Introduction
Resurrecting Blackness

Deep calls unto deep.
Ralph W. Emerson, *Nature*

Just before the slave insurrection is unveiled in Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" (1855), naïve American captain Delano attempts to return to his ship. At that point, Don Benito, the Spanish captain, makes a final attempt to alert the imperceptive American, "but his vital energy" fails.[1] To prevent communication between the captains, Babo, the insurrection's leader, sandwiches himself between them and poses as Don Benito's "supportive crutch" (97). Here Melville describes an exemplary image: "Don Benito would not let go of the hand of Captain Delano, but retained it in his, across the black's body" (97). As a result of Babo's ominous presence, both captains stand nearly paralyzed. This spectacle of two white men's sustained grasp across a slave's black body symbolizes Babo's power to obscure the truth of revolt from Delano and to exemplify its deadly force for Don Benito. Babo's effect on the two captains prompts the question: Does Babo manifest the same "power of blackness" Melville explores in his famous essay "Hawthorne and his Mosses" (1850), in which Melville correlates "blackness," the "deeply thinking mind," and tormenting feelings of existential limit (243)? While Babo's compelling influence over the two captains manifests his sense of power and/or evil, the "power of blackness" – as Melville describes it in his essay – makes no direct reference to racially marked bodies, slavery, or colonial power. This scene evokes the fundamental question at the center of my study: What constitutes the relationship between dark characters like Babo, whom Melville creates from the social fabric of colonialism and slavery, and Melville's prevailing associations with blackness?

Babo's character captures a constellation of interrelated ideas. He operates as a gatekeeper of truth, the mastermind of the slaves' plot, and a symbol of the transatlantic crisis over slavery and its aftermath in the

antebellum Americas. The import of slavery, epitomized by Melville's
Babo, is not unique in antebellum fiction. As Toni Morrison observes,
"there is no romance free of what Herman Melville called 'the power of
blackness,' especially not in a country in which there was a resident popu-
lation, already black, upon which the imagination could play."[2] Morrison's
insight is a challenging one because it describes the relationship between
American romance and slavery in the elusive terms of imagination and
play. Significant, while Morrison's notion of "playing in the dark" links
the American novel to the constitution of blackness, it also encourages
readers to think about what critics overlook if they collapse blackness
onto the presence of enslaved Africans or nonwhites marked as dark. In
my view, to understand fully Melville's "power of blackness" and its con-
nection to slave revolts, Indian genocide, and colonial subjugation in the
antebellum Americas, one must disturb the ready-made link between
blackness and the lived conditions of black people.[3] Part of this book's
task is to show that in order to deepen our understanding of racial con-
flict in the Americas through Melville's fiction, it is important to see that
the connection of blackness to racial difference is far more multifaceted
than a singular correlation between dark-skinned people or people of
African descent. Richard White reminds us that there are two crucial
aspects to the discourse of blackness, hue and actual skin color; and more
specifically, "each of these discourses of color is itself unstable, and is the
relation between them."[4] In order to tarry in the instabilities White men-
tions, I maintain throughout this book that for Melville blackness is not
always racial but rather a figurative blackness to which racial difference is
explicitly significant.

Stifling the ready-made connection between dark racial groups and
blackness helps bring into focus other theoretical concerns that inform
Melville's blackness. Harry Levin labored intensely over the impact of
blackness on Melville's aesthetics, claiming that it reflects Melville's deep-
est psychological, spiritual, and political wisdom. In Levin's eyes, Melville's
idea of blackness corresponds to unwelcome truths about death, the fail-
ures of democracy, and psychic terror that Melville imagined his audience
shied away from.[5] Focusing more on aesthetic depth, John Wenke reveals
Melville's fascination with ideas about "human essence" and the "nature
of being," which involves placing his characters in conditions where they
face the haunting traps of time, history, and the cosmos.[6] Robert Milder
finds blackness central to the very abstract concepts Wenke emphasizes;
blackness, Milder asserts, enables Melville to "beg the question of ultim-
ate reality."[7] Whether critics discuss blackness as a problem of moral evil

in an unjust cosmos, a profound skepticism of Christian idealism, or a tragic sense of life, it is understood to be at some level both philosophical and sociohistorical, corresponding to the various ways Melville contemplated the links between "mind and world."[8]

Other critics, such as Carolyn Karcher, Michael Rogin, Sterling Stuckey, Eric Sundquist, and Samuel Otter, rigorously focus on bringing out the importance of racial conflict and imperial ideologies that shaped Melville's fictional engagement with blackness. With a keen focus on the politics of U.S. slavery and empire, critics have demonstrated how profoundly Melville's fiction is politically concrete as well as richly philosophical.[9] Maurice Lee's work captures his own version of this political and philosophical mutuality when he contends "antebellum writers," like Melville, "interrogated the relationship between slavery and philosophy" (6).[10] From Lee's perspective, racial politics, blackness, and philosophy are inextricably linked.[11]

Melville is as important a figure as there is in debates about race, literature, and philosophical concerns in America. Writers like Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne deploy various forms of blackness throughout their fiction, but only Melville correlates blackness, interracial encounters, and epistemic disruptions across his major writings.[12] Even more important, my work on interracial conflict in Melville's fiction participates in this critical conversation on blackness by probing deeper into the inextricable and even irreconcilable connection between racial difference and abstract concerns. I broaden the geographical periphery of previous critics by pursing blackness in transnational imperialisms along with slavery. My focus in this book stems from the notion that powerful whites throughout the Americas used racial difference as a means through which to wield power and knowledge over enslaved Africans, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders. Yet what Melville repeatedly emphasizes throughout his depictions of encounters between the races is how subjects' notions of white imperial supremacy is defined by broader notions of what is possible for human beings to discover, know, and conquer. Richard Slotkin presents this similarly when he claims that interracial conflicts under colonialism are significant moments when whites confirm their cultural and political sense of themselves.[13] This book, however, studies how Melville strikes his white protagonists, who most desire knowledge, confirmation, and power, with psychic and physical disruptions that turn into prolonged and sustained feelings of paralysis and suffering – a sense of impasse so forceful there is often no way to recover. In these traumatic moments Melville captures what D. H. Lawrence famously referred to as "Doom!

Doom! Doom!"[14] There are neither new epistemologies nor new cogent philosophies of self or history, because the profundity of Melville's racial contests, I submit, precisely lies in the stories' asking readers to see what it feels like to not have any recourse. What is it like, then, to agonize over enigmas one wants most desperately to solve? Why does Melville showcase these troubling experiences through interracial conflicts?

Thus, while other critics argue that Melville's portrayals of racial conflict restore the possibilities of political speech; expose vexed, uneasy strivings for racial empathy; and unveil flashes of black rebellion and freedom, my book brings out what criticism overlooks: Through social encounters marked by racial difference, Melville imbues the concrete life of transatlantic slavery and colonialism with a sense of existential suffering and irreconcilable confusion, which, I contend, tempers the sociopolitical payoff that many critics seek.[15] Whether they focus on blackness and race politically, philosophically, or both, critics insufficiently attend to how subjects relate to ontological problems like the inevitable fact of death, the unpredictable violence of nature, or one's unavoidable susceptibility to the whims of others. Blackness, I submit, signifies horrific and unexpected disruptions that induce prolonged moments of existential angst and suffering. Through this psychic violence, Melville correlates the social reality of racial difference with philosophical concerns about mastery: seizing one's destiny, amassing scientific or spiritual knowledge, and perfecting the self.

Perhaps nowhere in Melville's career does the conflation of ideas about mastership and racial difference occur more clearly than in his seminal fiction of the 1850s, including *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852) as well as "Benito Cereno" and "The Encantadas" from the *Piazza Tales* (1856). I have chose these texts because the racial contests they feature do not merely disturb or confuse characters; these characters feel their own annihilation with acute intensity that cannot be fully quelled.

Throughout my study of these texts, I establish that blackness cannot be unpacked by means of a single hermetic strategy. By keeping the entanglement of abstract philosophical concerns and concrete social history in view, my aim is to restore blackness to a sign that, in Houston Baker's words, makes "the establishment" unhappy and unsettled.[16] Blackness must be analyzed at the intersection of the philosophical and the social in order to show how interracial encounters challenge philosophical ideals of self-mastery or mastery over others, as well as how Melville's broader meditations on knowledge and power are irreconcilably wed to racial difference. Examining blackness in this way reveals that interracial encounters

uncover how subjects experience a profound powerlessness that upends all modes of thinking, whether normative, conservative, or progressive. I call the sense of powerlessness that Melville's blackness represents the *illusion of mastery*, paying special attention to moments when interracial encounters and epistemological torment are conflated in the texts. How subjects fail to cope with their powerlessness reveals, in addition to the social effects of racial hierarchy, a profound *existential vulnerability* in the racial conflict of the antebellum period. Hence, putting blackness at the center of our conversations about Melville's antebellum Americas shows how we can think materially and historically at the same time we think existentially about race, with a sustained rigor, without ultimately reducing it to sociopolitics or metaphysical idealism. By refusing to reduce blackness solely to abstract or concrete concerns, this book demonstrates that irreconcilable contradiction and its unsettling affects shape critics' notions of what it means to think historically about racialized social conflict in ways critics often overlook.

Melville and the Idea of Blackness shows that fully knowing or trying to master the truth or the real is a kind of violence unto itself. No matter a person's philosophical worldview or political position, and regardless of one's views for or against social transformations, symbolic life can potentially disappear in the confusion of dark and inescapable disturbances. In Morrison's reflections, the construction of blackness by antebellum writers like Melville satisfied a collective need to allay internal fears about slavery and rationalize external exploitation.[17] Here I contend the reverse: Blackness corresponds to vexed images of one's own limitations and death as well as the end of any sense of a secure mastery over one's self and others. In this vein, Melville's portrayals of blackness do not merely counter U.S. colonial supremacy or the absolute power of slave regimes; they also subtly ask subjects to imagine themselves in hellish ambiguity where all sociopolitical avenues vanish – a realization of the end to all things – where subjects experience unsolvable enigmas, utter boundary loss, and self-sacrifice.

I use the remaining pages of this introduction to clarify how blackness relates to racial conflict and exchange in the Americas as I approach it in this book. First, I discuss Melville's meditations on blackness in his famous review essay, "Hawthorne and his Mosses," to reveal more specifically how blackness works as well as the connection between blackness and subjects' failures to achieve or maintain mastery. Equally important is that Melville's fiction takes place within a vibrant historical context; one fraught with sociopolitical and epistemological challenges,

which shape even his most abstract and elusive formulations of black-
ness. Second, I discuss the historical field that Melville's fiction reflects
and that I believe is crucial to the way Melville portrays blackness. To
this point, Melville draws upon a plethora of black images and dark
predicaments that feature black or racial groups distinguished somehow
as dark (socially, theologically, physically). These episodes take place in
what Mary Louise Pratt calls "contact zones," or "social spaces where
disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in
highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like
colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths."[18] While Pratt emphasizes
aspects of colonial history that display European subjects' assertions
of hegemony, I disclose how Melville's version of contact zones draws
upon moments when whites *fail* to actualize their physical and ideo-
logical power over "figures in black."[19] Along with physical deprivations,
explorers, missionaries, and traders shared the possibility of traumatic
ideological challenges, a sociohistorical reality Melville's fiction reflects.
Third, I briefly treat blackness in Melville's first major work, *Typee*
(1846). Locating blackness in *Typee* allows me to relay its beginnings in
Melville's writing and, in turn, to establish how it abruptly intensifies
through interracial encounters in his later fiction of the 1850s. What
begins as *Typee*'s adventures amidst indigenous people in the Pacific wil-
derness lays the foundation for a more ruthless blackness that Melville
unveils in his later fiction.

"mosses," blackness, and the illusion of mastery

Outside of his early fiction, Melville first discussed blackness in depth
when he published a review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story col-
lection, *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846), called "Hawthorne and His
Mosses" in *The Literary World*. If one follows Melville's writing on black-
ness in the "Mosses" essay, one cannot help but notice how blackness
"fixes and fascinates" him, yet he never defines it in any conventional
sense (244). Instead, Melville emphasizes how blackness works, how it
makes him feel, and what it makes him think about, rather than expli-
citly defining what it is. Thus, in tracking how it works rather than what
it is, I contend that despite a variety of nominal faces (blackness, dark-
ness, blackness of darkness, etc.), blackness represents a particular exist-
ential problem defined by two key aspects. The first is subjects' failure
to achieve or maintain self-mastery or mastery over others; this failure
discloses subjects' vulnerability to irreparable psychic violence and social

alienation. The second aspect involves Melville's depiction of actual characters, images, and conditions that are literally and/or symbolically black. How I read blackness in "Mosses" corresponds directly to how I read blackness in Melville's fiction. Blackness is both singular and varied because it corresponds to disparate dark signs at the same time it signifies a particular type of existential crisis.

When Melville recalls his feelings and thoughts on Hawthorne's "wide landscape beyond," he describes them by contrasting light and dark (242). Yet, after recognizing the light that other readers see and even celebrate, Melville abandons the "ever-moving dawn" to focus solely on the obscure and buried blackness. Even more significant, as Melville focuses on blackness, he does not make any clear distinction between blackness and darkness, black and dark, or the blackness of darkness. With few exceptions, these phrases and words function as equivalents in the "Mosses" essay and in Melville's fiction. When Melville refers to "that blackness in Hawthorne," he uses a myriad of phrases: "the dark half of the physical sphere," "black conceit," "darkness," "ten-times black," "black," and "dark" (242–4). Yet, along with the diverse catalog of names, the "Mosses" essay contains moments when Melville's language is more precise. In these moments, Melville mentions King Lear's fits of madness, the Calvinist concept of original sin, and Young Goodman Brown's losing battle with "agony and desperation" (251). The blackness in the "Mosses" essay is thus dualistic: On the one hand, it corresponds to numerous names for darkness, yet on the other, Melville uses it to point to something very specific when he suggests that starkly different figures like King Lear and Young Goodman Brown can be read similarly.

Notably, one aspect of blackness that appears concrete in the "Mosses" essay is the source of its force. "Certain it is," Melville writes, "this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin" (243). Melville's invocation of "Original Sin" calls attention to the unavoidable reality of moral evil. Milder extends the meaning of Melville's reference even farther, arguing that the Puritan source for blackness captures the "fundamental wrongness at the heart of life" that is best illustrated by the "spectacle of Job on his ash-heap or Lear on the heath 'tormented into desperation' and delivering himself in rage and grief on the blackness of life."[20] In a similar vein, Leslie Fiedler contends that what makes blackness evil is its connection to the notion that "the world is at once real and a mask through which we can dimly perceive more ultimate forces at work … it is impossible to know fully either God or ourselves."[21]

While there is much in Milder and Fiedler with which I generally
agree, neither answers a very important question: When Melville portrays
the "blackness of life," do actual dark objects always need to be present?[22]
The short answer is no, but this does not mean that Melville does not
strategically use various black objects and dark conditions to call atten-
tion to "the blackness of life" throughout his fiction in the 1850s.[23] Equally
if not more important is that the "Mosses" essay points to two different
texts that use literal blackness to signify dark existential conflicts. Briefly
discussing Shakespeare's *King Lear* and looking at Hawthorne's "Young
Goodman Brown," which Melville says is a "direct and unqualified mani-
festation" of blackness, will demonstrate that dark objects correlate with
existential blackness; looking at this aspect of Lear and Brown, then, will
show more specifically how Melville's blackness works (251–2).

In what amounts to a few significant sentences, Melville singles out
Shakespeare's *King Lear* as an example of blackness. One major tension
in Shakespeare's tragedy emerges when Lear's daughters betray him. He
is blindsided by his certainty; their betrayal is an unexpected and trau-
matic reversal. After this event he is confused and the confusion leads
to a madness that disturbs his entire conception of the world surround-
ing him. Most important, people, places, social intimacies, and practices
familiar to the king eventually become totally foreign and estranged. At
the height of his emotional torment, Lear revolts against the elements in
a night storm. The poignant Fool, whom Lear takes for a "philosopher,"
tells the other characters that that "cold night will turn us all to fools and
madmen" (3.4.84–5).[24] The king is lost within his inability to find the
answers to his questions about the world and its objects; an additional
consequence of this madness is that he can relate fully neither to people
nor to the institutions that define him. Thus, it is not enough to identify
blackness as an extreme feeling of life's betrayal or an undeniable evil or a
gap between "human need and fact";[25] blackness specifically reflects a rela-
tionship between self and other that involves profound torment as a result
of a subject's loss of mastery. What is more, Lear presents us with two
more features that "Mosses" does not make explicit but which are very
important to Melville's portraits of blackness: The first is the presence of
literal dark phenomena and objects like Lear's night thunderstorm (the
time of day and the intolerable weather are not incidental); the second is
the antisocial effects that either temporarily or permanently stifle viable
social relationships.

The dynamics I just described in *King Lear* are also apparent in the
short story Melville calls a "strong positive illustration" of blackness,

Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (251). The story begins when, after ignoring the warnings of his wife, Faith, Brown descends into the abysmal wilderness with the devil. The devil guides Brown down a path where all of the members of his community, whom he firmly believes to be moral and upstanding, turn out to be immoral. Along the way, Brown becomes "maddened with despair," overcome with "grief, rage and terror."[26] Overwhelmed by the devil's torments, Brown sees all the saints of the community as evil sinners. Brown then expresses with absolute confidence that "Evil is the nature of mankind," and this becomes Brown's truth.[27] He moves from a normal social life with family, friends, and community to an escalating sense of alienation. He shrinks away from Faith, tormenting her, and though he never physically retreats from his community, he dies completely isolated from every dimension of his social world. Brown's access to what he believes is the hidden truth of his social world drives him crazy and siphons off his connection to his religious leaders, church, family, wife, and the entire Puritan community.

I want to stress that depicting what they share is central to figuring what blackness signifies and how it operates. Brown and Lear are both certain in themselves and in their mastery of the social knowledge and relations that define their communities. They both experience violent reversals and are sent reeling from their comfortable and confident knowledge and normative connections to social alienation. I also want to emphasize that the presence of dark images constitutes the scenes of violent reversals – night storms, night wilderness, literal and figurative evil. Without the deep-seated alienation and dark imagery one does not have what Melville calls blackness. Moreover, critics have recognized that Melville's "power of blackness" involves sin and alienation, but closer attention to Melville's use of Lear and Young Goodman Brown shows how crucial blackness is to existential threats that also include race. In the section following, I bring out the aspects of colonialism and racial difference that I think attracted Melville precisely because they contain the challenges of mastery and intense feelings of vulnerability which blackness captures.

VULNERABILITY IN CONTACT ZONES

The U.S.'s aggressive expansions into the western frontier, Southern politicians' dreams of slave empires, and the numerous Protestant missions and social reform movements to save dark peoples from backwardness are all important historical pillars of the mid-nineteenth century. Within this history lies local and intimate dialogue between individuals

of different races, which Melville fictionally reimagines in various sites of social engagement in different geographies, turning the shores of the Marquesas in *Typee* and the deck of the *Pequod* in *Moby-Dick* into zones of contact. These zones include various types of cultural exchanges, collaborations, and social frictions between whites and indigenous people, slaves, and other nonwhites.

Within the encounters Melville displays lies a fictional view of the "metaphysical aspects of historical exchange."[28] These philosophical tenets often come from Melville's own adventures around the globe. From his own laborious travels, Melville compiled a tapestry of sources from contact zones that reflected his interests in interracial encounters.[29] Whether in the South Seas or off the coast of Ecuador, when various colonizers and traders engaged native inhabitants they were forced into learning new languages, cultural meanings, and social codes; in doing so, they also provoked questions, confusions, and affirmations that concerned their group and individual identities. For instance, Winthrop Jordan captures what was eventually at stake in English merchants' initial engagements with Africans. He explains that when these merchants traveled to Africa in search of slave labor, they reported back on the Africans' savagery and overall sinful ways. In writings about their travels, English merchants and missionaries also confronted more abstract questions of social control and moral values, questions mirroring drastic changes in their own local societies. These actual experiences with people from foreign shores made their way easily into intellectual discussions about race in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Jordan's eyes, the dilemmas Englishmen underwent prompted further efforts to establish or reaffirm the social inequality of non-Europeans, as well as to sustain beliefs in whites' own social categories, normative standards, and moral values.[30] Hence, social disturbances provoked abstract enigmas and confusions about categories, standards, beliefs, and values which were not easily settled by the English and other Europeans. Despite these provocations, modern thinkers, especially racial theorists, sought the "disenchantment of the world."[31] For them, Thomas Holt explains, "race made sense of worlds" in the midst of anxious changes in societies; race provided social, political, and epistemological affirmations in an "unpredictable" and "inchoate" world now calling attention to its rapid changes as examples of modern newness.[32]

More important, explorers, traders, and missionaries who sustained contacts with dark peoples in the Americas and Africa and who needed to learn languages and to grow very familiar with various groups' cultures and rituals could not deny the possibility of moments of nightmarish