

## Did Melville Misplace Santa Maria in *Benito Cereno*?

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*Herman Melville's Benito Cereno (1855) adapted Captain Amasa Delano's Voyages and Travels (1817) in order to draw out particular subtexts of racial politics and prejudicial attitudes, and thus to resonate with a contemporary antebellum audience. Exploring the rationale for these changes more broadly, this paper proposes that another change has so far gone unnoticed in critical responses to the tale: the transposition of Santa Maria, an island off the coast of Chile. Demonstrating that this is unlikely to be an unintentional slip, given Melville's familiarity with both the source text and the Chilean coastline, it argues that there were numerous possible reasons for doing this, including a desire to highlight colonial issues and comment on contemporary race relations both north and south of the Equator. As such, this piece utilizes a small array of key texts, rather than the broader biographical and contextually oriented sources that comprise the core of the larger piece of ongoing research to which this belongs. In so doing, it asserts that Melville's desire to change the source text to fit with his own artistic, political, and aesthetic goals still causes problems for critics today, inasmuch as this geographical mischief is yet another 'knotty problem' in the ongoing debate about Melville's motives for writing Benito Cereno.*

Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* is a text to which Melville readers often return. Virtually ignored upon its publication in *Putnam's* in 1855, it has similarly been overshadowed by the status or recognition afforded to works such as *Moby Dick* (1851) or *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853). Nevertheless, its nuances and complexities ensure that, once read, it lingers, encouraging readers back into its complex knots. One of the primary points of interest in the text, and which has raised issues as to its status as art is the tale's use of the diary of Captain Amasa Delano, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817). This use of historical source material was first noted by Harold Scudder in 1928. Scudder recognized that Melville had utilized elements of chapter eighteen of Delano's *Voyages*, to which was added a limited third-person narrative (the reader sees what Delano sees), in order to construct a story ostensibly concerned with a slave rebellion, but more concerned with an ideological critique of Delano's original narrative. Melville's tale focuses on Amasa Delano's discovery of a moored ship, his subsequent meetings with its captain, Benito Cereno, and his complete misrecognition of the fact that a slave rebellion had occurred onboard. The result, familiar to readers of *Benito Cereno*, is a narrative concerned with the problems of interpretation, as we observe Delano's naivety and prejudice (he

assumes that the slaves are incapable of rebelling because ‘they know their place’), knowing that something more is going on, but unsure as to what exactly it might be. Ambiguities abound in the text, and Melville prompts the reader to question what the narrator, Amasa Delano, sees, referring to knots that must be untied or cut, oakum-pickers and hatchet polishers, and chess pieces. For most critics, these ambiguities have to do with race relations, with the assumption that Delano’s biased narrative – clearly more concerned with his own lack of spoils than with the slave rebellion, or indeed the causes behind such a rebellion – represented for Melville an opportunity to intervene in antebellum America’s slavery debate.

Since Scudder identified the source for *Benito Cereno*, particular critics have interpreted the story through its differences from Delano’s *Voyages*, employing techniques of literary excavation rather than literary interpretation (the most important of these is arguably William Richardson’s *Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno’*). Both Scudder’s and Richardson’s works have produced invaluable insights into the documentary origins of *Benito Cereno*, and offered a number of interpretations for Melville’s various changes to the source material. Such alterations include changes of name (such as changing the name of the ship from *Tryal* to *San Dominick*, or changing the captain’s name from ‘Bonito Sereno’ to ‘Benito Cereno’) and date (amending the year from 1805 to 1799, for example); the inclusion of invented characters; and ship fixtures not present in the original (the skeleton as the figurehead). Furthermore, the narrative is dominated by religious and colonial terminology and references, especially to Catholicism and Spain.

One of the primary debates about Melville’s amendments is concerned with his rationale, if any, for moving the date of the capture of the *Tryal*, the ship upon which *Benito Cereno*’s *San Dominick* is based. Scudder summarizes the voyage thus: ‘[Delano] left Boston Nov. 10, 1799, and early in 1800 arrived in the neighborhood of Santa Maria, an island a few leagues from the mainland in the vicinity of the port of Talcahuano, and the city of Concepcion’.<sup>1</sup> Scudder notes, in relation to this date, that Delano’s capture of the *Tryal* actually occurred in 1805, when Delano returned to the area, and asserts that ‘[p]erhaps Melville failed to note this silent transition [between 1800 and 1805]’ because Melville sets the action of the text in 1799.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, H. Bruce Franklin asserts that ‘Melville changes the year of Delano’s narrative from 1805 to 1799, thus making Babo’s rule on the *San*

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<sup>1</sup> Harold H. Scudder, ‘Melville’s *Benito Cereno* and Captain Delano’s *Voyages*’, *PMLA*, 43 (1928), 502-32 (p. 530).

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*.

*Dominick* contemporaneous with Toussaint L'Ouverture's rule on San Domingo'.<sup>3</sup> Franklin further contends that this is because of the importance of 'the successful bloody rebellion of the slaves of San Domingo, a topic of great antebellum interest'.<sup>4</sup> In agreement with Franklin, Richardson later examined the significance not only of the years, but also of the respective calendar dates of the voyages of the *Tryal* and *San Dominick*, asserting that 'the year 1799 assumes considerable importance' as the midpoint of both the French Revolution and 'the American Constitution's 20-year ban on slavery', and that the midpoint of the voyage of Melville's *San Dominick* is 4 July, Independence Day.<sup>5</sup>

For Scudder, then, Melville's slip is merely a by-product of Delano's narrative digressing from chronology at this point, towards a memory of another event, and is thus 'accidental rather than intentional'.<sup>6</sup> For Franklin and Richardson, however, the change of date is vital to understanding the importance of anti-slavery sentiment embedded in the text of *Benito Cereno*; as Richardson states, 'the reader is justified in assuming that he attached some importance to those deviations'.<sup>7</sup> In each case, however, the focus of the debate is in Melville's use of an alternative date, a temporal focus that elides a possible geographical problem. As quoted earlier, Scudder notes that Santa Maria is 'an island a few leagues from the mainland in the vicinity of the port of Talcahuano', yet in *Benito Cereno* Melville describes Santa Maria as 'a small, desert, uninhabited island toward the southern extremity of the long coast of Chili'.<sup>8</sup> In essence, Melville translocates the island of Santa Maria in *Benito Cereno*, moving it from off the coast of central Chile to its southern tip. It is this discrepancy that I wish to examine, using it to offer some complicating factors – further knots to untie or cut, in the language of *Benito Cereno* – in the debate between Scudder, Franklin, and Richardson.

What does Delano's narrative have to say on this matter? The *Voyages* are fairly explicit about the location of Santa Maria, even without log books, and Melville's inclusion of the legally witnessed documents within his account imply that Delano's version of the events must be at least geographically accurate. That is, Melville did not propose sweeping changes

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<sup>3</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, "'Apparent Symbol of Despotism': Melville's *Benito Cereno*", *New England Quarterly*, 34 (1961), 462-77 (p. 471). See also Jonathan Beecher's recent 'Echoes of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution in Melville's *Benito Cereno*', *Leviathan*, 9.2 (2007), 43-58.

<sup>4</sup> Franklin, p. 471.

<sup>5</sup> William D. Richardson, *Melville's 'Benito Cereno': An Interpretation with Annotated Text and Concordance* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1987), p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> Scudder, p. 530.

<sup>7</sup> Richardson, p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

to such geographical information, but left it more or less verbatim, and reproduced Sereno's declaration of the events:

[Bonito Sereno] told them that what was most wanting for the voyage was water; that they would go near the coast to take it, and thence they would proceed on their course – that the negroes agreed to it; and the deponent steered towards the intermediate ports, hoping to meet some Spanish or foreign vessel that would save them; that within ten or eleven days they saw the land, and continued their course by it *in the vicinity of Nasca*; that the deponent observed that the negroes were now restless and mutinous, because he did not effect the taking in of water, they having required with threats that it should be done, without fail the following day; he told them that *they saw plainly that the coast was steep*, and the rivers designated in the maps were not to be found, with other reasons suitable to the circumstances; that *the best way would be to go to the island of Santa Maria*, where they might water and victual easily, it being a desert island, as the foreigners did; that the deponent *did not go to Pisco, that was near*, not make any other port of the coast, because the negroes had intimated to him several times, that they would kill them all the very moment they should perceive any city, town, or settlement, on the shores to which they would be carried; that having determined to go to the island of Santa Maria, as the deponent had planned, for the purpose of trying whether in the passage or in the island itself, they could find any vessel that should favour them, or whether he could escape from it in a boat *to the neighboring coast of Arruco*.<sup>9</sup>

Both Pisco and Nasca are located in Peru; Pisco is approximately 150 miles south along the coast from Lima, and Nasca a further 150 miles along the coast. From Delano's account, it seems as if the rebellious slaves were persuaded that it was too dangerous to land near such inhabited areas, and that they should instead head towards the island of Santa Maria. This trip took them from Peru to Chile, following the coastal regions of the Andes – 'they saw plainly that the coast was steep' – until they came to the lower-lying coastal areas south of Valparaiso, in Chile. Santa Maria, described as being off 'the neighboring coast of Arruco' was a long distance to travel with supplies running low, and from Delano's quotation of Sereno's disposition, it is implied that this was planned so that he could escape. Arauco (as

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 108 (my emphasis).

Arruco is now called) is approximately 75 miles south of Concepción, and this geographical signpost locates the island of Santa Maria close to the thirty-seventh southern parallel along the coast of Chile.

As noted previously, however, there remains a problem inasmuch as Melville seems to provide Santa Maria with a voyage of its own. Whilst Melville takes pains to disorientate the reader of *Benito Cereno*, shrouding the text in ambiguity, he opens the narrative very explicitly:

In the year 1799, Captain Amasa Delano, of Duxbury, in Massachusetts, commanding a large sealer and general trader, lay at anchor[,] with a valuable cargo, in the harbour of St. Maria – a small, desert, uninhabited island toward the southern extremity of the long coast of Chili.<sup>10</sup>

The political boundaries of Chile have of course changed since Melville's time, for now the 'southern extremity' of Chile is Cape Horn, but these boundaries were remarkably fluid during the early nineteenth century. The area around Arauco, the Bío-Bío, had only succumbed to white (especially Spanish) influence in the mid-eighteenth century, but there were nevertheless towns established as far south as Osorno and San Pablo (approximately 250 miles south of Concepción) even by the time Delano wrote his *Voyages*; by the time Melville was writing *Benito Cereno*, further towns had been established on the mainland near the island of Chiloé, and Chile's borders extended to two further provinces in the area as the indigenous Mapuche were brought into Chilean society (Arauco became a province in 1853). From the thirty-seventh southern parallel, where Santa Maria is located, to the southern extremity of Chile – at that time, on approximately the forty-first southern parallel – is a remarkably long journey.

Of course, much of this supposition rests on what precisely Melville means by the phrase 'toward the southern extremity of the long coast of Chili'. Santa Maria is certainly further south along the Chilean coast than its midpoint, which is on approximately the thirtieth southern parallel, and thus 'toward' the south, yet Melville's use of the term 'extremity' implies a much more southern position than it in fact occupies. The preposition 'toward' merely implies a direction, but the noun 'extremity' and the description of the coast as 'long' countermand this, and pull the reader further south. Rhetorically, his opening

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

description isolates the island, distancing the events that occur within the narrative from normalized society, and we can certainly see why Melville would want to do this; but he grounds the island in this passage nonetheless, emphasizing its (misplaced) location. Why would Melville make this emphasis? He was certainly reasonably well-versed in maritime matters, having spent the years 1839-1844 travelling, and whilst he was a 'green hand' on board the whaling ship *Acushnet* actually travelled north along the coast of Chile from Cape Horn to the Juan Fernández Islands (where Alexander Selkirk was marooned) between 15 April 1841 and May 1841.<sup>11</sup> Through these experiences, he clearly possessed some awareness of nautical distances and travel times, especially with regard to the region described in Delano's *Voyages*, lending credence to Richardson's observation of the specificity of the dates, and thence to the specificity of the location itself.

If it is not an unfortunate mistake, then why did Melville move Santa Maria? Within *Benito Cereno*, including the rewritten legal documents he incorporates into it, he does not revise the other locations mentioned in the narrative. Melville recounts much of the detail of Delano's narrative in *Benito Cereno*, including the above excerpt. He adds Babo's name to the deposition, and makes some minor changes in punctuation, but beyond that the only differences are that he calls Santa Maria 'solitary' rather than 'desert' and, significantly, includes the key phrase 'the neighboring coast of Arruco'.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Cereno's description of the long voyage from Cape Horn to Santa Maria also raises questions in Delano's mind:

For here, by your account, have you been these two months and more getting from Cape Horn to St. Maria, a distance which I myself, with a good wind, have sailed in a few days. True, you had calms, and long ones, but to be becalmed for two months, that is, at least, unusual.<sup>13</sup>

Delano then waits for an explanation as to why 'the passage from Cape Horn to St. Maria had been so exceedingly long', an explanation punctuated by Babo holding a knife to Cereno's throat, pretending to shave him, which Delano omits to consider as significant (in hindsight, it indicates that Cereno is under duress).<sup>14</sup> Location thus plays a significant role in *Benito*

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<sup>11</sup> Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography*, 2 vols. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), I, p. 193.

<sup>12</sup> Compare Richardson, pp. 57-58 and p. 108.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

*Cereno*, given the lies Cereno tells to cover the fact that the slave rebellion has occurred; what, then, is the significance of the opening paragraph locating Santa Maria in such a way?

Was Melville perhaps aware of the laws passed in 1819, after Chile gained full independence from Spain in 1818, that abolished ‘the distinction between Spaniard and Indian’ because ‘all inhabitants of the republic were proclaimed “Chileans” with equal political rights’?<sup>15</sup> Despite this treaty, Chilean southwards and eastwards expansion into Mapuche territory continued, giving the Mapuche rights to be equal subjects under Chilean law but not independent in their own right, and leading to a series of violent struggles.<sup>16</sup> Santa Maria would thus stand as a sign for the continued southwards expansion into Mapuche territories that was ongoing at the time. Given the ironic distance with which Melville tells Delano’s story in *Benito Cereno*, and the racial dimension to this distance, this is certainly a possibility. It tallies with the way in which Melville incorporates key elements of the Spanish colonization of the ‘New World’ into the narrative, including the name change from *Tryal* to *San Dominick*, the creation of a ‘Christopher Colon’ figurehead for the *San Dominick*, and the ‘Follow Your Leader’ motto appended to it. Nevertheless, it seems too far from Melville’s own experience to force *Benito Cereno* to correspond to a broader picture of race that incorporates Chilean politics, and the extension of the rights of slaves to be free to include aboriginal rights. Perhaps more plausibly, given the rhetorical significance of ‘southern’ in the period in which Melville was writing, and particularly ‘southern extremity’ as a euphemism for ‘southern extremism’, we can ask whether Santa Maria is Melville’s chosen site for the ethical debate on slavery, and especially the prejudice with which slaves were viewed. This seems far more likely, and relates the movement, albeit implied, of Santa Maria, to the growing divisions in antebellum American society.

This is perhaps seen most clearly when we juxtapose this expression with Melville’s clear assertion of Delano’s origins. He is of ‘Duxbury, in Massachusetts’, a small shipbuilding town in a northern state. This is indeed accurate, but plays no subsequent part in the narrative and does not appear to aid Melville in developing Delano’s character. Given the antebellum context of the story, it is thus significant that Delano is given an origin (‘Massachusetts’) and a destination (the ‘southern extremity’) in this opening paragraph. As Richardson states:

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<sup>15</sup> George McCutchen McBride, *Chile: Land and Society* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1936), p. 148.

<sup>16</sup> See also Simon Collier and William F. Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808-2002* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 95-96.

[Many] citizens coalesced into two violently opposing camps: the abolitionists, composed primarily of Northerners from regions (such as Massachusetts) that no longer derived much or any commercial benefit from slavery, and the pro-slavery faction, composed largely, but certainly not exclusively, of Southern slave owners who obviously had a large investment in slaves.<sup>17</sup>

Richardson's own analysis of the opening paragraphs of the narrative focuses almost exclusively on the 'muddying of colors' of the third paragraph, and devotes no time to the remarkable specificity with which Melville opens *Benito Cereno*.<sup>18</sup> By locating Delano as a Northerner, and thus ostensibly linking him to the emancipation of slaves by geographical location, while at the same time using *Benito Cereno* to demonstrate Delano's inherent racial prejudices, Melville emphasizes the ideological distance between assumption and reality in the then ongoing race debate.

If this is the case, and Melville's rhetorical strategy of *implying*, but not *stating*, that the island is further south than it actually is related to his overall aims for *Benito Cereno*, then this certainly lends credence to Richardson's and Franklin's trust in Melville. Rather than losing or misplacing the island, the politics of Spanish-governed Chile becomes Melville's catalyst for a transposition of the race debate, elided in Delano's original *Voyages*, into American consciousness. Scudder's belief that Melville 'mistimed' the tale fails to take into account the deliberation with which Melville transposed details of Delano's narrative, and Scudder's desire to see this as an error (can we ever finally say?), means that he overlooks the fact that this is an error Melville would be committing geographically as well as temporally. At this point, Darryl Hattenhauer's argument, that '[f]or Melville, there is no New World of the saved and Old and Third World of the damned, but rather a common continent of the sinful brotherhood', seems to be borne out.<sup>19</sup> *Benito Cereno* is not a narrative about redemption, but damnation, and given the (possible) Chilean/Spanish political contexts and (more plausible) American antebellum contexts, Santa Maria can be understood as the locus of this debate, not as a site of righteous rebellion or implicit white superiority, but as humanity *in extremis*, at its lowest ebb. The significance of the island is briefly alluded to by Richardson, in his brief aside on the relationship between the history of Saint Francis and

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<sup>17</sup> Richardson, p. 70.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>19</sup> Darryl Hattenhauer, "'Follow your leader": Knowing One's Place in *Benito Cereno*', *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 45 (1991), 7-17 (p. 13).

*Benito Cereno*, yet Melville foregrounds this island, and not just for the reason that it is the setting for the story.<sup>20</sup>

Given this interpretation, Hattenhauer's introduction to his essay, where he states that Melville's writing can be understood in relation to the distinction between the 'chronometrical' and the 'horological', 'the transcendent, heavenly, sacred, and timeless' and 'fallen, earthly, profane, and historical', falls into place.<sup>21</sup> He argues that Melville's narrative moves between the two in order to demonstrate Delano's preconceptions, and concludes that '[Delano] puts what he wants to see in place of what is actually there' and thus 'forces the horological to correspond to his preconceptions about the chronometrical'.<sup>22</sup> In essence, he asserts that Delano's ideological spectacles colour the world about him, making the world appear in a particular manner. This is a common reading of the text, but Hattenhauer's spatial account of the narrative gives me pause for thought. Given the 'voyage' of the island of Santa Maria, and the fact that it does not 'know its place' in *Benito Cereno*, might we equally assert that Melville, in addressing the ideological (chronometrical) status of American perceptions of slavery, subverted the actual (horological) location of the island of Santa Maria to further his aims?

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<sup>20</sup> See Richardson p. 209, n. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Hattenhauer, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.