“A SUBTLER EXPRESSION”: MELVILLE’S HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE NON-EVENT

By

Petal Samuel

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

August, 2012

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

Professor Colin Dayan

Professor Dana Nelson

Introduction

"It is an implacable law that every decadent class finds itself turned into a receptacle into which there flow all the dirty waters of history; that it is a universal law that before it disappears, every class must first disgrace itself completely, on all fronts, and that it is with their heads buried in the dunghill that dying societies utter their swan songs." – Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*

"Happy would it be, if the man possessed in himself some receptacle for his own rubbish of this sort: but he is like the occupant of a dwelling whose refuse can not be clapped into his own cellar, but must be deposited in the street before his own door, for the public functionaries to take care of. No common-place is ever effectually got rid of, except by essentially emptying one's self of it into a book; for once trapped in a book, then the book can be put into the fire, and all will be well."
– Herman Melville, *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*

Césaire and Melville, writing a century apart, harmonize on the matter and metaphor of waste and the illusion of its effacement. For both writers, the search for "receptacles" of waste is the exposition of imperialism's imperfections and the exhumation of colonialism's corpses. Césaire's "dirty waters" and Melville's "rubbish" are invoked ironically as the detritus that is Western history and literature's deepest disgrace and foundational matter. As such, we are prompted to consider the complicity of both genres in the ongoing projects of colonial and neocolonial domination. In addition, by employing these genres to highlight the routes by which literary and historical "waste" is absented, these writers challenge Western cultural imperatives to suppress, silence, and distance oneself from that which resists prescribed narrative and cultural frameworks. "Receptacle" is a crucial operative term here, gesturing toward such processes of containment and quarantine. Césaire and

Melville point out to us: Such waste is *not* simply unsightly and incidental; it is *dangerous, subversive, and necessary*.

For Césaire, particular histories are quarantined and relegated to the ranks of “waste” via the mechanisms of a peculiarly Western mode of historiography. Melville, executing a more localized critique, compellingly suggests that historical waste finds its receptacle in literature. Placing these two passages alongside one another we may begin to delineate a cartography of historical quarantine, suppression, and silencing. If Césaire suggests to us that the waste Melville invokes is historical, Melville, in turn, suggests that literature can be mined for histories that have been suppressed or otherwise silenced. For both writers, however, the moment of the appearance of “waste" is the moment of its imminent destruction or absenting: for Césaire, “dying societies,” for Melville, a book about to be “put into the fire.” It is significant, then, that Melville’s *Pierre* is marked by literary critics as “trash” and signals the decline of Melville’s career as a novelist.

Placing these texts alongside each other, I emphasize the linguistic confluences between Césaire, a 20th century Caribbean anticolonial writer, and Melville, a 19th Century American writer with deep anxieties about the directions in which the nascent United States are developing. The implications of these connections are weighty: both in terms of the suggestion of a colonial legacy in which the United States is complicit and

in terms of the role of American literature in broader processes of historiographical suppression.

In this paper, I am hoping to respond, at least provisionally and partially, to the question[1]: “What was it about Melville that made his works so liberating for Caribbean and African-American writers?” I will contend that the mode in which Melville engages with historical archives, pushes the boundaries between fiction and history, and troubles traditional historiographical techniques of his time is central to the attractiveness of Melville’s works for peoples whose histories were, and continue to be, in the process of being vigorously suppressed. Through my engagement with Melville’s arguably most infamous text, *Pierre*, I argue that Melville practices a mode of literary historiography that converges with the historiographical techniques of Caribbean writers like CLR James, Aimé Césaire and Michel-Rolph Trouillot. Furthermore, I examine the critical reception of Melville’s narrative as exemplary of a public discourse of suppression that exposes the mechanisms of power in the production of both history and literature (which Trouillot takes up in depth in his *Silencing the Past*). In the process, these responses also reveal the cultural, political, and ideological anxieties of a mid-19th century United States on the brink on civil war. In a Trouillotian sense, I seek to mine Melville’s work not particularly to imbue moments of silence and ambiguity

[1] This is a question that Dr. Colin Dayan posed to our Melville class upon our introduction in September.

with a set of meanings, but to, as Trouillot notes: “make the silences speak for themselves.” (Trouillot, 27)

Muddling Genealogies, Disrupting National Fiction

In the introduction to *Mariners, Renegades, and* Castaways, C.L.R. James’ 1952 collection of critical essays on Melville’s work, James notes: “The miracle of Herman Melville is this: that a hundred years ago in two novels, *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*, and two or three stories, he painted a picture of the world in which we live, which is to this day unsurpassed.” (James, 175) Writing while in detainment at Ellis Island, James’ statement here appears contradictory to mid-19th century literary critiques of *Pierre* as “false to nature.” Pierre, the main character of the novel, is a rustic, aristocratic beauty with a special tie to the birth of the nation—his grandfather, a Major-General in the Revolutionary War. However, despite his lofty heritage, Pierre is seemingly fated to suffer a steep fall from social grace: engaging in incest, discovering the blemish of an ambiguously raced half-sister, leaving the pure and idyllic countryside for the city brimming with a hodgepodge of immigrant populations cast as racial and ethnic Others, and eking out a living writing work highly incendiary to the literary and moral sensibilities of his publishers. In a sense, there appears to be something excessive, radical, and deeply idiosyncratic about Pierre and his world that plays itself out even on the level of Melville’s lush and imaginative language: Pierre appears as little more than a fictional

aberration in the face of a realer fictional archetype[2]. For James, however, the reality of *Pierre* rests in national allegory: “the old America was passing and a new America was taking its place in a turmoil that grew increasingly.” (James, 92) If we take James up on the suggestion of allegory within *Pierre*, we find ourselves observing the decline of a figure destined to embody an iconic Americanness. But he is revealed not to ever have been that which his nascent nation demanded of him: a morally incorruptible emblem of the state and defender of the American aristocracy. Pierre’s exile from Saddle Meadows into the city, in fact, is figured to be the result of Pierre’s misplaced national and economical loyalties, which have been commanded by the wrong parties (i.e. – Isabel).

The triumphalist narrative of the Revolutionary War and the invocation of the Founding Fathers, however, is also implicated in the fall: Pierre’s legacy does very little to guard against or rescue him from moral, social, and economic bankruptcy. James claims that he reads Melville as interrogating “the conditions of survival of modern civilization” (James, 20). Therefore, may we read Pierre’s failure to survive as intimately linked to his inability to meet these moral, social, and national conditions? James’

[2] Here, I gesture toward the fact that Pierre is called “false to nature”—a statement which intuits that there exist literary expectations for characters to reflect a set of behaviors that the audience finds “natural.” It is intriguing that there seem to exist hierarchies of “reality,” even within fiction. Thus, in this statement, I reflect briefly on the extraordinary fact that Pierre is “false to nature” not only within the scope of reality, but also within the scope of the “nature” of fictional worlds.

outlining of conditions of survival implicates the ideological processes that produce these very conditions, with particular emphasis on historiography. In other words, it is the manner in which the Revolutionary War and the "Founding Fathers", for instance, are written into history that is problematized. If *Pierre* is, as James alleges, the true legacy of the founding fathers, then a correlative question appears: how must figures like the founding fathers be written into the archive in order to make a character like Pierre impossible, or "false to nature"? Here in placing James and Melville alongside one another, I turn our attentions specifically to the ideological mechanisms of historical production, which Trouillot locates as the site where we may observe "the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others." (Trouillot, 25)

Furthermore, Melville's critique extends beyond Pierre as inheritor of the legacy of the founding fathers to the metaphorical "founding father" himself—Pierre Glendinning Sr—the first "silence" that I seek to mine. Melville's construction of Pierre's grandfather simultaneously renders him prominent, and yet obscures his body. As important a figure as Pierre's grandfather is, we never see him in person because the narrative takes place after his death. The narrator's recollection of Pierre's grandfather employs mythic language, recounting him as an inordinately large, "majestic soul," (Melville, 30) and his image is idolatrously enshrined in the Glendinning household. The reader is not offered any further proof of

Pierre's grandfather's existence, other than the narrator's folkloric accounts, Pierre's veneration of his legacy, and the landscape of Saddle Meadows, which is figured as bearing a geological memory of the Revolutionary War. Neither Pierre nor his mother ever explicitly seems to engage personal memories of him; rather the mnemonic responsibilities fall to the narrator. A slave owner and hero of the revolutionary war, he is described as both brave and humble, gentle and righteously ferocious against Native Americans. Pierre's grandfather's narrative of American exceptionalism thus resembles a very familiar American character archetype, and still yet reads as quite mythological or even fictional.

In a scene where the narrator recounts Pierre's relationship to his grandfather's legacy, he/she notes: "The grandfather of Pierre measured six feet four inches in height….Pierre had often tried on his military vest, which still remained an heirloom at Saddle Meadows, and found the pockets below his knees, and plenty additional room for a fair-sized quarter-cask within its buttoned girth." (Melville, 29) In a deeply self-reflective move, Pierre tests the extent to which he can, as a manner of speaking, fill his grandfather's shoes (or vest, in this instance) and falls profoundly short. With the pockets reaching his knees and more space than he can fill, Pierre is physically unable to embody his grandfather's legacy in the way he hopes to, or perhaps believes he is expected to. But Melville does little to corroborate Pierre's lineage, or even the very existence of Pierre's grandfather. If Pierre's grandfather (and by

extension, the nation’s founding fathers) represent a sort of American nationalistic ideal, the perfect patriots and the symbols of the republic, then the Glendinning family’s (and by extension, other Americans’) performances of national belonging are simulacra. Melville critically examines the genealogy of national belonging, and not only concludes that the metaphorical shoes are difficult to fill, but questions whether the shoes ever existed at all.

In a review of *Pierre* in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, a critic notes:

"'The truth is, Mr. Melville's theory is wrong. It should be the object of fiction to delineate life and character either as it is around us, or as it ought to be. Now, Pierre never did exist, and it is very certain that he never ought to exist. Consequently, in the production of Pierre, Mr. Melville has deviated from the legitimate line of the novelist.'" (Melville, 386)

As a corollary, it seems that Pierre’s grandfather should elicit as least as much, if not more, interrogation of his truth-value as a character as Pierre does. However, as the *Southern Literary Messenger* critic notes, the question of what “ought to exist” is exemplary of Trouillot’s interrogation of power and the production of history—any pretense at foregrounding historicity and facticity is dismantled as the critic invokes this process of moral qualification and exercise of power inherent to the critics’ “ought.”

Furthermore, the branches of genealogy that Melville chooses to examine, as well as his criteria for exacting such an interrogation, are unconventional and—from the perspective of his literary critics—outright

ridiculous. In one moment, the familial relationships that we take for granted as legitimate and authentic—for instance, Pierre's relationship with his mother—are questioned seemingly unnecessarily. As the narrator notes:

> "In the playfulness of their unclouded love, and with that strange license which a perfect confidence and mutual understanding at all points had long bred between them, they were wont to call each other brother and sister….nor when thrown among strangers was this mode of address ever suspected for a sportful assumption; since the amaranthineness of Mrs. Glendinning fully sustained this youthful pretension." (Melville, 5)

Coupled with Pierre's romantic jealousy and open hostility to Mrs. Glendinning's suitors, our understandings of propriety and convention within an aristocratic mother-son relationship are confounded. In the next moment, however, Melville's characters take for granted (seemingly using the wrong criteria for verification) the legitimacy of other genealogical ties that seem to most desire documentation and corroboration.

Melville poses a powerful challenge to genealogy-mapping that hearkens to Glissant's thoughts on genealogy and origins in his *Caribbean Discourse*: "The idea of creolization demonstrates that henceforth it is no longer valid to glorify 'unique' origins that the race safeguards and prolongs. In Western tradition, genealogical descent guarantees racial exclusivity, just as Genesis legitimizes genealogy." (Glissant, 111) Glissant's reading of genealogy as a mode of securing racial purity suggests a deep anxiety within the Glendinning family of racial mixture. The cast of portraits hung in the Glendinning household, which serve the

purposes of tracing a sort of genealogy, now appear ineffectual at performing the task to which they were assigned. While Stephanie Smallwood, in her *Saltwater Slavery*, suggests that “for the commoners and slaves history and genealogy were not particularly reliable or useful anchors of identity” (Smallwood, 114), Melville’s work here, resonating with both Glissant and Smallwood, suggests that all Western genealogy more broadly is arbitrary and falsifiable. In his troubling of genealogy, Melville hearkens to another set of histories with which his characters seem to be in conversation: Afro-diasporic histories.

Reading the Unthinkable in the Landscape

We are groomed for the spectral, lifeless Isabel and the unthinkability of her narrative with Melville’s description of the landscape surrounding Isabel’s house. Her house is positioned on a lake whose description echoes the language of silence and death that hovers around Isabel: “Beyond, the lake lay in one sheet of blankness and of dumbness, unstirred by breeze or breath; fast bound there it lay, with not life enough to reflect the smallest shrub or twig.” (Melville, 109) The visual and sonic modes of “blankness” and “dumbness,” as we know, reverberate powerfully and repeatedly around Isabel who frequently falls “dumb” during her narration. In light of Trouillot’s formulations, however, it is especially compelling that “blankness” is coupled with “dumbness.” The synesthesia here does not invoke a total void or absence, as “blankness”

alone may suggest. Rather, the inclusion of "dumbness," suggesting the absence of a discursive context, indicates that these silences and absences are loaded with meaning that yet remains unspeakable.

Interestingly enough, however, the lake's blankness and dumbness is disturbed only by its reflection of sunlight: "Yet in that lake was seen the duplicate, stirless sky above. Only in sunshine did that lake catch gay, green images; and these but displaced the imaged muteness of the unfeatured heavens." (Melville, 109) What does it mean that seemingly legible and effable images[3] such as "sunshine," and "green images" are but "displacements" of *already* "mute" and "unfeatured" heavens? Melville seems to indicate "muteness," "blankness," and "dumbness" as original states of signs in nature. Melville constructs a complex allegory here of how the "effable" comes to be. All is ineffable, until "displaced" by the effable—the true artifice is the articulable, those signs loaded with prescribed connotation and meaning.

This scene's theorization of the dialectic between ineffable and effable inflects, in some ways, the way we regard Isabel's position in Saddle Meadows. May we read Melville as proposing here that perhaps Isabel, in all her unintelligibility, is an outlier and anomaly amidst the cast of Saddle Meadows because of similar processes of displacement and artifice? Privilege in Saddle Meadows is rooted in and contingent upon

[3] Here, I gesture toward the coupling of "gay" with the "sunshine" and "green images." Melville suggests here that there is a prescribed set of cultural connotations—"gaiety," for instance—that governs the way we make sense of such visual cues as "sunshine" and "green" foliage.

artificially derived standards of normativity, legibility, and propriety that ultimately masks and suppresses that which is ineffable in every character. A direct illustration of the suppression of the ineffable in a character would be the suppression of one portrait of Pierre's father—one possessed of a "subtile element" that makes it "*namelessly* unpleasant and repelling" (Melville, 72, my italics) to Pierre's mother—in favor of another. The operative term in the preceding quote is "namelessly"—Pierre's mother cannot name, or articulate, that which troubles and haunts her. The term "element" invokes both the abstract and the essential or fundamental. The danger of the portrait is that its ineffability is not a trick of artistic interpretation; it is that it captures something "elementary" in Pierre's father that his more meticulously posed and crafted portraits hide more successfully.

The authoritative portrait of Pierre's father that hangs in the Glendinning household does work to obscure and suppress ambiguities—the "strange, ambiguous smile" and "unchastened light" (Melville, 83) of Pierre's father's mien. As Pierre tries to make sense of the alternate portrait, which he hides in his bedroom, he imagines his father, as depicted in the alternate portrait, narrating to him: "In mature life, the world *overlays* and *varnishes* us, Pierre; the thousand properties and polished finenesses and grimaces intervene, Pierre; then, we, as it were, abdicate ourselves, and take unto us another self." (Melville, 83, my italics)

The story of the Glendinning family, and by extension all of Saddle Meadows' aristocratic families, is a narrative of the superficial—of how to preserve the "overlay;" of how to train the ineffable self to misrecognize itself as unnatural, inarticulable, or nonexistent; and of how to embrace and exile others accordingly. The local narrative is one of family secrets and disturbed propriety, but the metanarrative begs the question: If the modes of identification that engender privilege and unprivilege are but "varnish," is it then possible for varnish or overlay to be removed? For ineffability to be embraced? And what are the consequences? *Pierre* theorizes these questions bleakly, presenting us with non-conventional characters that meet untimely and violent ends. Therefore, one of the many subversive gestures of Pierre—one implicated in its subtitle, "The Ambiguities"—is its ambition to peel back this overlay, and thereby lay bare the sociopolitical processes that undergird "intelligibility" and its descendant, normativity.

The lake whose "blankness" and "dumbness" is temporarily "displaced" by "gay, green images" that further mask the "muteness of the heavens themselves, is yet another local instance in a lineage of masking, suppression, and rewriting. The ineffable is not only present within every character in Saddle Meadows but also in the very landscape itself. Melville demonstrates here that this is not only the mode by which we make sense of each other, but also how we make sense of our surroundings. Indeed, "nature" and landscape plays a crucial role in questions of normativity and

the “natural” or “unnatural”—it is the very language we use to buttress notions of belonging, and is the testing ground for our experiments in effability—as demonstrated by the “gay, green images” that displace the “mute, unfeatured heavens.”

As Pierre proceeds, the narrator observes what appears to be a decadent landscape: with “owl-haunted depths of caves,” “rotted leaved,” “unused and unregarded inland overgrowth of decaying wood,” and “palsied trees.” (Melville, 110) Again, tropes of the ghostly, decay, and death abound and extend to the landscape. However, there is also a notable sort of anthropomorphism that occurs in the description of an “inhumane” forest that moans, mutters, and roars: “from out the infinite inhumanities of those profoundest forests, came a moaning, muttering, roaring, intermitted, changeful sound.” (Melville, 110) The invocation of “inhumanity” here is especially compelling, as it illustrates the sense of nature and the landscape being the testing ground for modes of managing human beings. What determinations are being made here about what is “inhumane”? Again, I contend that ineffability has much to do with how we might answer this question. The score of noises the forest produces simultaneously do not project a clear image of what kind of site the forest is. Rather, it is a site of ambivalent pain and/or pleasure (“moaning”), of unintelligible messages (“muttering”), and of that which is inconsistent and indeterminate (“intermittent,” “changeful”). It seems, interestingly enough, that it is this very ambiguity that makes the forest “inhumane.”

Finally, the ghostly is again invoked with the description of the "devilish gibberish of the forest-ghosts." (Melville, 110) The invocation of "haunting" and the ghostly in particular marks, as Avery Gordon argues in her *Ghostly Matters*, the presence of the repressed in the moment of its resurgence. Gordon notes:

"What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. I used the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view….Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way, I tried to suggest, we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us." (Gordon, xvi)

Here, Gordon's framework encourages a reading of the landscape as signaling and foreshadowing the return of Isabel's suppressed history, Pierre's father's and Ned's respective infidelities (as embodied in Isabel and Delly Ulver), and the implication of the Haiti in Isabel's narrative of her past (to which I will return). However, Gordon also encourages us to think about the way Pierre's own estrangement from Saddle Meadows in this scene is indicative of a broader resurgence of suppressed histories occurring throughout Saddle Meadows. While Pierre's estrangement from his surroundings here foreshadows his ultimate exile from Saddle Meadows, thinking of this moment as the resurgence of the insufficiently

repressed histories embedded in the landscape of Saddle Meadows and its communities refigures Pierre's exile. With Gordon in mind, Pierre's permanent estrangement from his household and from Saddle Meadows reads both as a punishment for Pierre's social transgression and a sign of Saddle Meadows' inability to maintain its own processes of suppression and containment. In other words, Pierre's departure is not simply an exclusive symbol of his own fall from moral grace, but yet another symptom of the decadence of Saddle Meadows as a whole[4].

As Pierre moves through the landscape he is not only overcome with "sensations which transcend all verbal renderings," (Melville, 111) but both his sense of place and his imagination fail him: "Pacing beneath the long-skirting shadows of the elevated wood…Pierre strangely strove to imagine to himself the scene which was destined to ensue. But imagination utterly failed him here; the reality was too real for him….And now the thicker shadows begin to fall, the place is lost to him." (Melville, 111) Here, we witness again the return of the ineffable in Pierre's inability to imagine his conversation with Isabel. Here, Pierre thinks of Isabel as a "reality" that is "too real" to be articulable—concerning Isabel, his mechanisms for making sense of reality fail. What is it about her—and as we note later on, her narrative—that makes her impossible to narrate?

[4] This comes to fruition with the segmenting of Lucy's family as she joins Pierre in the city and the extermination of the Glendinning line with the deaths of Pierre, Mrs. Glendinning, Glen Stanly, and Isabel.

Upon close reading the landscape surrounding Isabel's house, her litany of pauses, her characterization as deathlike and spectral, and her general sense of overwhelm at the ineffable or the irreconcilable no longer reads in isolation, but rather, as intimately connected to her landscape. The narrator even describes Isabel's house as entangled with the natural in certain ways: "Its ancient roof a bed of brightest mosses; its north front…also moss-incrusted, like the north side of any vast-trunked maple in the groves." (Melville, 110) Again, there is a way in which the natural comes to serve as the stage for negotiating issues of effability. It is notable and very suspicious, however, that these invocations of the ineffable seem to coalesce around Isabel. What of the content of Isabel's narrative, or her lineage, of her past, of her relationship to Pierre cannot afford expression? These questions warrant a critical turn to the Western historiography of the Haitian Revolution and a close reading of Isabel's narrative of origins.

Inscribing Haiti

The histories of slavery and revolution are central to Melville's genealogical and historiographical interrogations as they extend to Pierre's half-sister, Isabel, who is characterized as "dark-haired," "olive-skinned," a "specter," and otherwise "inhuman." A central moment where this becomes visible is when Isabel recounts the narrative of her origins to Pierre. Prior to the opening of the narrative, Pierre's descriptions of Isabel are rife with the language of death and silence. As the narrator notes of

Pierre: “he now gazed upon the death-like beauty of the face, and caught immortal sadness from it. She seemed as dead; as suffocated,—the death that leaves most unimpaired the latent tranquilities and sweetnesses of the human countenance.” (Melville, 112)

In addition to the contention that Isabel appears to Pierre as the living dead—associating with Isabel connotations of unreality—he notes that she appeared to be “suffocated,” accentuating an impairment of her voice. The metaphor of silence persists throughout her narrative, which is rife with pauses and gaps, and segments of which, she notes: “ hint vaguely of a ship at sea.” (Melville, 117) Furthermore, Isabel displays a profound inability to situate herself geographically, identify the people around her, or decipher the events she has witnessed. Isabel narrates: “’But all is dim and vague to me. Scarce know I at any time whether I tell you real things, or the unrealest dreams. Always in me, the solidest things melt into dreams, and dreams into solidities. Never have I wholly recovered from the effects of my strange early life.” (Melville, 117) Pierre’s aunt suggests to him that Isabel’s mother is a refugee from the French Revolution. However, the silences, the unreality, the ship which transports her to a mountainous landscape “on this side of the sea,” her endowment with markers of racial hybridity, and the general inarticulateness of her life narrative deeply suggest, on Trouillotian terms, that Isabel is, perhaps, linked to Haiti. Trouillot discusses the Haitian revolution as a “non-event” lacking a discursive context for its articulation. As Trouillot notes,

"Thus not surprisingly, as Western historiographies remain heavily guided by national—if not always nationalist—interests, the silencing of Saint-Domingue/Haiti continues in historical writings otherwise considered as models of the genre. The silence is also reproduced in the textbooks and popular writings that are the prime sources on global history for the literate masses in Europe, in the Americas, and in large chunks of the Third World." (Trouillot, 98)

Trouillot's work suggests not only that the unspeakability and unthinkability of Isabel's origins is an indication of an event that lacks a discursive context for its articulation, but that "popular writing," and not only explicitly historical texts, are implicated as sites for the production of history and the reproduction of suppressive and silencing historiographical techniques.

The implications of Trouillot's formulation extend not only beyond Isabel's narrative and her exclusion from the Glendinning legacy, but also to the ambiguities embedded in Pierre's family narrative. The suggestion of Isabel's link to the Haitian Revolution forces us to consider the radical implications of the inclusion of Haiti in both the all-American Glendinning bloodline and the cast of Saddle Meadows. Melville, here, places a valorized and mythologized narrative of an independent American republic alongside the "non-event" of the Haitian Revolution, in the service of muddying the notion of a pure national heritage. At the very least, we are left with the understanding of the Glendinning lineage as far more complex and creolized than the narrator initially suggests. Setting these two events on par with each other within a discourse of successful revolution implicates an important cast of characters—North American slaves—that

are often denied the valor of inclusion in the American exceptionalist narrative. The forced silence of these crucial characters foreshadows the anxieties of a society largely dependent on slave labor and on the brink of civil war. It is furthermore significant that this political climate is aggravated by the challenges the Haitian Revolution posed to the dominant ontological discourse surrounding African diasporic blacks: a discourse that Isabel consistently hearkens toward as she straddles the line between human and non-human.

Letting the Silences Speak: Interpreting Isabel's Narrative

The mystery of Isabel, or "the mystic girl" (Melville, 112) as the narrator invokes her, commences with the return of the "subtile element" of Pierre's father's hidden portrait: "Pierre now for an instant eyes her; and in that one instant sees in the imploring face not only the *nameless* touchingness of that sewing-girl, but also the *subtler expression* of the portrait of his then youthful father, strangely translated, and intermarryingly blended with some before unknown, foreign feminineness." (Melville, 112, my italics) The inarticulable "element" is made manifest in Isabel's mien in a way that hearkens to the portrait, and yet offers a distinct departure from the portrait's narrative. National and cultural affiliations are invoked and muddled in the figure of Isabel in a way they seem not to have been in the portrait of Pierre's father. Isabel's features are "intermarryingly blended" and gesture toward a "foreign feminineness," suggesting that Isabel's

foreign features are matrilineal. Melville makes an interesting distinction here between the “subtile element” of Pierre’s father and the “unknown, foreign feminineness” of Isabel—whatever is ineffable about Pierre’s father is not a feature that calls into question his national, cultural, or ethnic affiliations in the way Isabel’s features call her affiliations into question.

On one hand, there is a sense in which Pierre’s father’s “subtile element” is isolated from “foreignness,” suggesting that his ineffability is contingent upon another set of traits apart from his national or cultural affiliation. On the other hand, there is a compelling way in which Isabel’s “foreign” mother becomes identifiable as the source of ineffability: Pierre’s father’s portrait is inferred to have been painted at the height of his affair with Isabel’s mother, yielding the “subtile element” so distasteful to Mrs. Glendinning; Isabel’s foreignness is also traced through her matrilineal bloodline. Therefore, Melville leaves us unable to definitively trace the “source” of ineffability, but with a marked sense that there is something profoundly estranging, troubling, and inarticulable about Isabel’s national, cultural, and/or ethnic mother’s background.

Earlier in the narrative, as Pierre’s aunt, Dorothea, narrates to him the story of his father’s alternate portrait, she suggests that the woman with whom Pierre’s father has an affair is a refugee from the French Revolution: “’About this time there arrived in the port, a cabin-full of French emigrants of quality;—poor people, Pierre, who were forced to fly from

their native land, because of the cruel, blood-shedding times there.'" (Melville, 75) Young Pierre responds immediately, citing his knowledge of the French Revolution, for which his aunt lauds him. However, directly afterward, Dorothea narrates the story of a woman implied to be Isabel's mother, "'whose sad fate afterward made a great noise in the city, and made many eyes to weep, but in vain, for she was never heard of any more.'" (Melville, 75) As she embarks upon this narrative, Pierre notes that his aunt's voice suddenly becomes "very strange" (Melville, 76)—a fact that his aunt attributes to the hoarseness of her voice due to a cold. Though seemingly a passing relief from the narration of Isabel's mother's story, I contend that there is something suspicious and loaded about the fact that Aunt Dorothea's *voice*, of all things, is compromised as she begins to narrate Isabel's mother. The change in her voice is so marked that Pierre begs her: "'don't talk that way; you frighten me so, aunt.'" (Melville, 76)

This troubling of Aunt Dorothea's voice echoes later on in the narrative when Pierre writes a letter to Lucy in preparation to meet with Isabel in the evening. In the letter, he attempts to explain in the vaguest possible terms that he will be unable to meet with Lucy due to his rendezvous with Isabel. However, as he glances over the note, he is momentarily unable to read his own writing: "He folded the note, and was about sealing it, when he hesitated a moment, and instantly unfolding it, read it to himself. But he could not adequately comprehend his own

writing, for a sudden cloud came over him." (Melville, 93)[5] What are we to make of the characters that become unintelligible, whose voices or words are compromised or rendered ineffectual upon literal or rhetorical contact with or proximity to Isabel or her mother?

It is in these instances of narrating Isabel and her past that it becomes important to examine the historiography of the Haitian Revolution as outlined by writers such as C.L.R. James and Michel-Rolph Trouillot—because of the way the unthinkable rests central to both narratives. As Trouillot famously asks:

> "If some events cannot be accepted even as they occur, how can they be assessed later? In other words, can historical narratives convey plots that are unthinkable in the world within which these narratives take place? How does one write a history of the impossible?...to what extent has modern historiography of the Haitian Revolution—as part of a continuous Western discourse on slavery, race, and colonization—broken the iron bonds of the philosophical milieu in which it was born?" (Trouillot, 82-3)

Trouillot foregrounds here the idea that the narratives that bear the mark of the ineffable are often the ones that pose the most challenging questions to the archive and to the ideological foundations of the society corroborated by such an archive.

Isabel's narrative appears to us in two parts and three locations[6]: the first "a wild, dark house" in the "middle of deep stunted pine woods" in

[5] It is also notable that a few lines later, Pierre is also described as being an embalmed corpse: "Pierre went forth all redolent; but alas! his body only the embalming cerements of his buried dead within." (Melville, 94)
[6] Isabel questions over the course of her narrative whether she was in more locations than three; however, she, again, leaves this fact indeterminate for the reader.

an unknown location in Europe (Melville, 114); the second a “very large house,” “in this country; on this side of the sea,” “in some lowland,” with “cultivated fields about it” (Melville, 118); the third, a “much smaller…sweetly quiet” house a two-day drive away from the second house (Melville, 121-2). The transition from the first house to the second is marked by a trans-Atlantic journey: “most of these dim remembrances in me, hint vaguely of a ship at sea.” (Melville, 117) Many of the landscapes Isabel invokes in her recollections bear little topographical or climatological resemblance to the landscape of Haiti: for instance, she speaks about the experience of the “deep snows” of winter in her first house. (Melville, 114) However, there is a way in which the language of the Western archive’s treatment of the Haitian Revolution reverberates throughout Isabel’s narrative. The possibilities of Haiti’s positioning in Isabel’s narrative are endless: it is just as possible that Haiti was a stop on her trans-Atlantic journey as it is that her mother was a refugee from the Haitian Revolution rather than the French Revolution, as Aunt Dorothea suggests. However, the geography of her journey is deliberately left vague—rather it is the language of absenting, the attempted articulation of the unspeakable[7], that hearkens most concretely to the relevance of Haitian historiography to Isabel’s narrative.

---

[7] It is important to acknowledge that Isabel regards music to be the most appropriate medium for the articulation of her narrative. As she notes: “All the wonders are translated in the mysterious melodiousness of the guitar.” (Melville, 125) Much work remains to be done on what Colin Dayan terms to be the “ritual” of Isabel’s narrative performance and the way her

Thus, it is imperative that we regard with critical attention the most striking lines in the opening of Isabel's narrative: "I seem not of woman born. My first dim life-thoughts cluster round an old half-ruinous house in some region, for which I now have no chart to seek it out. If such a spot did ever really exist, that too seems to have been withdrawn from all the remainder of the earth." (Melville, 114) Not only does Isabel suggest that her place of origin is one that cannot be conceived within the framework of (Western) cartography, she furthermore suggests that she cannot map herself ontologically within the framework of heteronormative or matrifocal familial narratives of birth and upbringing. Isabel, for all rights and purposes, was raised without any notion of the sort of relationships traditionally suggestive of the Western framework of "family"—she, rather, describes herself as a prisoner, an animal, a nonentity—in the cabin in which she was raised. It is notable, albeit connected to her inability to map her surroundings, that Isabel is unaware of her status as a human being until much later in her life. Whatever Isabel's sites or circumstances of upbringing, Isabel's narrative seems muddled and unintelligible from the start. Yet, while this is attributed to the failings of her own memory, perhaps we may consider that Isabel's narrative, as Trouillot notes in his discussion of the unthinkable, "cannot [be] conceive[d] within the range of possible alternatives…perverts all answers because it defies the terms under which the questions were phrased." (Trouillot, 82) Perhaps then, we

---

spirituality is articulated, particularly via her relationship with her guitar and her invocation of periodic, reflective silences.

may ask ourselves: what questions do we as readers, as well as Pierre, ask of Isabel's narrative? Melville anticipates the mechanisms by which his audience rendered others intelligible: via questions of national, familial, cultural, and linguistic belonging, among others. By denying us satisfying answers to all of these questions, Melville, as Trouillot suggests, perhaps infers not that Isabel is an anomaly, but rather, that we are asking *the wrong questions*—that the terms under which we ask the questions do not allow us the conceptual framework for understanding Isabel's narrative. As a corollary, I would contend: If our questions can only render Isabel intelligible as a certain *kind* of person (with particular kinds of national and cultural loyalties), it is unsurprising, then, that Isabel is characterized as ghastly, dead, unintelligible, and inhuman. Isabel's uncertain national and racial affiliations do not afford her the privilege of humanness. Throughout the history of Western colonialism and domination in the Americas, the "inhuman" and the "uncivilized," for instance, have always been deployed as markers of sociopolitical unprivilege, while masquerading as biologically deterministic designations. "Human" and "person," within such a framework, become deeply relative concepts that operate as affirmations of political power. The challenge for us as readers, therefore, isn't to ask "What is Isabel?" Rather, Melville prompts us to ask: What does the language we use to understand what Isabel is say about what we are? About what we so desperately strive to be because of and in spite of what we are? How, then, does our reading of Isabel's narrative change if

we stop regarding it as an interrogation into Isabel, but rather, an interrogation into Melville's audience?

Conclusion: The Suppression of *Pierre*

A look at the reception history of *Pierre* reveals the novel as similarly subject to the forces of suppression. The 1852 publication of Melville's *Pierre* was discussed in literary reviews of the time not only as Melville's worst work within his entire canon, but also as single-handedly responsible for the demolition of Melville's literary career. "Amoral," "unreal," "un-American," "dead," "trash," and "deranged" were among the cast of descriptive adjectives that pervaded public speculation about the novel, and about the state of Melville's mental health. In an 1852 review of *Pierre* in the Boston Post, a critic notes: "Mr. Melville's latest book, we are pleased to say, fell almost stillborn from the press, and we opened the volume under notice with the hope and almost the expectation that he would not again abuse the great gift of genius that has been bestowed upon him." Yet another review in the New York *National Magazine* referred to *Pierre* as a "the late miserable abortion of Melville." We are presented here with a mobilization of the language of abnormality, deviance, and death for the purposes of extending a critique of the work to Melville's body, and neutralizing any the book's radical implications. In a vicious personal gesture, these reviewers conflate *Pierre*'s perceived

domestic horror story with a domestically aberrant Melville, particularizing and redirecting the work's implications onto Melville and his family.

Trouillot identifies two historiographical tropes employed in order to manage the narrative of the Haitian Revolution: "The first kind of tropes are formulas that tend to erase directly the fact of a revolution….The second kind tends to empty a number of singular events of their revolutionary content so that the entire string of facts, gnawed from all sides, becomes trivialized." (Trouillot, 96) Interestingly enough, both of these modes of management are applied to *Pierre*. In the 1852 *Boston Post* review, the critic notes: "...we believe we shall *never* see the man who has endured the reading of the whole of it;" a sentiment that suggests *Pierre* as unreadable, illegible, and therefore, unworthy of readerly attention. Also, rather than calling attention to the work itself, reviewers call attention to the abnormality, moral depravity, and diminished genius of Melville himself. In the same review, a selective (and quite sarcastic) summary of *Pierre* is offered, framed by allegations that it is "utter trash" and followed with the note: "Comment on the foregoing is needless."

As noted in Hayford, Parker, and Tanselle's "Historical Note" for *Pierre*, it was crucial that writers critique Melville while neutralizing *Pierre*—in a sense, preventing its infamy from kindling its popularity. In essence, it was important to these critics that Melville's chaotic text be viewed as contingent, by no means, for instance, a consciously developed, and meticulously constructed allegory.

The silencing, marginalization, ostracization, and suppression that occur within the novel mimic the techniques that operate on it within discourse of its own reception. I suggest that the truly subversive potential of *Pierre* resides in an act of mimicry—throughout his construction of the book, Melville enacts and dramatizes Western historiographical processes, thereby revealing its seams and its latent biases. Melville's alleged "abuse of power", then, is not solely in the construction of a troubling narrative, but in the mobilization of mechanisms of power toward the contestation of historiographical power itself.

Bibliography

"Pierre; or the Ambiguities by Herman Melville." *The Living Age* 1852: 480. Print.

Césaire, Aimé, and Robin D.G. Kelley. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Monthly Review Press, 2000. Print.

Gordon, Avery, and Janice Radway. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008. Print.

James, C.L.R. *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*. Dartmouth College, 1953. Print.

Melville, Herman. *The Letters of Herman Melville*. Ed. Davis, Merrell R.: Yale University Press, 1960. Print.

Melville, Herman, et al. *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*: Volume Seven, Scholarly Edition. Northwestern University Press, 1992. Print.

Smallwood, Stephanie E. *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Harvard University Press, 2008. Print.

Spanos, William V. *Herman Melville and the American Calling: The Fiction after Moby-Dick, 1851-1857*. State University of New York Press, 2008. Print.

Tally, Robert T. *Melville, Mapping and Globalization: Literary Cartography in the American Baroque Writer*. Continuum, 2009. Print.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press, 2002. Print.