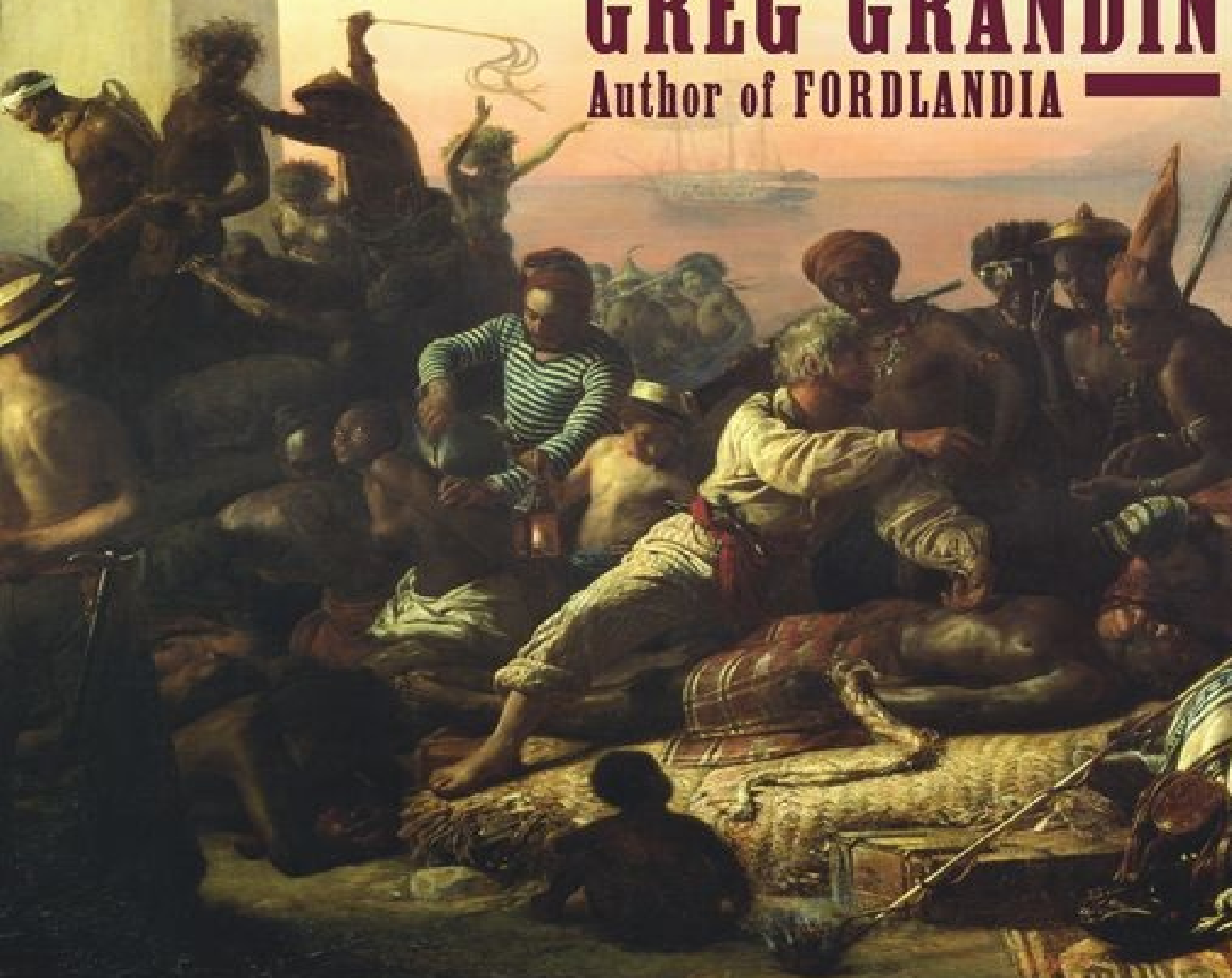


THE EMPIRE OF NECESSITY

SLAVERY, FREEDOM, and DECEPTION in the NEW WORLD

GREG GRANDIN

Author of *FORDLANDIA*



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the early 1920s, the British war journalist and novelist H. M. Tomlinson let Americans in on a secret. There existed an obscure book that certain people used as an “artful test” to identify like-minded souls. If they gave it to you to read, Tomlinson wrote in the *Christian Science Monitor*, and you “showed no surprise,” you’d be deemed “no good.” But, being that they “were half afraid of the intensity of their own conviction,” they wouldn’t tell you you were no good. They’d keep quiet. And however, Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* possessed you, you would have proved yourself worthy, able to “dwell in safety with fiends or angels and rest poised with a quiet mind between the stars and the bottomless pit.” Ninety years later, I felt that I had my own password into a knowing world of fiends and angels. When asked what I was working on, I’d say I was researching events that inspired the Herman Melville story. “Not *Moby-Dick*,” I’d say, “another one.” Less than half had heard of *Benito Cereno* and fewer still had read it. Those who had, though, knew it was different. It was Corey Roberson who first let me in on the secret and I owe the idea of this book to him.

Over the years, I’ve kept a running list of people who helped in large and small ways move the work along, and if I’ve left anyone out, I apologize. Though I cite their scholarship throughout, special credit is due to the historians Alex Borucki and Lyman Johnson. They have been extremely generous, taking time to respond to my questions and read the manuscript. I also want to thank the friends and colleagues, at NYU and elsewhere, who listened, suggested, corrected, and indulged, including Barbara Weinstein, Ada Ferrer, Sinclair Thomson, Michael Ralph, Gary Wilder, Laurent Dubois, Donna Murch, Chuck Walker, Mark Healey, Karen Spalding, Gerardo Rénique, Jennifer Adair, Debbi Poole, Kristin Ross, Harry Harootunian, Eric Foner, Emilia da Costa, Ned Sublette, Constance Ash Sublette, Walter Johnson, Fred Cooper, Ernesto Semán, Bob Wheeler, Julio Pinto, Peter Winn, George Joseph, Stuart Schwartz, Tom Bender, Matt Hausmann, Amy Hausmann, Robert Perkinson, Christian Parenti, Laura Brahm, Jack Wilson, Gordon Lafer, Josh Frens-String, Christy Thornton, Alessandro Marchesi, Ervand Abrahamian, Carlota McAllister, Marilyn Young, Deborah Levenson, Liz Oglesby, Molly Nolan, Lauren Benton, Cristina Mazzeo de Vivó, Henry Hughes, Jorge Ortiz-Sotelo, and Christopher Maxworthy. Jean Stein graciously read the manuscript and offered constant encouragement. Eleanor Roosevelt Seagraves kindly took the time to discuss Delano’s memoir. Susan Rabiner has helped guide the work along since the beginning. In the middle of the project, between the archival research and the writing, I fell into a Melville obsession, from the depths of which one thing kept me going: knowing that Richard Kim would understand.

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Carolyn Ravenscroft, the archivist at the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society, deserves special mention. Carolyn was with this project from nearly its beginning and though there are only so many times one can use the word *generous* in acknowledgments, that she was, and more so. Hershel Park was once kind enough to respond to an unsolicited e-mail inquiry and I hope he doesn't regret it! Ever since, he has been exceptionally charitable in answering questions and sharing his unmatched knowledge of Herman Melville's life and work.

I was privileged to be able to finish a final draft of the manuscript while a Gilder Lehrman Fellow in American History at the New York Public Library's Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers. As in the time to write and access to the library's collections weren't benefit enough, the year also allowed the rare opportunity to discuss all sorts of things with the wonderful people who keep the Center and Library running, especially Jean Strouse, Marie d'Orgny, Paul Delaverdac, Caitlin Kean, and Mai Liriano, and a terrific cohort of fellow fellows: Mae Ngai, Betsy Blackmar, Philip Gourevitch, Sara Sayrafiezadeh, Valentina Izmirlieva, Gary Panter, Jamie Ryerson, John Wray, Luc Sante, Shimon Dotan, Katie Morgan, Tony Gottlieb, Ruth Franklin, and Daniel Margocsy.

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In the past, I've thanked Tannia Goswami, Toshi Goswami, and, of course, Manu Goswami. I get

again, but this time also Eleanor Goswami Grandin, born on, depending on what calendar one is using, either the 20th of Rabi-al-thani 1435 or the 23rd of Ventôse 220, but in any case starting the work anew.

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~~Seeking to conquer a larger liberty, man but extends the empire of necessity.~~

Author unknown. Used as epigraph to Herman Melville's "The Bell-Tower."

INTRODUCTION

Wednesday, February 20, 1805
shortly after sunrise, in the South Pacific

Captain Amasa Delano was lying awake in his cot when his deck officer came to tell him that a vessel had been spotted coming round the southern head of Santa María, a small, uninhabited island off the coast of Chile. By the time Delano had dressed and come topside the “strange ship,” as he later described it, had slackened its sails and was now drifting with the wind toward an underwater ledge. To his puzzlement, it flew no flag. It looked to be in want and, if it drew closer to the shallows, in danger. Delano hastily had water, pumpkins, and fresh fish loaded in a boat. He then ordered it hoisted down and went on board.

The weather that morning was thick and breezy but the sun rose to reveal a calm bay. The other side of the island, from where the mysterious ship had appeared, was rough. Endless breakers, sharp-toothed underwater reefs, and steep rock-faced cliffs made its coastline unapproachable, providing sanctuaries for the seals that elsewhere had been hunted to near extinction. But the island’s east, where the *Perseverance* harbored, was peaceful, the Southern Hemisphere’s waning summer offering a harmony of lulling earth tones, brown, rich dirt, green sea, and cloudless blue skies. High bluffs blanketed by wild red thistles shielded a sandy, safe haven used by sealers and whalers to socialize, pass mailbags to ships bound home, and replenish wood and water.

As he came closer, Delano could see the ship’s name, the *Tryal*, painted in English in faded white letters along its bow. He could also see that its deck was full of black-skinned people, who looked to be slaves. And when he climbed on board, the alabaster-skinned New Englander discovered himself surrounded by scores of Africans and a handful of Spanish and mulatto sailors telling their “stories” and sharing their “grievances” in a babel of languages.

They spoke in Wolof, Mandinka, Fulani, and Spanish, a rush of words indecipherable in its details but soothing to Delano in its generalities. Earlier, as his men rowed toward the ship, he could see that its sails were tattered. What should have been an orderly web of rigging and tackle was a wooly mess. Its hull, calcified, moss covered, and pulling a long trail of sea grass, gave off a greenish tint. But Delano knew it was a common pirates’ ploy to make ships appear distressed in order to lure victims on board. Napoleon had just crowned himself emperor of the French, Madrid and Paris were at war with London, and privateers were raiding merchant ships at will, even in the distant South Pacific. Now, though hollow cheeks and frantic eyes confirmed that the misery was real, turning Delano’s fears into “feelings of pity.”

Amasa Delano was on board the *Tryal* for about nine hours, from around seven in the morning to a little after four in the afternoon. Having sent his away team back to the island to fill the *Tryal*’s casks with water, he spent most of the day alone among its voyagers, talking with its captain, helping to distribute the food and water he had brought with him, and securing the ship so it didn’t drift. Delano, a distant cousin of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, from a respected shipbuilding and fishing family on the

Massachusetts coast, was an experienced mariner in the middle of his third sail around the world. Yet he couldn't see that it was the *Tryal's* slaves, and not the man who introduced himself as its master who were in command.

Led by an older man named Babo and his son Mori, the West Africans had seized control of the *Tryal* nearly two months earlier and executed most of its crew and passengers, along with the slave trader who was taking them to Lima. They then ordered Benito Cerreño, the vessel's owner and captain, to sail them to Senegal. Cerreño stalled, afraid of rounding Cape Horn with only a handful of sailors and a ship full of mutinous slaves. He cruised first up and then down the Chilean coast, before running into Delano's *Perseverance*. The slaves could have fought or fled. Instead, Babo came up with a plan. The West Africans let Delano come on board and they acted as if they were still slaves. Mori stayed at Cerreño's side and feigned to be a humble and devoted servant. Cerreño pretended he was still in charge, making up a story about storms, doldrums, and fevers to account for the state of his ship and the absence of any officer besides himself.

Delano didn't know what to make of Cerreño. He remained uneasy around him, even after he had convinced himself that he wasn't a brigand. Delano mistook Cerreño's vacant stare—the effect of hunger and thirst and of having lived for almost two months under a death threat, after having witnessed most of his crew being executed—for disdain, as if the aristocratic-looking Spaniard dressed in a velvet jacket and loosely fitting black pants, thought himself too good to converse with a pea-coated New Englander. The West Africans, especially the women, also made Delano uncomfortable, though he couldn't say why. There were nearly thirty females on board, among them older women, young girls, and about nine mothers with suckling infants. Once the food and water had been doled out, the women took their babies and gathered together in the stern, where they began singing a slow dirge to a tune Delano didn't recognize. Nor did he understand the words, though the song had the opposite effect on him than did the soothing mix of languages that had welcomed his arrival.

Then there was Cerreño's servant, Mori, who never left his master's side. When the two captains went below deck, Mori followed. When Delano asked Cerreño to send the slave away so they could have a word alone, the Spaniard refused. The West African was his "confidant" and "companion," he insisted, and Delano could speak freely in front of him. Mori was, Cerreño said, "captain of the slaves." At first, Delano was amused by the attentiveness Mori paid to his master's needs. He started, though, to resent him, vaguely blaming the black man for the unease he had felt toward Cerreño. Delano became fixated on the slave. Mori, he later wrote, "excited my wonder." Other West Africans, including Mori's father, Babo, were also always around, "always listening." They seemed to anticipate Delano's thoughts, hovering around him like a school of pilot fish, moving him first this way, then that. "They all looked up to me as a benefactor," Delano wrote in his memoir, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres*, published in 1817, still, twelve years after the fact, confusing how he thought the rebels saw him that day with how they actually did see him.

It was only in the late afternoon, around four o'clock, after his men had returned with the additional food and supplies, that the ploy staged by the West Africans unraveled. Delano was sitting in the stern of his away boat, about to return to the *Perseverance*, when Benito Cerreño leapt overboard to escape Mori and came crashing down at his feet. It was at that point, after hearing

Cerreño's explanation for every strange thing he saw on board the *Tryal*, that Delano realized the depth of the deception. He then readied his men to unleash a god-awful violence.¹

* * *

Over the years, this remarkable affair—in effect a one-act, nine-hour, full-cast pantomime of the master-slave relation performed by a group of desperate, starving, and thirsty men and women, most of whom didn't speak the language of their would-be captors—inspired a number of writers, poets, and novelists, who saw in the masquerade lessons for their time. The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, for example, thought the boldness of the slaves reflected the dissent of the 1960s. In the last years of his life, Neruda started first a long poem and then a screenplay that he called “Babo, the Rebel.” More recently the Uruguayan Tomás de Mattos wrote a Chinese box of a novel, *La Fragata de las máscaras*, which used the deception as a metaphor for a world where reality wasn't what was hidden behind the mask but the mask itself.²

But by far the most famous story inspired by the events on the *Tryal*, and one of the most haunting pieces of writing in American literature, is Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*. Whether he was impressed with the slaves' wile or intrigued by Amasa Delano's naïveté, Melville took chapter 18 of Amasa Delano's long memoir, “Particulars of the Capture of the Spanish Ship *Tryal*,” and turned it into what many consider his other masterpiece.

Melville uses the ghostly ship itself to set the scene, describing it as if it came not from the other side of the island but out of the depths, mantled in vapors, “hearse-like” in its roll, trailing “dark festoons of sea-grass,” its rusted main chain resembling slave chains and its ribs showing through its hull like bones. Readers know there is evil on board, but they don't know who or what it is or where it might lurk.³

Apart from a wholly invented ending, *Benito Cereno*, published in installments in a magazine called *Putnam's Monthly* in late 1855, is mostly faithful to Delano's account: after the ruse is revealed, the ship is captured and its rebels turned over to Spanish authorities. But it is what happened on the ship, which takes up two-thirds of the story, that led reviewers at the time to comment on its “weird-like narrative” and to describe reading it as a “creeping horror.”⁴

Most of *Benito Cereno* takes place in the fictional Delano's mind. Page after page is devoted to his reveries, and readers experience the day on board the ship—which was filled with odd rituals, cryptic comments, peculiar symbols—as he experiences it. Melville keeps secret, just as it was kept secret from Delano, the fact that the slaves are running things. And like the real Delano, Melville is transfixed by the Spanish captain's relationship to his black body servant. In the story, Melville combines the historical Babo and Mori into a single character called Babo, described as a slight man with an open face. The idea that the West African might not only be equal to the Spanish captain but be his master was beyond Delano's comprehension. Amasa observes Babo gently tending to the unwell Cereno, dressing him, wiping spittle from his mouth, and nestling him in his black arms when he seems to faint. “As master and man stood before him, the black upholding the white,” Melville writes, “Captain Delano could not but bethink him of the beauty of that relationship which could present such a spectacle of fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other.” At one point

Melville has Babo remind Cereno it is time for his shave and then has the slave psychologically torture the Spaniard with a straight razor, as Amasa, clueless, watches.

Melville wrote *Benito Cereno* midway between the critical and commercial failure of 1851 *Moby-Dick* and the beginning of the American Civil War in 1861, at a moment when it seemed like the author and the country were going mad. Crammed into one day and onto the deck of a middling sized schooner, the novella conveys a claustrophobia that could be applied either to Melville (he had at this point shuttered himself away from the world, in the “cold north” of his Berkshire farm) or to a nation trapped (as Amasa Delano was trapped) inside its own prejudices, unable to see and thus avert the coming conflict. Soon after he finished it, Melville collapsed and America went to war. It’s a powerful story.⁵

So powerful, in fact, that it is easy to forget that the original incident it is based on didn’t occur in the 1850s, on the eve of the Civil War, or in the usual precincts where historians of the United States study slavery, such as on a ship in the Atlantic or on a plantation. It happened in the South Pacific, five thousand miles away from the heartland of U.S. slavery, decades before chattel bondage expanded in the South and pushed into the West, and it didn’t involve a racist or paternalist slave master but instead a New England republican who opposed slavery. The events on the *Tryal* illuminate not antebellum America as it headed to war but an earlier moment, the Age of Revolution, or the Age of Liberty. The revolt took place in late 1804, nearly exactly midway between the American Revolution and the Spanish American wars for independence. 1804 was also the year Haiti declared itself free, establishing the second republic in the Americas and the first ever, anywhere, born out of a slave rebellion.

* * *

Writing in the 1970s, Yale’s Edmund Morgan was one of the first modern historians to fully explore what he called the “central paradox” of this Age of Liberty: it also was the Age of Slavery. Morgan was writing specifically about colonial Virginia, but the paradox can be applied to all of the Americas, North and South, the Atlantic to the Pacific, as the history leading up to and including events on the *Tryal* reveals. What was true for Richmond was no less so for Buenos Aires and Lima—that what many meant by freedom was the freedom to buy and sell black people as property.⁶

To be sure, Spain had been bringing enslaved Africans to the Americas since the early 1500s, long before subversive republicanism, along with all the qualities that a free man was said to possess—rights, interests, free will, virtue, and personal conscience—began to spread throughout America. But starting around the 1770s, the slave trade underwent a stunning transformation. The Spanish Crown began to liberalize its colonial economy and the floodgates opened. Slavers started importing Africans into the continent any which way they could, working with privateers to unload them along empty beaches and in dark coves, sailing them up rivers to inland plains and foothills, and marching them over land. Merchants were quick to adopt the new language associated with laissez-faire economics and demand the right to import even more slaves. And they didn’t mince words saying what they wanted: they wanted *más libertad, más comercio libre de negros*—more liberty, more free trade of blacks.

More slaves, including Babo, Mori, and the other *Tryal* rebels, came into Uruguay and Argentina

1804 than any year previous. By the time Amasa was cruising the Pacific, a “slavers’ fever,” as our historian has put it, had taken hold throughout the continent. Each region of America has its own history of slavery, with its own rhythms and high points. But taking the Western Hemisphere as a whole, what was happening in South America in the early 1800s was part of a New World explosion of chattel bondage that had started earlier in the Caribbean, and was well under way in Portuguese Brazil. After 1812, it would hit the southern United States with special force, with the movement of cotton and sugar into Louisiana and across the Mississippi, into Texas.

In both the United States and Spanish America, slave labor produced the wealth that made independence possible. But slavery wasn’t just an economic institution. It was a psychic and imaginative one as well. At a time when most men and nearly all women lived in some form of unfreedom, tied to one thing or another, to an indenture, an apprentice contract, land rent, a mill, a work house or prison, a husband or father, saying what freedom was could be difficult. Saying what it wasn’t, though, was easy: “a very Guinea slave.” The ideal of the free man, then, answerable to his own personal conscience, in control of his own inner passions, liberated to pursue his own interests—the rational man who stood at the center of an enlightened world—was honed against its fantasized opposite: a slave, bonded as much to his appetites as he was to his master. In turn, repression of the slave was an often repeated metaphor for the way reason and will must repress desire and impulse if one were to be truly free and be able to claim equal standing within a civilization of similarly free men.⁷

It might seem an abstraction to say that the Age of Liberty was also the Age of Slavery. But consider these figures: of the known 10,148,288 Africans put on slave ships bound for the Americas between 1514 and 1866 (of a total historians estimate to be at least 12,500,000), more than half—5,131,385, were embarked after July 4, 1776.⁸

* * *

The South Pacific *pas de trois* between the New Englander Amasa Delano, the Spaniard Benito Cerreño, and the West African Mori, choreographed by Babo, is dramatic enough to excite the wonder of any historian, capturing the clash of peoples, economies, ideas, and faiths that was New World America in the early 1800s. That Babo, Mori, and some of the rest of their companions were Muslim means that three of the world’s great monotheistic religions—Cerreño’s Catholicism, Delano’s Protestantism, and the West Africans’ Islam—confronted one another on the stage-ship.

Aside from its sheer audacity, what is most fascinating about the daylong deception is the way it exposes a larger falsehood, on which the whole ideological edifice of slavery rested: the idea not just that slaves were loyal and simpleminded but that they had no independent lives or thoughts or, if they did have an interior self, that it too was subject to their masters’ jurisdiction, it too was property, that what you saw on the outside was what there was on the inside. The West Africans used talents their masters said they didn’t have (cunning, reason, and discipline) to give the lie to the stereotypes of what they were said to be (dimwitted and faithful). That day on board the *Tryal*, the slave-rebels were the masters of their passions, able to defer their desires, for, say, revenge or immediate freedom, and to harness their thoughts and emotions to play their roles. Mori in particular, as a Spanish official

reviewing the affair later wrote, “was a man of skill who perfectly acted the part of a humble and submissive slave.”⁹

The man they fooled, Amasa Delano, was in the Pacific hunting seals, an industry as predator bloody, and, for a short time, profitable as whaling but even more unsustainable. It’s tempting to think of him as the first in a long line of American innocents abroad, oblivious to the consequences of their actions, even as they drive themselves and those around them to ruin. Delano, though, is a more compelling figure. Born in the great upswell of Christian optimism that gave rise to the American Revolution, an optimism that held individuals to be in charge of their destinies, in the next life and this, he embodied all the possibilities and limits of that revolution. When he first set out as a sailor from New England, he carried with him the hopes of his youth. He believed slavery to be a relic of the past, certain to fade away. Yet his actions on the *Tryal*, the descent of his crew into barbarism, and his behavior in the months that followed, spoke of a future to come.

* * *

Herman Melville spent nearly his whole writing career considering the problem of freedom and slavery. Yet he most often did so elliptically, intent, seemingly, on disentangling the experience from the particularities of skin color, economics, or geography. He rarely wrote about human bondage as a historical institution with victims and victimizers but rather as an existential, or philosophical, condition common to all. *Benito Cereno* is an exception. Even here, though, Melville, by forcing the reader to adopt the perspective of Amasa Delano, is concerned less with exposing specific social horrors than with revealing slavery’s foundational deception—not just the fantasy that some men were natural slaves but that others could be absolutely free. There is a sense reading *Benito Cereno* that Melville knew, or feared, that the fantasy wouldn’t end, that after abolition, if abolition ever came, would adapt itself to new circumstances, becoming even more elusive, even more entrenched in human affairs. It’s this awareness, this dread, that makes *Benito Cereno* so enduring a story—and Melville such an astute appraiser of slavery’s true power and lasting legacy.

I first learned that *Benito Cereno* was based on actual events when I assigned the novella for a seminar I taught on American Exceptionalisms. That class explored the ways an idea usually thought of exclusively in terms of the United States—that America had a providential mission, a manifest destiny, to lead humanity to a new dawn—was actually held by all the New World republics. I began to research the history behind *Benito Cereno*, thinking that a book that focused narrowly on the rebellion and ruse could nicely illustrate the role slavery played in such self-understandings. But the more I tried to figure out what happened on board the *Tryal*, and the more I tried to uncover the motives and values of those involved, of Benito Cerreño, Amasa Delano, and, above all, of Babo, Mori, and the other West African rebels, the more convinced I became that it would be impossible to tell the story—or, rather, impossible to convey the meaning of the story—without presenting its large context. I kept getting pulled further afield, into realms of human activity and belief not immediately associated with slavery, into, for instance, piracy, sealing, and Islam. That’s the thing about American slavery: it never was just about slavery.

In his memoir, Delano uses a now obsolete sailor's term, "horse market," to describe the explosive pileup of converging tides, strong enough to scuttle vessels. It's a good metaphor. That's what the people on board the *Tryal* were caught in, a horse market of crashing historical currents, of free trade, U.S. expansion, and slavery, and of colliding ideas of justice and faith. The different routes that led all those involved in the drama to the Pacific reveal the fullness of the paradox of freedom and slavery in America, so pervasive it could trap not just slaves and slavers but men who thought they were neither.

FAST FISH

First: What is a Fast-Fish? Alive or dead a fish is technically fast, when it is connected with an occupied ship or boat, by any medium at all controllable by the occupant or occupants,—a mast, an oar, a nine-inch cable, a telegraph wire, or a strand of cobweb, it is all the same.

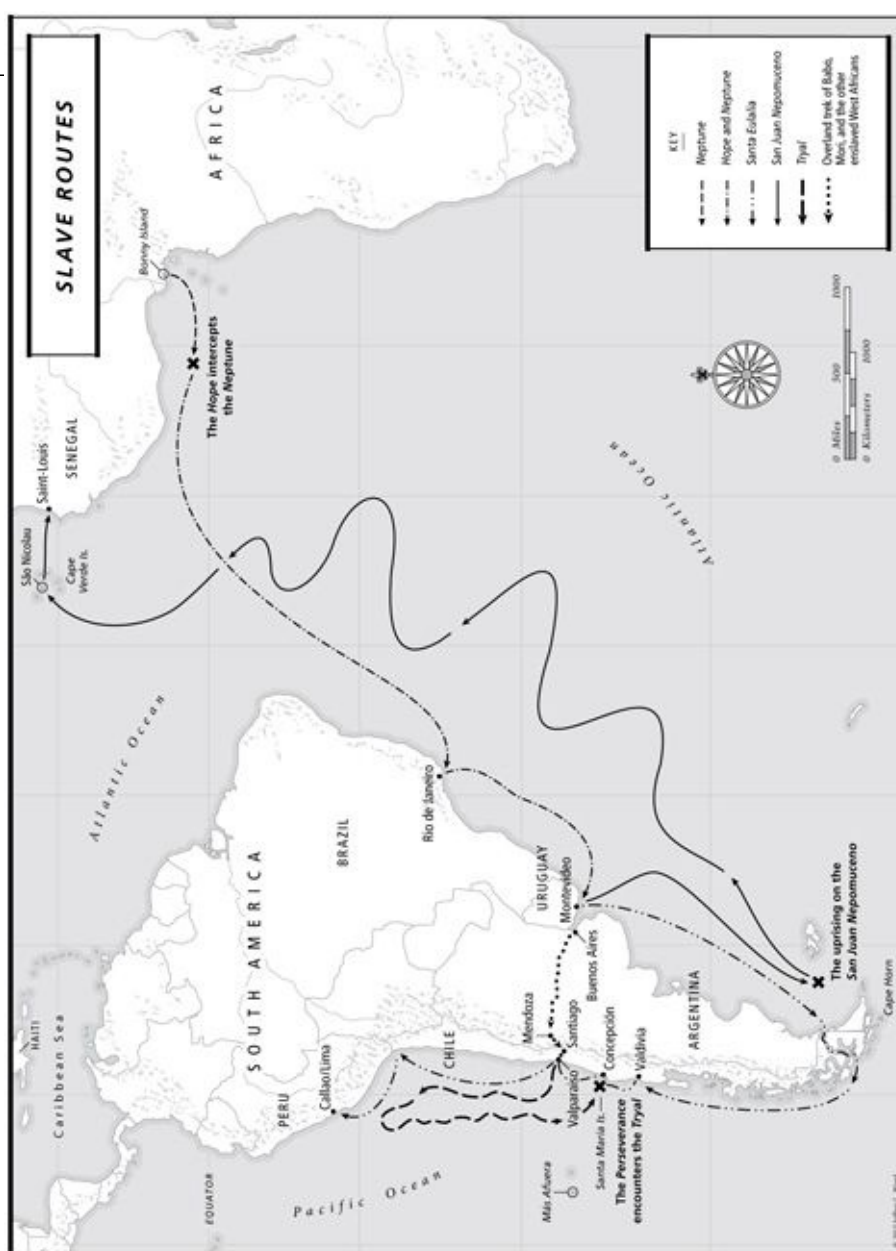
—HERMAN MELVILLE, *MOBY-DICK*

HAWKS ABROAD

In early January 1804, a one-armed French pirate cruised into Montevideo's harbor. The Spaniards in his multinational crew had trouble saying his name, so they called him Captain Manco—*manco* being the Spanish word for cripple. François-de-Paule Hippolyte Mordeille didn't mind the nickname. It was the rank he didn't like.

Mordeille was a seafaring Jacobin. He presided over men who wrapped red sashes around their waists, sang the "Marseillaise," and worked the deck to the rhythms of revolutionary chants. *Long live the republic! Perish earthly kings! String up aristocrats from the yardarms!* Commanding ships called *Le Brave Sans-Culottes*, *Révolution*, and *Le Démocrate*, he patrolled the coast of Africa from Île de France (now Mauritius) in the Indian Ocean to Senegal in the Atlantic, harassing the French Revolution's enemies and guarding its friends. Mordeille, true to his republican spirit, preferred to be addressed as *citoyen*—citizen—or *Citoyen Manco* if need be. But not *captain*.

Coming south from Brazil, Mordeille tacked to starboard and hugged the coastline as he entered Río de la Plata, the great water highway to Montevideo and Buenos Aires and points beyond. The broad sea gulf seemed welcoming. But it was shallow, shoaled, and rock strewn. Its fast-flowing tributaries—it was the mouth of several rivers—ran through some of the driest regions in South America, pouring tons of silty sediment into the estuary, raising sandbars, and rerouting sea lanes. Strong dark-cloud winds coming off the pampas were especially treacherous when they hit the water at low tide. Just a few years earlier a windstorm had wrecked eighty-six ships in a single blow. Even the north shore, considered the safest route in and along which Mordeille sailed, was known as "carpenter's coast," since woodworkers made a living salvaging the timber of washed-up broken ships.¹



Of Río de la Plata's two cities, Buenos Aires, located farther in on the south shore, was wealthier. But sailors preferred Montevideo on the north. It was littered with sunken hulls and still didn't have a wharf or a pier, but its harbor was deeper than the shallow riverbed off of Buenos Aires and thus preferable for loading and unloading cargo. Mordeille sailed in, driving his ship, the *Hope*, through the bay's muddy water to safe anchorage. Behind him came the *Neptune*, a prize Mordeille and his crew had taken near the Bight of Biafra.²

* * *

Copper-bottomed, teak-framed, three-masted, and three-decked, the 343-ton *Neptune* had a sharply angled cutwater topped with an ornately carved prow: a lion without a crown, as the Spaniards would later describe the figurehead. It was big and looked warlike. Its purpose, though, was to carry cargo and not to fight. It was no match for smaller, better-armed vessels like the *Hope*, a fact that its captain David Phillips, learned at great cost.

While the ship was anchored off Bonny Island, Phillips had heard reports that a French corvette

was cruising the sea lanes, standing between him and open water. But with his hold full, he decided to risk a confrontation and make for Barbados. When he saw the *Hope* coming in fast on portside, Phillips gave the order to run. But his pursuer was faster, sweeping the trader's bow, forcing it to give up the wind. Mordeille then boxhailed around, bracing his ship's sails and returning on the *Neptune*. Phillips was trapped.

If the objective was to destroy the target, the fight would have been over quickly. But the rules of privateering meant that Mordeille got to keep what the *Neptune* was carrying, so his men aimed the guns not at its hull but at its rigging. The firing continued as boys ran back and forth watering the *Hope's* deck to make sure blown powder didn't set it alight. A party of men readied themselves with boarding axes to take the *Neptune* by hand. The weapons weren't needed. A ball hit the rudder head, making it impossible to steer, and after about an hour more of firing, with eleven of his crew dead and another sixteen wounded, and his sails pocked and rigging frayed, Captain Phillips surrendered.

When Mordeille's men opened the *Neptune's* hatch, they found close to four hundred Africans—mostly boys and men between the ages of twelve and twenty-five, but also a number of women and children.

They were in chains and dressed in blue cotton smocks.

* * *

Spanish documents indicate that some of the *Tryal* rebels were among them. But they don't say who or how many. The name Mori was common for captives embarked at Bonny. According to one database of African names, of all the recorded men called Mori to leave Africa as slaves, a plurality of them—just under 37 percent, did so from Bonny. Variations of Babo—Baboo, Babu, Baba, and so forth—were likewise found among slaves put on ships at nearby ports. Court records give the names of one of thirteen other participants in the uprising, all men: Diamelo, Leobe, Natu, Quiamobo, Liché, Dic, Matunqui, Alasan, Yola, Yan, Malpenda, Yambaio, or Samba, and Atufal. The *Tryal's* fifty-seven other West African men and women remain anonymous.

Most of the men and women Mordeille found on the *Neptune* would already have traveled weeks in some cases months, moving along the trunks and tributaries of the enormous Niger, an ever-expanding grid reaching deep into the interior. Bonny was a popular station during these years, as big ships of considerable draft could anchor on the hard sand bed and take on large cargoes, as many as seven hundred Africans in some cases. The river was “spacious and deep,” reported one English sailor around the time the *Neptune* would have arrived, “wider than the Thames.” At any given moment there'd be a queue of up to fifteen vessels, many of them Liverpoolers, forming along the island shoreline, waiting for the black traders who came down from the inland once a fortnight. The traders would arrive in flotillas of twenty to thirty canoes, each holding as many as thirty captives, to be bartered for guns, gunpowder, iron, cloth, and brandy.³

The Europeans at Bonny and elsewhere in West Africa had no idea where the cargo came from. As late as 1803, the British Royal African Company instructed its agent in nearby Cape Coast Castle, on the Gold Coast west of Bonny, to survey the African merchants from whom they brought their slaves: “did they come to the coast in “small parties” or “caravans”? What were the names of the “towns

villages passed through”? Were the people in these towns “Mohamedans or pagans”? If they came from the “Great Desert,” “what were the names of their tribes?” If they came “from beyond the Niger,” what did “they know concerning its course”? Did they have any information about the “great chain of mountains that are reported to extend from Manding to Abyssinia”? The British had been on the Gold Coast for well over a hundred years—they had controlled Cape Coast Castle since 1664—and yet their agent could give only the vaguest answers to these questions.⁴

The Africans embarked at Bonny, even if their enslavers didn’t know their origins, had a reputation for being willful and prone to fatalism. Those two qualities might seem opposing but they often resulted in the same action: suicide. One ship surgeon, Alexander Falconbridge, in his 1788 condemnation of the slave trade, tells of fifteen slaves put on a ship at Bonny who, before the ship left port, threw themselves into a school of sharks. Another voyager on a Bonny slave ship, a young boy kept awake by the “howling of these negros,” described three captives who managed to break free and jump overboard: they were “dancing about among the waves, yelling with all their might what seemed to me to be a song of triumph” until their “voices came fainter and fainter upon the wind.”⁵

* * *

The *Neptune* was a Liverpool slave ship, which meant that, for Mordeille, its taking was more than potentially profitable. It was personal. The Frenchman had lost his arm escaping from a Spanish dungeon, but it was during a long lockup in Portsmouth, after having been captured by a Liverpool corsair, that he developed his “tenacious hatred” of the British.⁶

Liverpool had joined the fight against republicanism with exceptional fervor. When news arrived in early 1793 that the French had executed their king, Louis XVI, city fathers lowered the Union Jack that flew over the city’s Custom House to half mast. Mourning led to anger, and anger to action against the regicides, lest, warned one newspaper, the “red cap of liberty be raised, the flag of death unfurled, the Marseillaise chanted, the age of reason proclaimed, and the goddess and her guillotine be made permanent” in Piccadilly. Liverpool’s slavers, planters, and shippers financed a large mercenary fleet made up of about sixty-seven privateers, trim, fast ships mounted with twenty guns or better to take the fight against Jacobinism to the sea. For a time, French vessels were at their mercy.

But then Paris began to field its own privateers, including Mordeille, and Napoleon’s rise led to a marked improvement in the republic’s naval forces. By the time the *Hope* fell on the *Neptune*, France could not only better defend itself on the open sea but go on the offensive, harassing British cargo and slave ships as they traveled to and from Caribbean sugar plantations. Sailing under a Dutch flag with a French letter of marque, Mordeille was among the most tenacious of these avengers, hailed by the Napoleonic press as the scourge of Liverpool: “Mordeille! Mordeille! Small and frail, but in the breach he has the strength of heroes.”⁷

The *Neptune* was owned by John Bolton, one of the largest backers of the city’s mercenary fleet and an outfitter of a private anti-Jacobin squad of nearly six hundred men he named Bolton’s Invincibles, armed to protect Liverpool from enemies within and without. Born the “poor boy” son of a village apothecary, he started his career as an apprentice clerk in the West Indies, and legend has it that he parlayed a sack of potatoes and a brick of cheese into the start-up capital of what became

slaving empire. Leaving his “coloured” wife and children behind penniless in the Caribbean, he returned to Liverpool, splitting his time between the bustle of his Henry Street counting house and Storrs Hall, a country mansion built in the middle of an ornamental grove on a wooded promontory overlooking Windermere Lake, where he entertained Tory politicians and Romantic poets, including his friend William Wordsworth.

Bolton might have come into life humble, but the wealth produced by at least 120 slave voyages led him leave it in a fine coffin shrouded in black velvet and studded with silver nails. His funeral cortege included:

eight gentleman abreast, three hundred boys from the Blue Suit School six deep, two hundred and fifty Gentlemen on foot, six deep, sixty gentlemen on horseback, thirty gentlemen’s private carriages in a line. Several gigs.... Four mutes on horseback. Three mourning coaches, each drawn by four horses. Mr. Bolton’s private carriage, drawn by four, beautiful blood horses, bringing up the rear.

It was a Scouser send-off to remember, and observers thought the bells of St. Luke tolled with exceptional beauty the day Bolton was laid to earth.⁸

* * *

As they made ready to sail across the Atlantic, the *Hope* and the *Neptune* were floating contradictions of the Age of Revolution. On board one ship were enslaved Africans understood to be property, which meant that according to some interpretations of natural-law liberalism they could be bought, sold, and traded as cargo. On board the other, a multihued crew lived the French Revolution’s promise of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*. Europeans, mostly French and Spanish, worked alongside dark-skinned Portuguese mulattos and black Africans and Haitians who served as gunners and musketeers. They assigned no title to skin color and spoke an egalitarian patois sounding sort of like French but with traces of Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, and old *langue d’oc*, along with words picked up from around the Caribbean and the coasts of West and East Africa. Mordeille himself, born on the Mediterranean not far from Marseilles and a short sail from North Africa, was once described as “black as an Ethiopian.”⁹

The color line did not, strictly speaking, divide the Atlantic between masters and slaves. In the navies and merchant fleets of all the seafaring empires and republics at the time, men of color—among them, Africans, South Sea islanders, Arabs, Indians, Chinese, and freed American blacks—worked on ships, including slave ships, as cooks, cabin boys, sailors, and even, in a few instances, captains. Nor did white skin protect against the kind of arbitrary rule over body and will associated with chattel slavery. Press gangs roamed the wharves and piers of port cities throughout the British realm on the hunt for men to fill the ships of the Royal Navy, looking nothing so much as like the slave gangs that stalked the coasts and rivers of Africa.¹⁰

In Liverpool, the vanguard of merchant reaction, savage fellows patrolled the streets, often led by “dissipated, but determined-looking officer, in a very seedy uniform and shabby hat.” Men would flee and children scream upon catching sight of them. Word quickly went out that there were “hawk-

abroad.” Pity the poor sailor who didn’t keep his door bolted and shades drawn: “he was seized up as if he were a common felon, deprived of his liberty, torn from his home, his friends, his parents, his wife or children, hurried to the rendezvous-house, examined, passed, and sent on board the tender, like a negro to a slave-ship.”¹¹

Once at sea sailors were subject to rule as feudal as the ancien régime and as brutal as the plantation. They could be flogged, tarred, feathered, keelhauled—dunked in the ocean and dragged under the hull, barnacles doing to backs in a minute what it took the whip fifteen lashes—or executed made to walk the plank or hung by the yardarm. Even on ships like the *Hope*, which sailed with an insurgent élan and did away with rank, the authority of Mordeille, whether he be called citizen or captain, was absolute.¹²

The African slave trade, however, was a different kind of bondage. It not only survived the dawn of the Age of Liberty but was expanding and becoming even more lucrative. And so back on the *Neptune* after it had been secured, its dead heaved overboard, its British prisoners shackled, and its African cargo counted, Mordeille did the math and guessed that the ship’s slaves were worth, wholesale, at least 80,000 silver pesos (it’s nearly impossible to do a straight conversion into today’s currency, but this princely sum was roughly equal to the annual salaries of the viceroys of Mexico and Peru, the highest Spanish officials in the Americas).

It doesn’t seem that Mordeille gave much thought to the contradiction, the fact that he was a Jacobin believer in the rights of man and the liberties of the world who made his living seizing British slaves and selling them to Spanish American merchants. After all, he swore allegiance not to ideas but to the French nation, which had abolished slavery in its colonies in 1794 only to restore it eight years later. Napoleon’s 1802 announcement of its restoration was terse: “Slavery shall be maintained”; the slave trade “shall take place.” In any case, the revolution’s to-ing and fro-ing when it came to slavery and freedom mattered little to the privateer or, apparently, to his men.

When everything was ready on board the *Neptune*, the inventory complete, the rudder repaired, the damaged sails replaced, and the rigging redone, the two ships, the victor and its vanquished prize, sailed for Montevideo. The British, including the officers, had been placed in a hold, not the one that contained the Africans but a smaller one, below the *Neptune*’s quarterdeck.

* * *

Until about the 1770s, most Africans who made the Middle Passage to America didn’t travel much farther once they crossed the Atlantic. The main slave harbors of the Americas—New Orleans, Havana, Port-au-Prince, Alexandria, Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, Cartagena, Baltimore, and Charleston—were portals to coastal, river, and island plantations, haciendas, and cities where most of the captives who survived the voyage would spend the rest of their lives.

But the West Africans brought into Montevideo by Mordeille on the *Neptune* were arriving as part of slavery’s new extreme, the motor of a market revolution that was remaking Spanish America. They had already traveled more than five thousand miles from Bonny to Río de la Plata. They were about to be thrust into the wheels of mercantile corruption, though for them there would be no difference between what was called crime and what passed for commerce. And for those captives who would be

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