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978-1-107-02206-5 - Melville and the Idea of Blackness: Race and Imperialism in
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Christopher Freeburg

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MELVILLE AND THE IDEA OF BLACKNESS

By examining the unique problems that “blackness” signifies in *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, “Benito Cereno,” and “The Encantadas,” Christopher Freeburg analyzes how Herman Melville grapples with the social realities of racial difference in nineteenth-century America. Where Melville’s critics typically read blackness as a metaphor for the haunting power of slavery or an allegory of moral evil, Freeburg asserts that blackness functions as the site where Melville correlates the sociopolitical challenges of transatlantic slavery and U.S. colonial expansion with philosophical concerns about mastery. By focusing on Melville’s iconic interracial encounters, Freeburg reveals the important role blackness plays in Melville’s portrayal of characters’ arduous attempts to seize their own destinies, amass scientific knowledge, and perfect themselves. A valuable resource for scholars and graduate students in American literature, this text will also appeal to those working in American, African American, and postcolonial studies.

Christopher Freeburg is an assistant professor of English at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and his master’s degree from Stanford. His work has appeared in journals such as *American Literature* and *Modern Fiction Studies*.

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Nineteenth-Century America

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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Christopher Freeburg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

*To Joseph Brown S.J.
and Trish Loughran*

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press
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Nineteenth-Century America
Christopher Freeburg
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface: Darkening the Past</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxi
Introduction: Resurrecting Blackness	i
1. Knowing the “Bottomless Deep”: <i>Moby-Dick</i>	20
2. Living “Within the Maelstrom”: <i>Pierre</i>	61
3. Thwarting the “Regulated Mind”: “Benito Cereno”	93
4. Embodying the “Assaults of Time”: “The Encantadas”	132
<i>Notes</i>	165
<i>Index</i>	185

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Nineteenth-Century America

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

Darkening the Past

Voyage through death
to life upon these shores.

Robert Hayden, "Middle Passage"

This book concerns Melville's idea of blackness and racial conflict in the Americas. Throughout *Melville and the Idea of Blackness*, I discuss how Melville's blackness signals the agonizing and volatile challenges of fully mastering one's self or other people. Melville captures this difficult and often traumatizing struggle through fictional episodes drawn from the history of slavery and colonialism. While the former ideas characterize this book's specific focus on racial contests and Melville's blackness, this preface forecasts something broader in scope. Here, I use the term *blackness* to ask fundamental questions about the way critics think about history and what they mean when they say they are thinking historically. Melville's blackness, in my view, helps critics to query further what it is to be historical or to use history as an instrument for revisiting various narratives of sociopolitical progress, which defines much of literary and cultural inquiry in Americanist fields.

I argue throughout this book that blackness signifies the violence of subjects' experience of existential limits and the destruction of subjects' social viability. Melville presents these traumatic experiences through characters involved in racial conflicts – conflicts that result in characters' failed attempts to control themselves, others, nature, and the course of history. Melville's characters Benito Cereno and Babo, Ahab and Pip, Ishmael and Queequeg, Hunilla and the modern voyager all take action in circumstances they want to master or believe they can ensure control over, and this sense of authority is ripped from underneath them. In Melville's fiction, interracial encounters and conflict show how subjects get lost in the illusion of being certain that there are no limits for the self at the very moment they experience the harsh realities of existential

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Nineteenth-Century America

Christopher Freeburg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

Preface: Darkening the Past

limitation. Melville uses these characters' limit cases to critique racism while still looking at racial conflict through the prism of blackness, amplifying how the power of race contains images of whites' taking control of totality, but also, more important, how everyone in the Americas is equally *subject* to the contingent forces of history that unexpectedly erupt in everyday life.

If we fully credit this sense of being subject to history, what impact can it have on the way we think about the uses of history in literary and cultural study? Fredric Jameson's maxim, "always historicize," is currently well-accepted dogma and I will not attempt to dispute this proclamation, yet I do think that Melville's blackness can expand and deepen what it means to historicize or to be historical for contemporary critics.¹ To this end, I briefly look at Clarel's portrait of Abdon the Black Jew in *Clarel* (1876) and the poem "The Coming Storm" from *Battle-Pieces* (1866) in order to show how they capture the sense of distress and immobility that blackness signifies. My purpose in visiting blackness in these postbellum texts of Melville is not to point out suppressed racial confrontations, but rather to demonstrate that these poetic moments provide a segue to directly address Melville's blackness and the critical task of facing the real conditions of history.

Most critics' sense of being historical reflects a fundamental assumption: History is an instrument of knowledge that if used properly (historicizing) will lead to some version of truth or the real; truth is guaranteed. With this idea in mind, it is worth looking at Walter Benjamin's portrayal of "shock" that he finds crucial to historicism. Benjamin's shock is not identical to Melville's blackness, but they share striking similarities, and even though Benjamin would largely agree with Jameson about critical practice, Benjamin offers a slightly different account of critics' relationship to their archives and evidence that I read as closely in line with the violence and unpredictability Melville's blackness captures. Discussing Benjamin's notion of shock with Melville's blackness in mind can help us rethink blackness's relevance to critical praxis – not in order to revisit what a radical or progressive criticism looks like but rather to recognize that empowering discoveries and unconquerable enigmas both define the way critics study social life.

In 1865, Melville saw the painting *A Coming Storm on Lake George* (1863) by R. S. Gifford in the National Gallery. He wrote a poem about the painting that he included in his collection of Civil War poetry, *Battle-Pieces* (1866). "The Coming Storm" begins by telling the reader that the source of the poem is the speaker's relationship to a painting at the

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Nineteenth-Century America

Christopher Freeburg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface: Darkening the Past*

xiii

national exhibition. The poem's speaker addresses "him/Who felt this picture," which could be the painter, the buyer, and/or the imagined persona viewing the scene (123).² Either way, the effect is the same: "presage dim – Dim inklings from the shadowy sphere" that "fixed him and fascinated here" (123). The language bears remarkable closeness to Melville's own famous lines about Hawthorne's blackness where Melville says it is "that blackness in Hawthorne ... that so fixes and fascinates me."³ Both depict a subject enamored by the artist's sense of darkness; in the case of the painting it is the "demon-cloud" that has "Burst on a spirit" (123). The crucial difference between them lies in Melville's explicit conception of the poem out of the social conflict of the Civil War. It is more than the prospect of a horrible thunderstorm that makes this cloud's abrupt appearance disruptive. The cloud symbolizes the real dangers of an oncoming storm and visceral sense of violation; it suddenly appears and transforms a tranquil day on Lake George. Yet the viewer's psychological intensity doubles because the "demon-cloud" withholds the destructive capacities of the Civil War. Even more frightening, the viewer is "fixed" and "fascinated." He embodies a tormenting sense of pause, realizing an abrupt sense of danger he is powerless to change.

"The Coming Storm" communicates an impasse where time and history become self-conscious and realized in the aesthetic vision, but this vision does not contain any feelings of freedom, only unforeseeable constraint.

William Dean Howells writes in *The Atlantic Monthly* that because of the "phantasms" and "vagaries" in Melville's war poetry, the verse fails to capture the reality of the human experience. *Battle-Pieces*, Howells writes, bears no semblance to any "life you have known."⁴ As far as Melville's style is concerned, there was probably nothing Melville could have done that would have allowed him to live up to Howells's standards of human life. The very phantasms and vagaries that mask the human for Howells revealed and defined the human in Melville's eyes. The premonitions of the viewer in "The Coming Storm" sit at the heart of "Man's final lore" (123). The substance of this "lore" is vast – which "we seek and shun" (123). The poem's language and subject matter conceal explicit sociality and details of personal representations, as Howells explains, yet Melville clearly embraces this kind of poetic abstraction; he revels in frightening intimations of obscurity.

In this vein, an anonymous reviewer of Melville's war verse was equally convinced of Melville's elusiveness and imagined a visceral response to it; he calls the verse "epileptic,"⁵ associating it with sudden and recurrent

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Nineteenth-Century America

Christopher Freeburg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv

Preface: Darkening the Past

sensory disturbances, slips in and out of consciousness, and violent convulsions – as if precisely describing what blackness represents to Benito Cereno. Epileptic movement is bereft of identifiable progress, and if one seeks a version of this resolution, it can result in just what Howells and the viewer point to; readers can unwittingly become one of Melville's thought divers, destined to come away with "blood shot eyes."⁶ Neither the speaker in Melville's "The Coming Storm" nor Melville's reviewers escape the spell of impasse, of unresolved inner dissonance that can take shape in real and imagined oncoming threats that also reveal different senses of history.

Melville's Clarel endures feelings of oncoming events that he realizes with an intensity he cannot control. The poem begins when Clarel leaves home on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Clarel finds grave difficulty fending off phantoms and the violence of inevitable death. Early in the poem, Clarel encounters Abdon, "the Black Jew."⁷ Abdon is a member of the tribe of Cochin Jews from southern India and he travels to the Holy Land to die. Abdon and other people appear to Clarel like ancient and timeless relics "unmixed into time's swamping sea."⁸ After he leaves the black Jew, he finds himself in dark reverie. His eyes fall on a paper tray where briefly comprised on one poor sheet are the words "The World Accosts."⁹ "The World Accosts" magnifies the sense in "The Coming Storm," which seems only to be a true realization because the subjects who see it believe the opposite. That is, if subjects ignored or repressed or swept under the rug the reality of what subjects can do little or nothing about, while championing one's agential possibility and grasp of truth(s), then a realization of "the world accosts" can create a profound sense of contradiction in subjects' idea of themselves and what changes and transformation are possible in their milieu. The parts of Melville's poetry that I have highlighted reiterate how the hard facts of history unveil the forces we cannot change, and they firmly impress upon subjects what Hayden White has recently argued: "[H]istory is not something one understands, it is something one endures – if one is lucky."¹⁰

But what do the rude and abrupt realizations of history and world that Melville captures in the "demon-cloud" from "The Coming Storm" and Clarel's reactions to "the Black Jew" have to do with critical notions of doing historical work or being historical? Most current notions of doing historical work rely on material archives as instruments for discerning the real, the concrete in a social reality of ideology and abstraction. What is more, when it comes to quotable mantras from pages of theoretical work on historicism there are many in Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of

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978-1-107-02206-5 - Melville and the Idea of Blackness: Race and Imperialism in
Nineteenth-Century America

Christopher Freeburg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface: Darkening the Past*

xv

History” (1940) that reappear in various ways in books and articles on modern literature and culture. Kenneth Warren jokingly remarks that “if we were each to receive a dollar for every time Benjamin’s theses were quoted or used as a guiding principle,” we may not be rich but we would certainly be able to buy some nice things.¹¹ Whether or not Americanists are sufficiently Benjaminian is not my point, but it is worth noting that his work on the philosophy of history has captured the scholarly imagination in cursory and substantive ways. Even more important, if one takes Benjamin’s idea of shock and danger seriously, it shows critics the unforeseen and disturbing challenges that can both liberate and shackle, clarify and obscure, the pursuit of illumination through any methodology.

Hence, what I found most striking about Melville’s showcasing of protagonists’ experiences of blackness in his fiction, *Clarel*, or “The Coming Storm,” is that, in a limited way, it resembles Benjamin’s ideas about danger and shock in the archives of history. In the second thesis, Benjamin mentions the “secret index” of the past that refers the historical materialist to the previously hidden messianic power in the present.¹² This talk of secrets and messianic power for the “historian schooled in Marx” is not supposed to direct critics from an emphasis on class struggle but rather to focus them on the “fight for crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist.”¹³ Benjamin continues:

But these latter things, which are present in class struggle are not present as a vision of spoils that fall to the victor. *They are alive* in this struggle as confidence, courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude, and have effects that reach far back into the past. They call into question every victory, past, and present, of the rulers. ... This the historical materialist must be aware of.¹⁴

One especially important thing about this thesis is how Benjamin emphasizes the historical materialist’s role of casting light on the “avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the down trodden,” “the struggling, oppressed class itself.”¹⁵ Benjamin also posits a particular relationship between the past, “now-time,” and the future.¹⁶ He contends that the injustice committed by the ruling classes cannot be undone, but perhaps can be “reconciled through remembering,” which “ties up the present with the communicated context of a universal solidarity.”¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas summarizes it as follows: through the past, these future generations claim the “messianic power of the present.”¹⁸

Benjamin describes the experiential relation of the person delving into various archives to excavate “historical knowledge.”¹⁹ I quoted the earlier passage at length because Benjamin emphasizes “spiritual things.” He

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 Nineteenth-Century America
 Christopher Freeburg
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

does not retreat from history, but instead he points to something “alive” in the archive that must be somehow captured to witness against the ruling classes’ account of history. The mysticism of Benjamin’s spirit is no secret. By this, I do not mean to say that he was not suspicious of the strictures of power and knowledge that frame theocracies, religious institutions, and pedestals of speculative philosophy, which also bear the name of spirit or spiritual things. However, one cannot doubt that Benjamin was unapologetically possessed by the hidden powers of historical consciousness that he believed lay dormant in materiality. The sense of spirit found in the social actions and thoughts of the people is not “effective historical consciousness,” in Habermas’s words, but something that animates it that the historical materialist sees.²⁰

More significant, Benjamin says that the redeemable past appears in a “moment of danger.”²¹ This “danger,” he emphasizes, “threatens both the content and the tradition.”²² From this moment of “danger,” one ultimately gets to universal history, and the historical thinker can approach this history “where thinking comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions.”²³ It “gives that constellation a shock” where the thinker “recognizes a sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.”²⁴

While one cannot deny that Benjamin insists the historical materialist upends naturalized historical norms to reveal the true subject of historical knowledge, the “oppressed class,” one cannot say beyond that specifically how. Brushing against the grain in anticipation of dialectical images and flash points is a general idea that leaves much room for interpretation. Benjamin’s poetic and sermon-like language makes no apologies for the fact that what he says seldom gets translated by critics into how to follow his lead from imaginative prose to deliberate practice. Of what specific use, then, are flashes, unpredictable moments of danger?

Benjamin’s fragments escape the rigidities and pitfalls of orthodox Marxism. Yet, if we are to think about assessing shock and what Benjamin meant by it, one cannot help but think that what was shocking and alarming to Benjamin may not be shocking now. Benjamin composed his influential fragments on history in a literal state of emergency. Without being disingenuous, what is our scholarly equivalent to the fight against fascism in Germany’s war years, or any *ism* that would define the historicist as a threat that should be crushed or silenced? Such a struggle would not permit us to live or see the present the same way we do now.²⁵ Almost no one descending into any archive to study oppressed groups today would find their experiences full of epistemic shocks of this

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Nineteenth-Century America

Christopher Freeburg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface: Darkening the Past*

xvii

degree, yet Benjamin still insists on the imperative of experiential danger and shock. However, I am not clear on how one achieves this with deliberate and calculated purpose. How would we recognize the moment of danger and shock if its power lies in the fact that we cannot initially recognize it?

Susan Buck-Morss claims that “in the Theses, Benjamin speaks of shock; rather than awakening, but they are different words for the same experience.”²⁶ In Benjamin’s eyes, “history appears as a catastrophe, a hellish, cyclical repetition of barbarism and oppression,” and Buck-Morss wants readers to see this idea as an opportunity for awakening.²⁷ Awakening, however, is broad and can mean anything that someone perceives as being alerting. Still, Buck-Morss’s reading begs the question of why Benjamin deploys “hellish” and “catastrophe.” Surely shock implies danger and violence, literally, epistemically, and socially, more so than what Buck-Morss calls “awakening.” Buck-Morss’s substitution, in my view, undermines the gravity of Benjamin’s use of catastrophe and hellish, which not only makes the critic vulnerable but depicts vulnerability as potentially jolting and violent.

Habermas also suggests a relationship between awakening and shock. For him, shock causes awakening which then makes “profane illumination” or a “renewal of consciousness” available.²⁸ But in his rephrasing, he advances something Benjamin does not suggest strongly enough. Benjamin makes no guarantees for the historically minded critic beyond shock, danger, terror, and flashes, only the projection of a necessary hope. Benjamin suggests that the critic is subject to the archive materials as the materials. If this is true, then when the critic “shatters the continuum of history,” it is a moment of recognition and comprehension. The continuum is a historical construction that various groups and individuals have an interest in or psychological attachment to. What is the critic’s relation to what is conveyed in the shattering? How does the critic shield himself or herself from the violence of that shattering? Shattering, in my view, indicates the critic’s relation to the history as well. If this experience discloses the “breaks within history,” it also reflects something that breaks or becomes broken within the subject.²⁹

Benjamin, in my view, reveals a mutual relation of disruption that cannot routinely offer a golden parachute to historical clarity and/or truth that can be a radical instrument. From this reading, Benjamin factored in “awakening” and “shock” in such a way that the aftermath might not turn out to be the liberation or truth the critic seeks, and in fact, it does not guarantee that the critic may be struck by another form of

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Nineteenth-Century America

Christopher Freeburg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii

Preface: Darkening the Past

mystification, concealment, or various codes of naturalization. That is, the critic doing the rigorous work of historicism must be willing to feel and endure a sense of impasse, one possessed by disruption and intimations of dangerous enigmas, which I have called blackness. This is not the same sense of brutal psychic and physical torment that Melville's blackness signifies, but I think Benjamin's shock is our critical equivalent, or at least akin to it.

Fredric Jameson also uses the language of shock to discuss approaches to literature and culture. Unlike Benjamin, Jameson is more direct about his expectations for the use value of his approach to objects of analysis. In Jameson's eyes, "genuine" dialectical thinking "forces upon us an *abrupt* self-consciousness with respect to our own critical instruments and literary categories ... an *epistemological shock* that will identify its presence" [my emphasis] (375). This is definitive "and inseparable from dialectical thinking, as the ark of an abrupt shift to a higher level of consciousness to a larger context of being" (375). Jameson's descriptions of abrupt, upward movements of consciousness resulting from true dialectical thinking guarantee the practitioner results that Benjamin does not. Jameson sees this dialectical consciousness "as an assault on our conventionalized life patterns, a whole battery of shocks administered to our routine vision of things, an implicit critique and restructuration of our habitual consciousness" (374).

However, as Jameson unveils his ideas of what would "oblige us to practice," he does not ask the question that is crucially relevant: What happens when attacking conventions is no longer the outlier position, but instead the outlier itself becomes *the* convention? Jameson's ideas are now approaching decades of dominance in the field of literary and cultural study – are Marxist historicism or other versions of progressive materialist scholarship still outliers? Marxism is an inner "permanent revolution," but it cannot truly be a revolution in praxis, in my view, if one is looking for what one knows is already there (362). My point here is that if shock and danger are to be crucial parts of our critical reality, how can one guarantee "higher consciousness" or historical consciousness or consciousness at all? This type of authority over the future is the equivalent of planning your own surprise party. If revolution and reform are to be permanent and radical, then they must also be able to turn against and away from themselves.

If critics avail themselves of shock and danger in their professional practice, then it will not always be an experiment with all the right kinds of results, repressions, admissions, and triumphs. My argument here is

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Nineteenth-Century America

Christopher Freeburg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface: Darkening the Past*

xix

that practitioners of various methods must be prepared to see the end of their own ideas if they claim to be willing to harness radicalizing energies. As I have quoted them here, neither Jameson nor Benjamin demonstrates this, but the key difference is Benjamin does not use the armor of dialectical thinking as a shield to fend off the vulnerability of abstractions that by definition involve uncertainty, enigmas, and epistemic risks. If we are all happily affirming Jameson's maxim to "always historicize," what does a radical criticism look like?³⁰ I want to argue that according to Melville and Benjamin's versions of blackness, we will know it as we confront the overwhelming weight of constraint against power, including various modes of power and dominance in institutions that govern our social and professional communities.

Benjamin's re-mystifications erupt as further illusions, philosophical questions, new historical obfuscations, and insights, meaning that whatever may be called the concrete is interlaced by a myriad of "spiritual things." A critic, as analyst and listener, should take on the challenge of being subject to the whims and violations of history's ungraspable phantoms. Pursuing versions of messianic revelation also means being completely subject to enigmatic silence, awe, and the violent tremors of frustration. If one is truly willing to leave home or feels forced out in pursuing radical thoughts "against the grain," to use Benjamin's words, then one cannot brush with the grain of established conventions and methods of scholarship while championing the banner of epistemic and political revolt.³¹ If Melville's blackness, as I render it here and throughout this book, can leave its impression in this contemporary critical moment, it is in the idea that critics must be prepared to realize the experiential "shock" of blackness in their homes of methodological identity; in blackness, these homes may be destroyed or radically altered to the degree that the only clear thing is that one "cannot go home again."³²

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Christopher Freeburg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxii

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