin authorities: the documents open with Cereno's account as deponent paired with the certification of the royal notary "as much as is requisite in law," and closes with the authenticating signature not of the Spanish captain, but of Doctor Rozas, who has Benito Cereno under his care at the Hospital de Sacerdotes.¹⁹³ The conversion of enslaver Alexandro Aranda's skeleton into the substitute figurehead of the ship becomes evidence of the depravity of the Black fugitives' attempted subversion of the moral and natural order. Secure in his belief about that order of affectability, Don Alexandro had assured his friend Cereno that the one hundred and sixty African men, women, and children did not need to be locked up in the hold or fettered because "they were all tractable."¹⁹⁴ Seven days later he learns that the Black people he enslaved do possess agency. While in the original text the enslaver Aranda is thrown overboard by the very people he tried to own as property, Melville's story takes a different approach: "but the Negro Babo stopped

¹⁹² Weiner, *Law in Art: Melville's Major Fiction and Nineteenth-Century American Law*, 22.

¹⁹³ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 121, 134.

¹⁹⁴ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 122.

them, bidding the murder be completed on the deck before him, which was done, when by his orders, the body was carried below, forward.”¹⁹⁵ Cereno begs to know the fate of the corpse but remains ignorant until the fourth day, when “the Negro Babo showed him a skeleton, which has been substituted for the ship’s proper figurehead” of Christopher Columbus.¹⁹⁶ The fictive Babo’s ingenious revision of colonial history and its violences challenge the order of white supremacy; in his influential postcolonial reading Eric Sundquist describes this display as “the entire story of New World history told from the European American point of view – that is stripped down to the rudiments of its own carnage: the master becomes the sacrificial emblem of his own vicious system of power.”¹⁹⁷ Babo’s treatment of Aranda’s bones plays with race science’s relationship to visual culture and affective racial identification: with each member of the crew, starting with Cereno, Babo asks “whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should think it a white’s,” his query reversing race science’s logic with essential interiority embodied by the bones now reflecting the absent externalization of face and dermis as differentiated signifier of racial identity and humanity.¹⁹⁸ His threat hinges on using these sentimental logics of recognition: unless the Spaniards help the Africans, they “shall in spirit, as now in body, follow [their] leader.”¹⁹⁹ In response, “each Spaniard covered his face,” a gesture confirming racial physiognomic recognition.²⁰⁰ Babo’s subversive parody as portrayed the legal deposition, however, serves as part of the official case for his death sentence because he defied the basis of Western civilization. During the subsequent battle Don Alexandro Aranda’s skeleton becomes re-signified as a positive locus for right feeling to

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 125.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 126.

¹⁹⁷ Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, 170.

¹⁹⁸ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 126.

¹⁹⁹ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 126.

²⁰⁰ Ibid. Here the Spanish enslavers engage in the misreading critiqued by Dana Luciano: “To read the skeleton as simply allegorizing the human condition, then, risks producing an ethical interpretation of the narrative at the expense of a historical one, sacrificing materiality for universality” (*Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* 206).

inspire right action: his white bones are viewed as “beckoning the whites to avenge it.”²⁰¹ The victory of the whites on the high seas and the court act as moral and legal recognition that the natural order that privileges whiteness was justly maintained while Black agency is recognized only through condemnation.

II.III Sympathetic Benito Cereno, Unsympathetic Babo, and the Question of Justice

Thanks to the juridical apparatus of the biopolitics of feeling, justice is served and Delano feels justified. Through the lens of the law the story of the *San Dominick* and its passengers becomes disciplined into linearity and legibility:

Hitherto the nature of his narrative, besides rendering the intricacies in the beginning unavoidable, has more or less required that many things, instead of being set down in the order of occurrence, should be retrospectively, or irregularly given; this last is the case with the following passages which will conclude the account.²⁰²

Like the order of the story, Delano’s sense of order is also restored. In the original Delano’s account Don Benito is ungrateful to the American and avoids him after the *San Dominick* incident: part of the historical legal proceedings address the Spanish captain’s refusal to pay for services rendered by the Americans and Delano’s need to prove his good character in court. Although in pursuit of what he views as his rightful monetary reward, the real-life Delano records in his *Narrative* that he intervened in the affairs of the slave ship *Tryal* “from pure motives of humanity.”²⁰³ Melville’s retelling changes these events to maintain his focus on the transnational solidarity of sentimental white supremacy. In the novella the

²⁰¹ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 119.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁰³ Delano, *Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Comprising Three Voyages Round the World; Together with a Voyage of Survey and Discovery, in the Pacific Ocean and Oriental Islands*, 352.

triangulation of white sympathetic recognition has been renewed and completed: Delano and Cereno are united as fellow white men in friendship – “their fraternal unreserve in singular contrast with former withdrawals” – thanks to their shared fight against the antagonist Babo, the spectre of unsympathetic Blackness.²⁰⁴ Perversely, the reinstatement of Black social death – and the assurance of Babo’s death – provide the basis for their shared social life.

When Don Benito lauds him for his bravery, Captain Delano replies,

“Yes, all is owing to Providence, I know; but the temper of my mind that morning was more than commonly pleasant, while the sight of so much suffering, more apparent than real, added to my good-nature, compassion, and charity, happily interweaving the three”.²⁰⁵

Self-righteous Delano dubs himself a philanthropist to his fellow white man and finally receives the full recognition he felt he deserved for his right feelings. He has not given up on his sentimental frame of mind, but finds another way to justify his perspective on the world as truth: “Besides, those feelings I spoke of enabled me to get the better of momentary distrust, at times when acuteness might have cost me my life, without saving another’s.”²⁰⁶ Although his perceptions of the *San Dominick* were false, this is no epistemological break for him: he embraces his ignorance as his innocence, for justice according to the law of nature has been served.

Benito Cereno’s excessive sense of having been wronged by Babo follows from this triumph of sentimentalism: he has been marked by his experience of a brief reversal of the expectations of affectability and must affirm himself as affective. He fixates on his persecution, consolidating Delano’s sympathy: “Again and again, it was repeated, how hard it

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 136.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 57.

had been to enact the part forced on the Spaniard by Babo.”²⁰⁷ He describes that his “heart was frozen” when worried about Delano’s safety and his own thanks to Babo’s undermining of the sentimental conventions inscribed by antiblackness.²⁰⁸ After Babo’s failed murder attempt with the dagger, Cereno “refused to move, or be moved, until the negro should have been first put out of view.”²⁰⁹ Once freed from the Black man’s influence, Don Benito exercises his affective authority to erase Babo from his vision without even having to take direct action. Nonetheless he has been affected to the point of ill-health, simply naming “The negro” as the cause of his affliction.²¹⁰ Despite having all his structural privileges restored, he languishes like the wan aristocrat he is; at the tribunal he is unable to look at Babo and faints. Don Benito indulges his sense of victimization to the point of his own demise: he dies a wasting death, which, according to sentimental genre conventions, was the fate of those poor souls too good for this world. Thus, he characterizes himself as sympathetic victim and Babo as unsympathetic villain despite the actual power dynamics of enslavement and his role in condemning the Black man to death.

Babo’s post-mortem beheading functions as the abjected racial reversal of Aranda’s death: the lawful execution versus the obscene murder. 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 post-mortem 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.²¹¹ Placing Babo’s head on a pole, “that hive of subtlety,” in part reflects the phrenological

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 135.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 136.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 117.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid., 137.

fetishization of the head as the material object of visual analysis; as the narrative emphasizes, the African's "brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt."²¹²

Babo's severed head links the reader back to the multivalent violences of race science; one can trace the shift from living face to mute head to eventual skull specimen. In her study of race science's obsession with heads, 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.²¹³ The authoritative science that informs Delano's gaze and confirms his racial prejudices is based on empirical data wrested from exhumed bodies of peoples of color and a product of national and colonial projects. Among Morton's careful description of each skull's origins, one "remarkably characteristic Indian head" belonged to a Seminole warrior killed during the Second Seminole War that was still ongoing during and after the publication of *Crania Americana*.²¹⁴ Like Shaw's decision to remand Thomas Sims to slavery through a retreat to legal formalism, the purported objectivity of science attempts to sanitize the means of its own production and its resulting effects. Melville's novella returns context to the effects of race science on the American way of looking, reminding us that representative violence is inevitably linked to other national and transnational forms of brutality.

Against abolitionist arguments for feeling as a weapon against unfeeling scientific and legal institutional oppressions, Melville's *Benito Cereno* reveals to us how both disciplines

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead*, 4.

²¹⁴ Morton, *Crania Americana*, 166.

were imbricated within the nineteenth-century culture of sentiment as part of the biopolitics of feeling. The ironic narrative focalization on Delano illustrates how the American's racism is justified by contemporary science and law but naturalized by love, not hate. Despite Delano's failings, the order of his world is restored: he has been affirmed in his sense of self as sympathetic in a world sympathetic to his whiteness.

III. The Babo Problem: Unthought, Unfeeling

"Babo is the most heroic character in Melville's fiction," writes C.L.R. James, "He is a man of unbending will."²¹⁵ Babo is "unbending" in defiance of the demands of his affectability. In contrast to his show of tractable deference onboard the *San Dominick*, Babo becomes a figure of complete withholding: "Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words."²¹⁶ To the real question of "How it feels to be a problem?" Du Bois responds much like Babo, "I answer seldom a word."²¹⁷ The narrative cannot comprehend that his choice to be unmoving is his remaining exercise of defiant agency against the system of affectability that would only recognize him through animatedness for the benefit of whiteness: after failing to kill the captains, Babo's action is represented as having "at once yielded to the superior muscular strength of his captor."²¹⁸ Until the end, he will not submit to the sentimental demands of the politics of recognition because he knows that under this system any expression, no matter how heartfelt, cannot earn him sympathy: he remains "voiceless," and has to be "dragged to the gibbet" as a final gesture of physical noncompliance.²¹⁹ It is

²¹⁵ James, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*.

²¹⁶ Melville, 137.

²¹⁷ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

only as an object that he, as a decapitated head, can be finally recognized as returning the white gaze:

The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gazes of the whites; and across the Plaza looked towards St. Bartholomew's church, in whose vaults slept then, as now, the recovered bones of Aranda; and across the Rimac bridge looked towards the monastery, on Mount Agonia without; where three months after being dismissed by the court, Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader.²²⁰

“The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist,” Fred Moten famously declares.²²¹ In the final long multi-claused sentence of the novella, the narrator tracks Babo's gaze across space and time directed at his former enslaver Benito Cereno whose death three months later closes the narrative. His “unabashed” expression signals the rebel's final fugitive performance of unfeeling as refusal to accept the criminalization of Blackness that I suggest is part of the genealogy that Koritha Mitchell calls a critical demeanor of shamelessness produced by Jim Crow lynching and modern mass incarceration.²²² The ambiguity of the last noun combined with the ordering structure of the clauses implies the Senegalese man's deadly power to affect even when demoted in death to an unmoving object in the biopolitical hierarchy of feeling and animacy. If Aranda's bones were able to rally Spanish and Americans across national difference through shared sympathy for whiteness, who might be inspired by Babo's unsympathetic Blackness and, perhaps, be sympathetic? We are only told about the whites who bear witness to the spectacle of the execution and morbid aftermath.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Moten, *In the Break: Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 1.

²²² Mitchell, “No More Shame! Defeating the New Jim Crow with Antilynching Activism's Best Tools.”

The novella leaves us with this unanswered question and the marked absence of any potentially sympathetic people Black or otherwise. According to Hartman, “On the one hand, the slave is the foundation of the national order, and, on the other, the slave occupies the position of the unthought.”²²³ Unfeeling may be considered kin to the unthought. In his adaptation of the original Delano’s account, Melville writes a narrative that can be considered as aligned with an Afropessimist take on the totalizing negation of Black affects and, in turn, Black sociality: the novella downplays or omits the Black women, men, and children who could feel otherwise about Babo’s final defiance. According to the historical account of the revolt Babo was not the one executed: the real Babo dies during the battle and it was his son Mure who is hanged and beheaded along with four others, for acting “as captain and commander of them.”²²⁴ This Babo was indeed “the ring leader,” but shared this role with his son who took on “the appearance of the submission of the humble slave” to monitor Cereno during Delano’s visit.²²⁵ Melville’s Babo is severed from his familial ties and his collaborators. The story erases, too, the enslaved Black women and children forced to be present at the execution: stated as part of the sentence passed on March 2, 1805, “The negresses and young negroes of the same gang shall be present at the execution, if they should be in that city at the same time thereof.”²²⁶ The centrality of Black women’s contributions to onboard resistance to the Atlantic slave trade has been elided; as historian Jane Landers argues, the archive shows revolts were correlated to the greater number of women aboard.²²⁷ Both the real and fictional legal documents hint that these women played a

²²³ Hartman and Wilderson III., “The Position of the Unthought,” 184–85.

²²⁴ Delano, *Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Comprising Three Voyages Round the World; Together with a Voyage of Survey and Discovery, in the Pacific Ocean and Oriental Islands*, 341.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 335, 338.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 347.

²²⁷ Landers, “Founding Mothers: Female Rebels in Colonial New Granada and Spanish Florida,” 7. See also Katherine McKittrick’s *Demonic Grounds*.

greater role in the uprising: they are said to be “knowing to the revolt,” influenced the deaths of their enslavers including Aranda, and during the battle they “sang melancholy songs” to motivate their men.²²⁸ These events do not enter the narrative proper because they were not witnessed by the white characters: Melville adds in the deposition that “all this is believed, because the negroes have said it.”²²⁹ These women remain unnamed in both the historical and literary accounts, falling below the threshold of recognition given to their male counterparts as disaffected insurgents. Black social death is inexorable: Melville’s Babo dies alone, stripped of any vestige of sympathy and sociality.

In adapting the historical record, *Benito Cereno* enacts the erasure of alternative racialized structures of feeling, banished as “unfeeling” and outside the category of the universal human which, as Sylvia Wynter and Denise Ferreira da Silva have shown, is founded upon the abjection of Blackness. This is a world governed by white feelings that will not and cannot recognize or tolerate racialized affects that fall outside dominant structures of feeling. Liberation for Babo and the other Africans, however, meant their disaffected defiance of these structures of feeling and therefore risking illegibility as feeling. Here we must acknowledge the unsettling dynamic of such a narrative that anticipates something akin Afro-pessimism in its reading of the world as it is: Melville critiques the conditional sympathy granted Black people and the deadly consequences to unsympathetic Blackness as the negation on which the human depends, but accepts that foreclosure. He does not speculate about what affects, actions, and imaginings can emerge from the radical choice to feel otherwise in such a world. In the following chapter I read Martin Delany’s *Blake; or the Huts of America* for an exploration of those possibilities that refuses to accept that world as the

²²⁸ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, 132.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

only world and the alternative structures of feeling towards a new world for Black,

Indigenous, and other peoples of colour.