

Seeing Unseeing:
the Historical Amasa Delano and his *Voyages*¹

Introduction

Amasa Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817) provided not only the basis for Herman Melville's novella *Benito Cereno* (1855), but it is likely to have contributed to Melville's liberal views on religion and culture in the Pacific. Most Melville critics—if they read Delano at all—focus only on the American captain's encounter with the Spanish slaver described in Chapter 18 of *Voyages*.² Readers of *Benito Cereno* who have never looked at Delano's narrative know only that simple-minded mariner of "singularly undistrustful good nature" who cannot see the "malign evil in man."³ Delano figures as unperceptive, naïve and foolishly optimistic or, for more skeptical examiners, duplicitous, conniving and mercenary-minded. An examination of the critical reception of the character Delano shows a persistent interest in the original historical figure and a persistent tendency to conflate his narrative with the fictional adaptation, leading to erroneous accusations of Delano being a cheat, pirate, moral degenerate and a slave trader. But a reappraisal of the historical Amasa Delano (1763-1823) and the entire *Voyages* independent of Melville's fictional lens and in the context of turn-of-the-century Orientalist writing—paying particular

attention to Delano's experiences in the Pacific Islands and China—dispels these false attributions and reveals a much more complex, open-minded and culturally sensitive blue-water author who struggles with the dialogics of writing and presenting his life.

We do not know when Melville read Delano's *Voyages*. Hershel Parker notes that Henry Hubbard, a distant relative of Amasa Delano and Melville's old shipmate on the *Acushnet*, may have shared a copy of *Voyages* during their eighteen months at sea together. But Robert K. Wallace's discovery that Melville's father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw (1781-1861), prepared a contract for an 1818 edition of *Voyages*, suggests the possibility that Melville heard about Delano from Shaw even before 1841. Shaw was a longtime friend of the Melville family, having once been a real estate partner with Herman's father, Allan Melvill.⁴ Melville was certainly intrigued by Delano's entanglement with the slaver *Tryal*. And the American captain's decision to uphold the laws of the sea and assist Cereno must have reflected Melville's frustration with the fugitive slave laws upheld by his father-in-law, then supreme court justice of Massachusetts. But like Shaw, Delano attempted to untangle moral and social race issues in his writing, candidly describing, often criticizing, and never endorsing indigenous and colonial slavery in the Pacific and Africa.

In *Voyages*, Delano offers a rich story of a life at sea, beginning with his experiences on a British East India expedition (1791-1793) where his encounters with Pacific natives led him to overturn presumptions of Christian superiority, sharply challenge missionary projects, and foster a "liberal acquiescence" toward various world religions. His narrative and the authorized appended biography also offer fascinating and astonishingly objective discussions of cannibalism—drawn from interviews with

castaways and from his own family history. One can't help wondering how much Melville may have gleaned from Delano's reflections on the subject.

Delano is also a valuable reporter on the early American China trade. He describes friendly relations with the Cantonese and boasts of the Middle Kingdom's greatness, though not without critically observing troubling practices such as capital punishment, foot-binding and infanticide. Like many Western traders in the Pacific, Delano misses a lot, but he is often conscious of his blindness, and this *seeing* and *unseeing* leads him to powerful revelations about the human condition. Losing a boat in rough water off the coast of Australia, Delano sees one of his panicked crewmen thrashing towards him. In one of the most striking admissions in maritime literature, Delano tells us how relieved he is to see his fellow sailor sink beneath waves. In a world of postured and pasteboard prose, Delano's unadorned honesty is exceptional. Did moments like this in Delano's narrative influence Melville's own complicated, often painful search for truth in words?

Little effort has been made to read the entire *Voyages* beyond the narrow fictional context established by Melville's novella. On its own, Delano's *Voyages* represents an important early nineteenth-century dialogue with humanistic values, a challenge to presumed Christian and Western superiority, and an adumbration of what has come to be called globalism and multiculturalism even in the course of high-stakes investment over dangerously high seas. The enlightened, dialogic nature of Delano's narrative raises, finally, great questions: What did Melville really learn from Delano? Why did he use Delano's narrative the way he did?

Critical Reception of Character and Text

Melville's adapted source for *Benito Cereno* was noticed by at least one contemporary critic. The reviewer for New York's *Evening Post* (October 1855) playfully jabbed Melville for "taking the same liberty with Captain Amasa Delano that he did with my old acquaintance, Israel Potter," noting that Delano published *Voyages* "nearly forty years ago," and that Melville took his experience with the slave ship and "turned [it] into a romance." ⁵

The connection between Delano and Melville was restored for twentieth-century readers by Harold H. Scudder and published in a 1928 *PMLA* article that included a portrait of Delano and a complete reprint of Chapter 18 describing his retaking of the slave ship, *Tryal*, off Santa Maria Island, Chile, in 1805. Scudder claims that Melville "found his story ready made," yet he marks the differences between Delano, who "sets down the facts of his thrilling and unforgettable experience," and Melville, who "transformed them into a Gothic masterpiece." ⁶

Objecting to Scudder's simplistic appraisal of Melville and his source, Rosalie Feltenstein offers in 1947 the first detailed comparative analysis of Delano's account and Melville's story. Feltenstein describes "a flatly matter-of-fact account, written with as much artistry and emotion as one would find in a weather report," where "Delano emerges as a brave, shrewd sea captain, who gives his crew plenty of good, wholesome whippings and who is less interested in the nature of evil than in the Spanish captain's efforts to deprive him of salvage rights." ⁷ In the four decades that followed, several

comparisons between Delano's and Melville's rendering of the *Tryal* episode have been published by critics including Margaret Jackson (1960), Max Putzel (1962), Marjorie Dew (1965), David Galloway (1967), Robin Ward (1982), Sandra A. Zagarell (1984), Lea Newman (1986), and H. Bruce Franklin (1997).⁸

Putzel offers one of the more creative comparisons of Delano's and Melville's work and, unlike Feltenstein, he recognizes that Delano is also dealing with moral problems, "though in a fairly crude and naive way." Putzel stresses that Melville "sees a universe like Shakespeare's or Sophocles' . . . where the wisest man must admit he sees little more than a fool."⁹ But as we shall see, the writer, Amasa Delano, also struggled with and admitted to the limits of his human perception and understanding.

Putzel's essay devotes an entire section to the historical Delano. Drawing from Samuel Eliot Morison's *Maritime History of the United States* (1941), and Delano's own *Voyages*, Putzel briefly sketches an "orderly man adventuring in a violently disordered world," who "has compensated for a lack of schooling by much reading and despite hardships and losses, retains an optimistic view of human nature and a balanced, disinterested tolerance of its vagaries." Most interesting, perhaps, is Putzel's reading of Delano's portrait appearing as a frontispiece on *Voyages*: "Not only does he seem youthful in his early fifties: he has the look of a towheaded boy, almost albino in the preternatural whiteness of his complexion." "Melville's imagination," Putzel adds, "could not but magnify that whiteness."¹⁰ Putzel's physiogomic profile of Delano—a mind keen but not deep, satisfied but not complacent, a man altogether robust, stylish, yet boyishly innocent and exceedingly white—may help explain Melville's masterful representation of that late, white, Enlightenment everyman imperiled by his own buoyant optimism and

tempered tolerance—the Amasa Delano that Warren D'Azevedo sadly called the "average middleclass northern American of his day." ¹¹

The first major attack on the historical Amasa Delano comes in 1988 from Sterling Stuckey and Joshua Leslie. Stuckey and Leslie accurately summarize Chapter 18 of *Voyages*, but they also insist that "a reading of additional chapters in *Voyages* is essential to understanding Melville's perception of Delano's character," and that "Melville had serious reservations about Delano as a human being." ¹² The critics find Delano's "instinctive support" of slavery evidenced by his note that the English commander John McClure, under whom Delano served, "found three or four females of Malay, from nine to twelve years old which he purchased at Timor . . . and five or six male slaves, from different eastern coasts." In a similar manner, the critics assert that Delano embodied "the spirit of imperialism" because he advises trading "trinkets" for "valuables, gold and pearls" when dealing with natives. ¹⁴ Despite Stuckey and Leslie's inability to find evidence in *Voyages* for Delano's "moral degeneracy," their scholarly excavations do provide us with important unpublished documents from Chile's Archivo Nazionale that prove Delano, his disgruntled crew members, and Benito Cereno had very different perspectives on the *Tryal* incident, and that Delano edited documents for inclusion in *Voyages*.

Delano appends ten depositions to his narrative, but Stuckey and Leslie locate omitted documents including one wherein Cereno calls Delano a "monster" behind a "crooked scheme." Other documents include testimonies from five crewmembers who were Botany Bay convicts who had secreted themselves aboard Delano's vessel, *Perseverance*. It is not surprising that Delano would reject these documents: Don

Cereno's aspersions were outrageous and the testimonies by the stowaways were unreliable. Delano openly admits, "Amongst those who swore against me were the three outlawed convicts" and "Amongst other atrocities, they swore I was a pirate" (329); but Delano also falsely states that the printed documents "are inserted without alteration" (331). According to Stuckey and Leslie, Delano wrote in the words "the generous Captain Amasa" before his own surname.¹⁵ After a fresh look at the evidence, Mark C. Anderson asks: "Delano's omission and interpolation may well represent the actions of a guilty man, but guilty of what? . . . Had Delano simply left his tale as first-person narrative sans depositions the tale may well have been more convincing."¹⁶ We might here be reminded of one young Herman Melville who attested to have "stated such matters just as they occurred" in the Preface to his at least partly fictional *Typee* (1846).¹⁷ Is Delano, like Melville, so convinced that what he says is—in the larger sense—complete, honest and just, that he'll risk perjury and swear its authenticity? Delano is editing to compensate for what he believes is an unfair representation of the case. Melville and a host of critics, however, were able to see through Delano's patchwork. Although motivated by the same notions of *truth-making* that shape both great literature and realpolitik, Delano lacks the artistry to deceive. Anderson concludes: "In the historical nondepositional text, Delano, in fact, appears to be 'generous' whereas through the depositions, because of Delano's editing, his self-proclaimed generosity is tarnished."¹⁸

In another recent analysis of Delano's and Melville's narratives, Richard V. McLamore focuses on the rhetorical strategies of disguise, parody and representation, but he also performs a strange act of bio-fictive criticism that assaults the historical Delano.

Although McLamore deftly illustrates the way in which "Melville . . . mimes the mariner's textual strategies" exposing the evasive and often contradictory "self-representation" in Delano's stated motives for retaking the *Tryal*, he wrongfully accuses the real man of "religiously-colored" deceit, prejudice, and greed-driven imperialism that prefigured "both the creation of the Monroe Doctrine in the 1820s and Young America's espousal of Manifest Destiny in the 1850s." ¹⁹ Looking through Melville's text and conflating fact and fiction, McLamore exaggerates Delano's "mercenary motivations," echoing Don Cereno's claims that the American is a mere pirate. McLamore suggests, for example, that Melville's renaming of Delano's vessels as *Bachelor's Delight* (the name of Ambrose Cowley's famous pirate ship) and *Rover* (a well-known euphemism for buccaneer) implicates the historical Delano as a "grasping brigand." While exaggerating Delano's cruelty toward his crew and his enthusiasm for recapturing the slave ship, McLamore also posits that a sequel to Melville's tale would have Delano "installed as Benito Cereno's successor as commander and owner of the *San Dominick* and its cargo." ²⁰

Delano, Melville and Slavery

Whereas the critical reception emphasizes Delano's faults, seeming to read his actions through Cereno's resistance or Melville's irony, a closer study of *Voyages* reveals

the more complex dimension of his character. In *Voyages* Amasa Delano shows no interest in pirating or trading slaves, though he was exposed to both evils during his lifetime. Recalling his dreadful teenage service on a "depraved" privateer during the American Revolution, Delano measures civilized progress by certain correctives: since "Much has been done to put an end to the miseries of slavery," now let us "put an end to those sufferings which spring from privateering . . ." (204). In the case of the slaver *Tryal*, Benito Cereno literally falls into his care as a distressed fellow officer. This does not absolve Delano of his role in the brutal retaking of the ship, during which many slaves are killed and badly wounded, despite their "desperate courage." The morning after the battle, Delano unflinchingly describes the "truly horrid" condition of the Africans who suffered at the hands of the whites. Yet it is the vengeful Spanish who must be restrained. Delano tells us he had to "prevent them from cutting to pieces and killing these poor unfortunate beings [the slaves]. . . . I commanded them not to hurt another one of them, on pain of being brought to the gang-way and flogged" (327-328). Delano even keeps Benito Cereno from stabbing a slave. Although shared responsibility for the tragedy of slavery is an important theme in *Benito Cereno*, the specific title Melville gives his story is clearly not arbitrary.

Although in Delano's account he and Cereno share responsibility for the violence, Melville heightens Delano's role and makes the racial conflict more complex. We might ask why Melville intensifies black violence aboard the *San Dominick*? Looking closely at the character of Babo and comparing *Benito Cereno* to Harriet Martineau's novel about Toussaint L'Ouverture, *The Hour and the Man* (1840), Charlene Avallone argues that Melville "altered his historical source to show a slave uprising as motivated not by desire

for liberty, in Martineau's view, but by vindictiveness." Avallone observes that Melville's "story maintains a binary racial division through the comparative sadism and calculating vengefulness it emphasizes in its blacks," and she finds that this "hyperbolic vengeance in Melville's portrait of blacks . . . makes it difficult to find a significant anti-slavery stance in the story." ²¹

I believe there is a strong anti-slavery stance in *Benito Cereno*, but Melville doesn't pander to easy liberal politics or pour the longing sentiment one finds in Whittier's "The Farewell" (1838) and Longfellow's "The Slave's Dream" (1842). Melville knows that revolutions are bloody—that both whites and blacks will suffer—and I agree with Avallone that "Melville is frightened" by this inevitable change. Melville certainly depicts blacks as powerfully intelligent and capable of orchestrated rebellion. And yet it's hard to miss the fictional Delano's despicably patronizing complicity and blindness to the horrors of slavery. At one point, the fictional Delano even offers to buy the slave Babo, presumably to use as a manservant. This dim view represents the attitude of so-called progressive northerners who oppose slavery (but not class-based servility) and are unwilling to risk their peace and prosperity to challenge its existence. ²²

The historical Delano's obedience to laws protecting "property" are disappointing but not exceptional, and Melville must have connected these failings to his beloved father-in-law, the counselor and judge, Lemuel Shaw, a public man harshly criticized by abolitionists for upholding fugitive slave laws in Massachusetts. Discussing *Voyages'* Chapter 18, the writer for the *Evening Post* (Oct. 1855) wryly states that "it was hard" for Delano "after having enforced a sort of fugitive slave law on so grand a scale, and in so bloody a manner, to get more kicks than half-pence in return." ²³

Eric J. Sundquist is among the few critics who have connected Delano to Shaw. "In Delano," Sundquist writes, "Melville seems to pillory his own father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, who presided in the trial and return to slavery of Thomas Sims, declaring the Fugitive Slave Law constitutional" ²⁴ As noted earlier, Robert K. Wallace has uncovered documents showing that in 1818, Lemuel Shaw prepared the contract for a southern edition of Delano's *Voyages* (and we might imagine that years later Melville and Shaw exchanged at least a few words about this book). Wallace investigates Shaw's controversial decisions in 1842 and 1851 to uphold fugitive slave laws, and the influence those decisions had on the composition of *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd* (1891). Wallace finds that Shaw faced a "conflict in which an otherwise resourceful and honorable man becomes complicit in the inhumanity of slavery because he feels the rule of law leaves him no room to do otherwise."²⁵ The historical Delano is also, in principle, opposed to slavery, and he represents a similar case as a captain accountable to the laws and codes of the sea, even when adherence to these laws causes human suffering. It is Melville's oblique critique of slavery and the ambiguity of violence perpetrated by both whites and blacks that frustrate some readers. Sundquist writes: "Melville, like Delano and like the American government through the 1850s, cagily suppresses that image and, retreating into the resolute silence of legal documentation, returns the question to the courts. In doing so, he incorporates every tangled aspect of the crises over slavery articulated in the decades before the war" ²⁶

There's ample evidence that the historical Delano tried to untangle moral and social issues connected to race. In Chapter 16 of *Voyages*, he criticizes the Spanish enslavement of South American natives: "I have been struck with horror to hear a

Spanish priest call them brutes; telling me at the same time they were not Christians, and no better than cattle" (228). Delano's further criticism of hypocritical, Christian-sponsored imperialism and slavery carries a very Melvillean ring. "Thus, 'thinks I to myself,' goes the world—one man robs another of his country, his wealth, and his liberty; and then says he is a brute, and not a Christian" (*Voyages* 229).

As penetrating as Avallone's and Sundquist's arguments are, a fair evaluation of Delano's views must also include his comments on Africans. On a trip to Cape Town in 1807, Delano writes extensively on colonial slavery. He says the Dutch use the Hottentots "in the most barbarous manner, flogging them most brutally with thongs of hides, and firing small shot into their legs and thighs on the most trivial occasions" (551). The Dutch are also "greatly prejudiced" against the Bosjessmen. "A peasant talks as coolly of shooting a couple of Bosjessmen (sic) as he would a pair of partridges" (552). Delano goes on to describe the Caffres as a "species of negroes . . . tall, athletic and manly, . . . warlike and industrious" who at least on one occasion show more kindness and generosity than the white peasantry in assisting the shipwrecked crew of an American vessel.²⁷ Some of Delano's descriptions of the native Africans are both racialistic and racist—though certainly less so than those of his elder contemporary Thomas Jefferson. Delano more than favorably compares South African free blacks to lower class whites, noting the "free coloured people of the town are chiefly mechanics and fishermen, and are industrious, and support their families very comfortably," while the Boers are a "wretched set of slothful, indolent men, living in miserable hovels . . ." (545, 546).

A reading of his narrative would lead one to conclude that Delano is one of those Enlightenment travelers attempting to process the world through a paradigm that rationalizes a certain degree of racial inequality as part of the varieties and vagaries of the human condition. In considering Delano's actions and words regarding the *Tryal* episode, one can only commend Melville for his brilliant exploitation of the historical Delano's inability to see what was happening aboard the slave ship and his subsequent eagerness to restore the human cargo to its Spanish owners. And although not an issue for Melville, critics are justified in exposing the historical Delano's financial motivations for retaking of the slave ship and his attempt to conceal these desires as generosity. Unjustified is the complete character assassination of the man, Amasa Delano. Flaws notwithstanding, Delano is not the "moral degenera[te]" condemned by Stuckey and Leslie, nor a "superficial ugly American" driven by religious and nationalistic greed, as McLamore charges.²⁸ A complete reading of Delano's *Voyages* reveals many of humanistic values and conflicts we would come to appreciate in Melville's writing.

Liberal Education in the Pacific

Amasa Delano was born into a family of shipbuilders in Duxbury, Massachusetts. Too restless and adventure-seeking for the schoolroom—an oversight he would later regret and strive to amend—he spent his days hunting, fishing, boating and swimming around Plymouth Bay. It is reported that at age eleven, he rescued his six-year-old brother from drowning, a foreshadowing of the lives saved and lost during his many years at sea.²⁹ Early in the American Revolution, at age fourteen, he joined the local militia and

later served aboard the privateer *Mars* on a deplorable nine-month cruise. Delano described privateering as "licensed robbery" that "enables a wicked and mercenary man to insult and injure even mutual friends on the ocean" (203). In keeping with his fairness, Delano "would not say that all men engaged in this business are wicked and corrupt," but he finds "few situations could be imagined where a man's conscience, his moral feelings, his sentiments of honour, and his generous ambitions would suffer more" (204). In the later years of the Revolution, Amasa worked for his father and, as embargoes dissolved, sailed trade ships to the West Indies. His first voyage to China was made as the navigator aboard the *Massachusetts*, the largest American ship of its day. The *Massachusetts* was sold shortly after its arrival in Canton in the fall of 1790, and Delano took a position in Whampoa supervising repairs on a vessel belonging to the Danish East India Company.³⁰ After completing the job, he sailed to Macao where he caught the eye of British commodore John McClure.

Impressed by the skills and ambition of the twenty-seven-year-old American, McClure signed Delano aboard HMS *Panther* for an East India Company expedition of the Western Pacific that began in April 1791.³¹ Delano remarks that the expeditionary officers had not been degraded by "the pursuits of trade," and they were educated through experience in "the variety of countries and people where they visited," giving them "a practical liberality of mind . . ." (44-45). During this two-year voyage of exploration and discovery Delano kept "minute and full" journals, read voraciously and underwent his own liberal education that tested his humor and resilience as a stranger abroad.

Delano soon attracts the attention of the British officers, who call him

"Jonathan"—a patronizing nickname for a callow Yankee— and almost immediately make him the object of a seaman's prank. On 16 May 1791, at the Babuyan Islands of the Philippines, Delano is shown a piece of gold said to have been found locally.

Encouraged by the other sailors, he hikes miles up a jungle river with a Malabar guide instructed by the pranksters to point upstream whenever questioned. Finding nothing, Delano confesses: "I saw myself . . . [a] ridiculous dupe. In the midst of my vexation, I could not help laughing, and almost crying" (50). He is resolved to make the best of his situation, turning his fool's hunt into a field study of the soil, flora, and fauna. A sack brought along for gold is filled with tropical birds "of a plumage surpassing in beauty and richness, the finest colors of the mineral kingdom" (51).

The McClure expedition proceeds to Palau, east of the Philippines, where Delano meets King Abba Thulle, "a wise and benevolent leader," who overturns presumptions that Christian cultures are morally superior. We learn that Abba Thulle has warned the rebellious Artingallians that warriors will arrive in three days to commence fighting. A confounded Delano responds:

Although I was a Christian, and was in the habit of supposing the Christians superior to these pagans in the principles of virtue and benevolence, yet I could not refrain from remonstrating against this conduct on the part of the king. I told him that Christian nations considered it as within the acknowledged system of lawful and honourable warfare to use stratagems against enemies, and to . . . take them by surprise. (60)

Abba Thulle is shocked. Should the rebels be subdued by stratagem and surprise, the king explains, they would hate him and be forever unfaithful. "[T]his elevated character excited my admiration the more for this excellent pagan," writes Delano. "Christians might learn of Abba Thulle a fair comment upon the best principles of their own religion" (60).

We should not be surprised if Delano's phrasing sounds a bit like Ishmael when he speaks of his cannibal companion, Queequeg, in *Moby-Dick*. Later in the expedition, Delano describes his reaction to religion in Malaysia. Just as Ishmael warms to worshipping Queequeg's Kokovoko idol, Delano says "When I first saw . . . the worship of the Malays, I was disposed to think it ridiculous and absurd, but it appears sufficiently rational upon examination, and changes all its associations when its object is understood" (161). By the early nineteenth century, American missionaries had begun Christianizing many Asia-Pacific cultures, and this outraged skeptics like Delano, whose enlightened commentary may have inspired, among others, Melville, who read *Voyages* and launched his own attacks on Christian proselytizers and the march of civilization in *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), and *Moby-Dick* (1851). After long discussions with Captain Mayhew Folger about his discovery of the Pitcairn Island colony populated by descendents of the *Bounty* mutineers and their female Tahitian partners, Delano idealizes a Typee-like "Paradise" of "uncorrupted children of nature" whose "graceful forms and artless manners" bespeak "innocence and purity" (150-151). For this unspoiled, bilingual, inter-ethnic community on Pitcairn, Delano promotes liberal education over religious training:

let . . . a liberal acquiescence in the diversities of character, be much more an object than any compend of particular views and principles which

might be found in the dogmas of sects To send missionaries among them, would be an unfortunate experiment upon their peace and virtue, unless the individuals selected should be much more enlightened and liberal than any other of that class of persons with whom I have been fortunate enough to be acquainted. No mode of destroying their harmony would probably be more successful (150-151)

After months of observing the various religious and cultural possibilities of the Pacific, Delano concludes "the subject substance and object of faith are so much alike in all countries, that a thorough knowledge of them is pretty certain to give a catholic spirit to every reflecting traveler" (161).

This catholic spirit is manifested during the mariner's assistance of eight shipwrecked Japanese sailors discovered in Oahu, Hawaii, in 1806. Delano assists the lost strangers and attempts their return to Osaka, but the threat of foul weather in unfamiliar waters forces their landing at Canton. With the aid of a linguist, Delano conducts an interview and learns that in order to survive, the Japanese castaways drew lots and cannibalized some of their own men. Knowledge of these cannibalistic acts does not, however, detract from his admiration: "I could discover the greatest number of favorable traits in the character of these people of any I ever saw" (402). This forgiving assessment reminds us of Tommo's response to Toby's disparagement of the Typee. "Why, they are cannibals!" said Toby. "'Granted,' I replied, 'but a more humane, gentlemanly, and amiable set of epicures do not probably exist in the Pacific'" (NN *Typee* 97). Delano further observes that the Japanese cannibals "were remarkably religious, but I could not find out exactly their tenets." ³² This ability to see beyond the horrors of

cannibalism and recognize a people's religious roots without its branching principles is echoed later in *Typee* when Tommo, even after extensive exposure to Marquesan ritual and iconography, laments "the religious theories of the islands were a complete mystery to me." Tommo concludes, "I saw everything but could comprehend nothing" (173, 177).

Delano's acceptance of cannibalism must also be understood through an old family story. We learn from the anonymous biography appended to *Voyages* that Amasa was named after an "unfortunate" uncle who fought with Roger's Rangers during the French and Indian Wars. Misled by their scouts near Canadian lines and "reduced to the greatest extremity" the men were "compelled to eat an Indian child which they met in the woods." When the Indians uncovered this murder, they massacred Uncle Amasa and his men in a "most horrid manner" (*Voyages*, "Biographical," 580). What might otherwise have been concealed as a dark family secret is revealed in an authorized biography. Delano does not hide his gruesome skeletons.

Along with Owen Chase's account of the *Essex* disaster, Melville might easily have remembered Delano's acceptance of cannibalism when he wrote *Typee*. Although Tommo deems cannibalism a "rather bad trait in their [the Typee] character," he adds that it is only to "gratify the passion of revenge upon their enemies" (NN *Typee* 125). This extended explanation of cannibalism adds another suggestive valence to the specter of man-eating hovering above Aranda's bones lashed to the bow of the *San Dominick* in *Benito Cereno*. The slaves aboard the *San Dominick* deserve, we might agree, their vengeance upon the man who robbed them of their families and freedom.³³

Delano experienced an often violent and confusing world, and his narrative reflects his varying positions and attitudes about politics and culture. When McClure's

Panther lands at Palau, Delano remarks without irony that the intention is to extend "the blessings of civilization, agriculture, and Christianity among the Pelew islanders," but he soon discovers that the heathen chief, Abba Thulle, is more Christian than many Christians. Hearing reports a few years later of continued bloodshed on Palau, he can't help bemoaning the "unhappy alteration in the character and conduct of this people since they became acquainted with the Europeans" (77). Delano praises Abba Thulle's "justice" toward an open enemy, but he is shocked by the king's sanctioning of prison torture—"to cut off the leg of a prisoner and beat his own face with it" (66).

Delano has mixed feelings about the people of what he calls the "Oriental isles." He honors the natives of Palau and Hawaii, but he criticizes the "hostile and treacherous" inhabitants of New Guinea, and repels vicious Malay pirates off the coast of Sumatra. Orientalists are often accused of generalizing and totalizing the peoples of the East; and though Delano makes broad, even racist statements about particular groups, he tries to stay true to his experiences. Delano calls the Malays of Sumatra "notoriously treacherous," but says he is "treated civilly" by the Malay colonists on New Guinea. Delano explains that trade with the Malays is inhibited only by their "suspicion" that "we would be unjust, and perhaps violent, using force of our armed vessels against their own if we should find any occasion for a quarrel." Delano adds: "the Europeans and others have not conducted themselves with sufficient integrity and disinterestedness to remove all apology for this suspicion" (85). Although critics have described *Voyages* as imperialist discourse, we find in Delano's narrative evidence that colonization is a worldwide practice. The Malays in New Guinea who had carved out a piece of the jungle, built houses, been attacked by natives—"Their object in making an exchange of islands

was the increase of their trade"—were not so different from the Europeans (84).

Colonization, the desire for more land and resources, is not an exclusively Western idea.

Delano and the China Trade

A closer reading of *Voyages* suggests that Delano's real problems lie not with his beliefs but with his perceptions. The experiences of the McClure expedition awaken Delano's interest in the Chinese and the flourishing China trade. Visiting the Philippine Islands in 1792, Delano finds that "the Chinese particularly are the most active and successful merchants and mechanics." In contrast, "the Spaniards are indolent, and have been long in the habit of relying upon the returns of the vessels, which they annually send to Acapulco" (166). Although a generalization in itself, Delano's comparison places East Asians above the Spanish in the measure of honest hard work. Critics such as Edward Said and Malini Johar Schueller speak repeatedly of the western-made Orientalist dichotomy of the ancient, dissipated East and the young, vital West.³⁴ Delano's pattern, however, sets the Spanish on the Old World cushions of pelf and depicts the Chinese as energized, unbounded entrepreneurs.

Outbound on his own entrepreneurial endeavors, Delano captains the family-built *Perseverance* in November 1799, rounding Cape Horn, and joining many Americans in coasting South America and taking fur seals for trade in China.³⁶ After months of sealing, Delano's vessels anchor off the Galapagos Islands where he vividly describes the birds, lizards and tortoises thriving on this alternately sea-sprayed and dry, "cindery" landscape,

"as if the whole island had undergone a revolution by volcano" (370). Mention of Delano's extensive, first-hand report of the Galapagos seems intentionally avoided by Melville in "The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles" (1854). In the fifth sketch of the "The Encantadas," Melville claims "you have but three eye-witness authorities worth mentioning touching the Enchanted Isles"—Cowley, Colnett and Porter. "Other than these you have but barren, bootless allusions from some few passing voyagers or compilers" (NN *Piazza Tales*, 143). Perhaps Melville feared that reference to Delano would expose his heavy, unacknowledged borrowing for *Benito Cereno*. And Melville may have blanched after reading Delano's criticism of Daniel Defoe who "had the injustice to avail himself of the hard earned labours of Selkirk, by the publication of his journal, under the title of 'The History of Robinson Crusoe'" (309). Melville spent a month on and among the Galapagos Islands in 1841, and visited them on at least two subsequent occasions, but most scholars agree that he also drew from other published sources, including Chapter 20 of Delano's *Voyages* to fully illustrate "The Encantadas."

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After a successful harvest of sealskins and profitable sale and trade at Canton, Delano returns to Boston in November 1802 and prepares for another voyage that begins the following fall. Again loaded with sealskins, the *Perseverance* arrives at Macao on 10 November 1806, and Delano secures the services of the Hong merchant, Consequa, a man of questionable integrity in the eyes of some American businessmen.³⁸ Delano, however, has no problems dealing with Consequa, adding "both father and son were intimate with, and very friendly to me" (533).

Chroniclers of the early China trade were preoccupied with fears of being cheated. Sullivan Dorr, one of the more vitriolic of the American critics—who swears "I know of no honest Chinamen"—complains in a letter to his father in 1799 that when dealing with Consequa "you may be egregiously cheated."³⁹ The historian Tyler Dennett discloses instructions to a supercargo that warn "Consequa is a . . . Baboon you must not have anything to do with."⁴⁰ But Delano works well with Consequa and he defends Hong merchants, explaining their immense responsibilities. "[T]hey not only become surety for what the commander, or supercargo does at Canton; but for all they do previous to their arrival, and after they leave it, whilst any where within the jurisdiction of the China law . . ." (410). This is an insightful comment regarding Confucian principles of shared responsibility. Unlike the West where individuals are largely responsible for their own actions and not for those of their friends, co-workers, or even family members, Confucianism demands an interconnectedness of responsibility. If an American captain were caught smuggling, his Hong merchant would have to apologize to other members of the trade guild as well as bow before and pay fines to the Hoppo, the customs chief.

Delano and Consequa clearly enjoyed positive and profitable business relations; yet again, a careless conflation of fiction and fact by a Melville critic has led to a misreading of *Voyages*. Arguing for the fictional Delano's preoccupation with race, Rita A. Capezzi finds that Delano's description of "Don Benito's small, yellow hands" must be "recalling his recent advantageous trip to Canton where, like the real Delano, he possibly exploited the Cantonese." Drawing on Stuckey and Leslie's analysis of Delano's trade advice, Capezzi claims that Delano "engaged in unequal trade with Chinese, exchanging worthless trinkets for articles of real value." It is Capezzi, however, not Delano, who

underestimates the Chinese. Among the world's international traders, Cantonese at the turn-of-the-century were often the most sophisticated and exacting. Furs, sandalwood and silver—not trinkets—impressed buyers from the Middle Kingdom.⁴¹

If anything, Delano's brief history of international trade with China is unusually critical of Western abuses.

When the Europeans first visited this country, they were received by the Chinese with great kindness and hospitality, granting them every indulgence in the pursuits of commerce, which were reasonable. They at first had full liberty to go where they pleased; but the strangers soon began to abuse this indulgence, and conduct themselves in such a manner by taking liberties with their women, and other gross improprieties which a Chinese can never overlook" (531)

It is significant that Delano uses the word "strangers" to describe the Europeans with whom he must have culturally identified. Recognizing one's self as a *stranger* or *other* shows awareness of the complementary Occidental discourses used by the Chinese.⁴²

Contrary to Orientalist images of the decayed grandeur and lost order frequently used to portray ancient kingdoms of the East, Delano remarks that "China in modern times has been found to be foremost in the arts and sciences and in agriculture" (531). Moreover, Delano praises the Chinese government and its justice system. "It is one of the best-regulated governments in the world. The laws are just, and are maintained with strict impartiality" (531). Delano does, however, express the typical American disapproval of the Chinese law that insists on unconditional capital punishment for murder. Delano writes, "There is one law in China which will be condemned by the

people of countries where there is more freedom enjoyed, which is that if a person kills another, the laws require that his life should be taken as the only atonement. There is no difference made between the killing with premeditated malice, or by accident, or through the influence of passion."⁴⁴ In his novella, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Melville shows equal contempt for martial laws that do not recognize the extenuating circumstances in the killing of the abusive master-at-arms, John Claggart, by the angelic foretopman, Billy.

The inequitable treatment of women in China has also tempered many otherwise favorable American reviews of the culture since the eighteenth century. In 1798, Delano's one-time trading partner, André Van Braam, reports that "there is no country in the world in which the women live in a greater state of humiliation or are less considered than in China."⁴⁵ The missionary Charles Gutzlaff, after describing "Horrible" Chinese marriage practices such as polygamy and the selling of one's wife to another, exclaims "Whatever produces profit is followed most eagerly by the Chinese, without the smallest regard to decency."⁴⁶ Delano never experiences Chinese society outside the city walls of Canton; nonetheless, he is interested in challenging misinformation about women. He begins his discussion of Chinese women with an accurate survey of marriage customs, finding that "Marriages are much respected by the Chinese," even though they are arranged by parents. Writing about the wedding of Consequa's son in 1806, Delano says: "I had the privilege, which is not common, of knowing how the courtship and marriage was conducted" (533), and he is careful to explain that it is the custom "for every man to marry one woman who is his equal in rank, and that his parents think suitable for him" (532). Consequa's son is "about twenty years old, the bride seventeen or eighteen." Delano contrasts these Chinese customs to those of India where parents arrange

marriages for their children while they are still very young. Delano does very little editorializing beyond providing comparisons. It is true, he tells us, that wealthy men in China may take multiple wives or concubines; he only ventures to add "that it is not a common custom with the Chinese to put two wives into one house, as it is not agreeable to them to live together" (533). In the case of the Chinese, there is no Christian reproach of polygamy; Delano shows the tolerance and open-mindedness of a worldly traveler and not the religious dogmatism of a missionary.⁴⁷

Delano does, however, share the missionary's concern about the oppression of women in China, and he links this sexist history to the practice of foot-binding. After observing the bound feet of Han women, Delano hears from the Chinese that "the first cause of this custom . . . arose from its being inflicted on the women as a punishment, on account of an attempt made by them in some early period of the nation to interfere with the affairs of government" (541). Although no "first cause" is identifiable in the long and deliberate Confucian tradition of female subjugation, there were, in fact, women of political prominence who later became vilified, such as the Tang dynasty empress, Wu Zetian, who rose to power after killing her children. Later in that dynasty, Emperor Xuanzong's concubine had been such a questionable influence over the sovereign that his troops would not march until she was hanged. Accounts of these cruel and ambitious women, reconstructed by male Chinese historians, may help explain a crippling fashion like foot-binding. The subtext of Delano's comment links the practice of foot-binding to the censure of ambitious women and helps expose the culture of sexism and its corollaries in fashion and custom.

A darker aspect of Chinese sexism that deeply disturbed Western observers in the nineteenth century was the killing of female babies. "Such principles," writes Reverend Gutzlaff, "could only emanate from the devil."⁵² Delano calmly relays: "[I]t has been asserted by writers that Chinese women are in the habit of drowning a certain portion, say one third, of their female offspring in the rivers; but from the information that I have had on the subject, I am fully convinced that it is not correct" (539). Delano's presentation uncovers its own truth, however. He obtains his information from "respectable Chinese merchants . . . who appeared to revolt at the idea, and denied it altogether" (540). Respectable merchants are the last people who would admit to Chinese infanticide, and it seems Delano's positive attitude toward the Chinese makes it hard for him to believe that they would kill their own children. Here Melville's naïve and overly optimistic character is revealed elsewhere in the historical autobiography. Delano is probably correct in questioning the frequency of these acts, but in the same paragraph he testifies that these acts did occur. He speculates that infanticide arises "from the circumstance of the lower class of women in the suburbs of Canton having children by European or American fathers, and have exposed them in this manner to conceal it from their countrymen. I have on two instances seen infants floating down the river at Canton" (540). Delano's editorials are reserved; yet he implies that irresponsible American and European sailors have caused the Guangdong peasant women much hardship. Earlier in *Voyages*, Delano criticizes Westerners for "taking liberties with their women . . . which the Chinese can never overlook" (531). It is tragic that women who bear children from these interracial unions have to "expose" the babies (that is, drown them in the river where foreigners like Delano may see them) in order to "conceal" their behavior from the Chinese community

that never "overlooks" such moral transgressions. These unwanted children mark one of the great failings of the early East-West encounters.

Seeing Unseeing

In the pursuit of experience, wealth, justice, and knowledge, Delano struggles with the problems of seeing and not seeing. If the prank played on him by the British sailors of the McClure expedition teaches him to be more skeptical of gold strikes, the experience aboard the Spanish slaver shows him that calm surfaces often belie deep tribulation, a revelation that Melville exploits as a way of indicting the horrors of American slavery concealed by civil peace, commercial prosperity and social optimism. But Delano understands that seeing is not always *believing*, and even less often is it *knowing*. Again and again Delano anticipates Tommo's powerful admission in *Typee*: "I saw everything but could comprehend nothing" (NN *Typee* 177). Contrary to accusations that the author of *Voyages* conceals facts in a "desperate attempt to rescue his sense of self-worth,"⁵³ Delano gives us the truth behind the shadows. His narrative, as accurately described by the critic for *North-American Review* (July 1817), speaks with "apparent openness and impartiality . . . and shows no inclination to conceal anecdotes . . . from a fear of the effect they would have upon his character with the reader."⁵⁴

In one of the most honest admissions in American literature of the sea, Delano relays the events of a bitter winter's day in Bass Strait off the south coast of Australia in 1804. With the *Pilgrim* anchored about two-thirds of a mile off shore in rough seas,

Delano and a crew of five men attempt to reach the beach in a small launch, but "the water rushed so rapidly into the boat, that in less than two minutes she sank like a stone" (467). Delano, along with his brother and fellow crewmen, struggle for the distant shore. In a few moments, panic strikes one of the seamen.

I saw one of my faithful sailors, a Swede, named John Fostram, making towards me with all possible exertion. I turned my head from him and used every effort to prevent his reaching me, which I greatly apprehended he would; but the poor fellow finding his attempts fail, relinquished the oar he had grasped in his hand, his head gradually lowering, until his strength being entirely exhausted, he gave up, and sank.

The seaman drowns and Delano confesses:

I never until then had experienced any satisfaction at seeing a man die; but so great is the regard we have for ourselves when in danger, that we would sooner see the whole human race perish than die ourselves. I remember but few incidents in the course of my life, that were more gratifying to me than that of Fostram's sinking. (468)

Two of Delano's men die in the accident; his brother survives. In "seeing a man die," Delano vividly apprehends the selfish, preservationist nature of being human. The reviewer in 1817 finds that Delano's "feelings on seeing them die, is given in so bold and undisguised a manner" and "is so different from the affected accounts we usually get from survivors in such cases, and at the same time so descriptive of the selfishness which always operates when great interests are at stake."⁵⁵ Of this same passage, Alexander K. Laing writes: "the candor of this narration is exceptional in a period when self-sacrificing

heroism was a dominant theme in fiction and poetry." Similarly, Geoffrey C. Ward views Delano's testimonies as "entirely free of the self-justifying piety of his age. For better and for worse . . . Amasa Delano reported exactly what he saw and heard and felt."

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The exposed honesty of Delano's narrative ends with admissions of financial failure. After a final fruitless voyage to the West Indies in 1810, Delano retired to a quiet, austere life in Boston. He married a widow, Hannah Appleton, sometime after 1812, but they had no children. In 1816, at the age of fifty-three, he began writing his narrative—to share useful knowledge of sailing and the world, to "employ and amuse my mind," and "to spend, in a rational and profitable manner, a number of months which might otherwise have been left a prey to melancholy and painful meditations" (15-16). The wealth of his experience notwithstanding, Delano's last years were spent in genteel poverty. His biographer writes that "it is a matter of regret that a man of his generous and disinterested feelings, and who has made such great exertions to secure a handsome living in this world, should be thus unfortunate at his time of life, which is now approaching to old age, and in which adventures cannot be resorted to for riches or support" (593). But more than any material legacy, the narrative of Amasa Delano is enduring evidence of a life's worth.

Conclusion

A close study of the historical and fictional Amasa Delano creates a puzzling dilemma: If Melville, particularly while writing *Typee* and *Moby-Dick*, found a kindred

spirit in Delano, why would he brutally satirize him in *Benito Cereno*? One answer may be found in the way Melville, by the 1850s, turned away from anything resembling hero-worship or aggrandizing biography, declining an offer, for example, to write the life of Commodore Matthew Perry after he was recommended by Hawthorne. Melville saw clearly how heroism and success were random products of cultural timing, not the pure flowering of an individual's inherent qualities. Growing particularly weary of heroic tales of the American Revolution (both of Melville's grandfathers were veterans of the war) he produced the satiric *Israel Potter* (1855) roughly based on the anonymous *Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel Potter* (1824). A similar spirit may have urged Melville to exploit the autobiography of another Revolutionary War veteran, Amasa Delano, who attempts to honor his life's adventures by writing them down. This cynical attitude toward stories of "great men" made it easier for Melville to exploit their writings.

Melville was always truer to his philosophy and art than to historical or biographical facts. This form of fictional biography is controversial but not exceptional in literature. Drawing on a few shadowy details or crank histories, Shakespeare immortalized the villainous Richard III in his brilliant play, just as Peter Shaffer effectively demonized the great composer Antonio Salieri as the devilishly envious antagonist to Mozart in the popular play and film, *Amadeus*. Delano's contemporary, William Bligh, is commonly recognized as the viciously unyielding captain portrayed in James Hall and Charles Nordhoff's *Mutiny on the "Bounty"* (1932). Amasa Delano, among other observers and historians, writes sympathetically of both Bligh and his mutinous crew in chapter 6 of *Voyages*. Most controversially, perhaps, is William Styron's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). Using a

fictional, first-person voice, Styron alters several facts about Turner's life to suggest more of an antisocial, brooding, and sexually twisted figure. American historians, including Stephen Oates, seriously criticized Styron and opened an important debate on the ethics of changing historical facts for artistic effect. As a fearless writer of novels and stories, Melville freely welds facts and fiction, eagerly exploiting Delano's life and work as literary material.⁵⁷

This raises yet another question: Why untangle the fictional and historical Amasa Delano? Powerfully present in the consciousness of many readers, the fictional Delano is arguably more important in the way he dramatizes the ever-present American blindness and complicity to social and political abuses. Furthermore, we can't criticize Melville for reconstructing Delano's voice as Styron did with Turner. Distinct from the historical Delano's simple, first person account, Melville's narrator, as H. Bruce Franklin points out, "is more literary and more intellectual than Delano."⁵⁸ In contrast to the reader-character intimacy described earlier, Franklin and other critics find it hard to trust the narrator in *Benito Cereno*, remarking that his aloof and elevated tone makes it easier to disparage the American captain. Whether we feel close to or distant from the American captain, we would hope that by the story's end the narrator's and Delano's eloquent and presumptuous racism is exposed and that the actions of the purblind Delano are understood in terms of America's repeated failure to see the suffering it causes or ignores. But a close reading of Melville's *Benito Cereno* should not blind us to the man, Amasa Delano, whose writing has not only been a source for great fiction, but is itself a distinct and informing entity. Melvilleans must also get beyond the easy smears of "dumb Delano" when referring to the historical personage. Melville artistically exploited

a chapter from *Voyages* to create a brilliant story, but he must have also enjoyed and appreciated the larger narrative and its author's worldly open-mindedness.

Thirty years before the young Herman Melville would sign aboard the *Acushnet*, Delano describes exotic lands, people and cultures of the Pacific. Writing on Abba Thulle of Palau, Delano inverts the hierarchies privileging Christians over pagans, and commends the king for his wisdom and virtue. And yet he warns that the natives of the Pacific are also torturers, pirates, and colonizers, and that they live in fear of the equally brutal Europeans and Americans, adumbrating Melville's metaphor for universal inhumanity as "a shocking sharkish business enough for all parties" (NN *MD* 293). Delano demonstrates that Christians are no more "civilized" than the Pacific islanders; he denounces missionary intervention and advocates religious universalism based on tolerance and benevolence. Delano did, however, assist in the bloody suppression of a slave uprising aboard the *Trial*, and readers are right in condemning this act and the society that would have allowed a progressive like Delano to imagine it just. Like all humans, he was limited by the time and world in which his mind developed. But more than most men of any period in history, Delano is an adventuring spirit—curious, tolerant, and free of Christian moralizing—and he embodies Ishmael's creed, "I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote. I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts. Not ignoring what is good, I am quick to perceive a horror, and could be social with it—would they let me—" (NN *MD* 7).

And yet Delano has his own place distinct from the specter of Melville's fiction. Where Melville only dreamed of China,⁵⁹ Delano traveled and traded there, spending many months in Canton and reporting fairly on this remarkable moment in international

relations. Delano doesn't merely tolerate the Chinese, as did so many traders; he makes friends among them. His understanding of the Hong merchant's Confucian responsibilities is exceptional among his carping peers, and his history of European abuses in China helps explain the severe laws governing international contact and the restrictions placed on aliens. Delano also makes important observations regarding women in Chinese society, challenging and confirming information about marriage, foot-binding, and infanticide. Delano's commentary on culture, even his exposure of sexism in China, is conducted through level reporting and subtle suggestion rather than diatribe. This proffering bears little resemblance to the anti-Chinese jingoism common in the nineteenth century or the Orientalist discourse described by Said. "China is one of the most fertile and beautiful countries on the globe," Delano exclaims. It is "the first for greatness, riches, and grandeur of any country ever known" (542).

Writing from the perspective of an early American patriot and a trader in the world's oldest continuous civilization, Delano is conscious of the dangerous ethnocentrism and nationalism in the minds of many Americans and Chinese.

Virtue and vice, happiness and misery, are much more equally distributed to nations than those are permitted to suppose who have never been from home, and who believe, like the Chinese, that their residence is in the center of the world, of light, of privilege, and of enjoyment. National prejudices, to a certain extent, may be very useful, and possibly necessary; but they are always attended by considerable evils in the narrow and intolerant spirit which they perpetuate The more enlarged a mind becomes in its views of men and the world, the less it will be disposed to

denounce the varieties of opinion and pursuit, and the more it will enjoy the benevolent results to which wisdom and philosophy point" (256).

It's remarkable that there was only one public response connecting Delano's *Voyages to Benito Cereno* when Melville published the story in *Putnam's* in 1855. The Duxbury captain's testimonies had slipped into convenient obscurity. Since the Melville revival in the 1920s, a great deal has been written about Delano, but always in the shadow of Melville's fiction. In the late 1930s there was Franklin Delano Roosevelt's interest in his ancestral cousin's international adventures; a liberty ship, *SS Amasa Delano*, launched in his name in 1944;⁶⁰ and a 1994 popular edition of *Voyages* warmly introduced by another descendent, Eleanor Roosevelt Seagraves. Perhaps there's little more one could hope for in a legacy. But if the greatest truths of human history are laid down in words, then we might return to Amasa Delano's narrative with a fresh willingness to read and see what's truly alive there.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented as "Amasa Delano and the Dialogics of Honesty" at the conference, "Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: A Sesquicentennial Celebration," New Bedford, Massachusetts, 25 June 2005. I am grateful to Dennis Berthold, John Bryant, Robert K. Wallace, Kelly Richardson, Eleanor Roosevelt Seagraves and others who read and commented on this essay as it evolved.

2. Amasa Delano, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Comprising Three Voyages Round The World; Together with a Voyage of Survey and Discovery, in the Pacific Ocean and Oriental Islands* (Boston: E.G. House, for the author, 1817 [Facsimile print, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: The Gregg Press, 1970]), hereafter cited parenthetically as *Voyages*. A second edition of *Voyages* intended for distribution in the American South was printed in 1818. In addition to The Gregg Press, Praeger Press also issued a facsimile of *Voyages* in 1970 with a brief introduction by C. Hartley Grattan. The most recent paperback edition, *Delano's Voyages of Commerce and Discovery*, ed. Eleanor Roosevelt Seagraves (Stockbridge, Massachusetts: Berkshire House Publishers, 1994) adjusts some phrasing, punctuation and spelling, omits material relating to geography, navigation and weather, but retains Delano's important commentary on peoples and cultures.

3. Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860. The Writings of Herman Melville*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A MacDougall, G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1987), 47. Currently available is a new source-packed, convenient single edition of *Benito Cereno*, beautifully edited and introduced by Wyn Kelley (Bedford/St. Martins, 2008).

4. Hershel Parker explains: "All we know about Melville's reading of Delano is that he had it at hand when he was writing *Benito Cereno*!" (Correspondence 23 Dec. 2005). For notes on Henry Hubbard see NN *Moby-Dick*, 1018-1019. Robert K. Wallace located the contract for a new edition of *Voyages* to be "distributed to the Southern states," dated 30 March 1818 among the papers in the Lemuel Shaw collection at Boston's Social Law Library. See Wallace's "Fugitive Justice: Douglass, Shaw, Melville," in *Frederick Douglass & Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*, ed. Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 43, 61. Shaw hailed from Barnstable, Massachusetts and was very interested in sea narratives as evidenced by his urging the young Melville to write up his oceanic adventures in the way of Richard Henry Dana. See Hershal Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), I: 308-9.

5. *Benito Cereno* first appeared serially without a byline or source note in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* for October, November and December of 1855. Also without a source note, a slightly revised *Benito Cereno* was republished in *The Piazza Tales* in

1856. Letters between Melville and his publishers strongly suggest his intention to credit Delano as a source for *Benito Cereno* when the story appeared in a more formal book-length collection. But in contrast to the marketing strategy behind *Typee*, *The Piazza Tales* were advertised as fiction. In a letter to Dix and Edwards, Melville wrote: "In the corrected magazine sheets I sent you, a M.S. note is *appended to the title* of 'Benito Cereno'; but as the book is now to be published as a collection of 'Tales,' that note is unsuitable & had better be omitted." *Melville's Letters*, eds. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 179. "The Origin of Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" appeared in the New York *Evening Post*, 9 Oct. 1855, and is reprinted in *Herman Melville: the Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 469-470. The *Evening Post* reviewer warmly acknowledges Delano's maritime accomplishments and maintains a moderately sympathetic tone toward the American's retaking of the slaver, though not without quoting a passage graphically detailing the injuries suffered by the blacks.

6. Harold H. Scudder, "Melville's *Benito Cereno* and Captain Delano's *Voyages*," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 43 (1928), 502-32. *Tryal* is Delano's spelling in *Voyages*; depositions in Chile's Archivo Nacional list the ship's name as *Trial*.

7. Rosalie Feltenstein, "Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" *American Literature* 19.3 (1947): 246.

8. Margaret Y. Jackson, "Melville's Use of a Real Slave Mutiny in 'Benito Cereno'," *College Language Association Journal* 4 (1960): 79-93; Max Putzel, "The Source and Symbols of Melville's 'Benito Cereno'," *American Literature* 34 (1962): 191-206; Marjorie C. Dew, "Benito Cereno: Melville's Vision and Revision of the Source," in *A Benito Cereno Handbook*, ed. Theodore L. Gross (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1965), 178-184. David Galloway, "Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*: An Anatomy," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 9 (1967): 239-252; Robert J. Ward, "From Source to Achievement in 'Benito Cereno'," *Anglo-American Studies* 2 (1982), 233-240; Sandra A. Zagrell, "Reenvisioning America: Melville's 'Benito Cereno.'" 1984. In *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno."* Ed. Robert E. Barkholder (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992): 127-145. Lea Newman, *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Herman Melville* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986), 95-153. H. Bruce Franklin, "Slavery and Empire: Melville's 'Benito Cereno.'" In *Melville's Evermoving Dawn: Centennial Essays*. Ed. John Bryant and Robert Milder (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997), 147-161.

9. Putzel, 193.

10. Putzel, 195, 196. Putzel writes: "Another thing that must have struck Melville was Delano's appearance. The atmosphere of bland confidence which emanates from his broad face . . . is indescribable. He stares out at the world through eyes that are pale yet piercing, slightly squinting as from long familiarity with the sea yet strangely lacking in depth. . . . He holds himself stiffly upright, his head tilted slightly back; and his hair,

which has receded, is trimmed very short, ending in sideburns just below the ears, in one of which he wears a small jewel."

11. Warren D'Azevedo, "Revolt on the San Dominick," *Phylon* 17.2 (1956): 129-140. In an important essay stating that "Benito Cereno" is "one the sharpest indictments against slavery and concepts of white superiority in American fiction," D'Azevedo also provides a perceptive assessment of fictional Amasa Delano's character: "The strain of humanism in this man's intellectual make-up, with its preponderant element of paternalism, defines him most typically. Being narrow and complacent his 'humanism' actually prevents him from understanding clearly what he sees. His ready classification of people, his stock categories for behavior and appearances, lead him and the average white reader (more or less similarly afflicted) deeper into the enigma rather than out of it" (135).

12. Sterling Stuckey and Joshua Leslie, "Aftermath: Captain Delano's Claim Against Benito Cereno," *Modern Philology* 85.3 (1988): 267.

13. Stuckey and Leslie, 269; *Voyages*, 69.

14. Stuckey and Leslie, 269; *Voyages*, 100.

15. Stuckey and Leslie, 273-277.

16. Mark C. Anderson, "Stolen Flesh, Borrowed Fresh: Herman Melville's Benito Cereno Deposition," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 28.1 (1998): 67.
17. Herman Melville, *Typee*. 1846. *The Writings of Herman Melville*. Ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1968), 173. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
18. Anderson, 173. It must be admitted that *Voyages* contradicts itself regarding the American's desire for compensation, but Delano is hardened by Benito Cereno, who in an attempt to restore some of his lost honor and fortune, turns against his rescuer in a countersuit that is thrown out of the Concepción court. In a letter to the governor, Cereno admits that he promised Delano "half of the ship" if he could help reclaim the vessel and save the remaining crew. A financially strained Delano holds him to that promise, then asks for \$10,000, finally receiving \$8,000 and, upon his return to America in 1807, a letter and gold metal from the Spanish crown.
19. Richard V. McLamore, "Narrative Self-Justification: Melville and Amasa Delano." *Studies in American Fiction* 23.1 (1995): 49.
20. McLamore, 44-49. The editors of the Northwestern Newberry *Piazza Tales* stress that Melville creates the suggestion that Delano's first officer is a pirate—"no such hint of piracy occurs in Delano." In his revision of *Benito Cereno* for the *Piazza Tales*, Melville diminishes the imputation. "Probably Melville had belated scruples about blackening the

actual mate's reputation; though not named in "Benito Cereno," Rufus Low [(Delano's first mate; see *Voyages* 319, 326)] was a man easily identifiable within Melville's own Massachusetts orbit" See NN *Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces*, 586. In his discussion of piracy in *Benito Cereno*, H. Bruce Franklin interprets Delano's retaking of the *San Dominick* not as an individual act with biographical significance, but rather as a larger symbol of America's "taking over" the slave trade from Spain. See Franklin's "Slavery and Empire: Melville's 'Benito Cereno'" in *Melville's Evermoving Dawn: Centennial Essays*. Ed. John Bryant and Robert Milder (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997), 147-161.

21. Charlene Avallone, "Harriet Martineau, Herman Melville, and the Romancing of Haitian History." A paper delivered at the conference, "Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: A Sesquicentennial Celebration," New Bedford, Massachusetts, 24 June 2005.

22. In his erudite and eloquent, "Slavery, Revolution, and the American Renaissance," Eric J. Sundquist finds that "Melville's short tale comprehends the complex history and knotted contemporary issues of black bondage in America." Sundquist considers ways in which slavery was contested and defended in the American traditions of both violent revolution and domestic tranquility. See Sundquist's essay in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, ed. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 1-33. For another important challenge to claims that *Benito Cereno's* ambiguity disqualifies anti-slavery readings, see James Kavanaugh's "'That Hive of Subtlety': 'Benito Cereno' and the Liberal Hero," in *Ideology and Classic*

American Literature, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (New York: Cambridge U.P., 1986), 352-383, and H. Bruce Franklin's "Slavery and Empire: Melville's 'Benito Cereno.'" "

23. "The Origin of Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" *New York Evening Post* 9 (Oct. 1855); reprinted in *Herman Melville: the Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 469-470.

24. Sundquist, 27.

25. Wallace, "Fugitive Justice: Douglass, Shaw, Melville," in *Frederick Douglass & Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*, ed. Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 40.

26. Sundquist, 28.

27. "Hottentots" is the Afrikaans word for the pastoral people of southwest Africa, and "Bossjessmen" refers to what were commonly called "Bushman," Africans from the southwest Kalahari region. Caffires or Kaffirs is a derogatory term in South Africa for blacks, originally Bantu-speaking black Africans from the southeast.

28. Stuckey and Leslie, 273; McLamore, 35.

29. One of the few historical sources for Amasa Delano's life is the "Biographical Sketch—Written by a Friend" appended to *Voyages*. The sketch is overwhelmingly positive but it does divulge setbacks and failures. Samuel Eliot Morison draws from *Voyages* and this biography to portray Amasa Delano as a "rugged shipmaster," summing up his life as a private in the Continental Army at fourteen, a privateersmen aboard the *Mars* at sixteen, and a master shipbuilder at twenty-one. Amasa and his brother "built the sealers *Perseverance* and *Pilgrim*, and sailed as far as Tasmania where they matched rascalities and exchanged brutalities with one of the British convict colonies." See Morison's *Maritime History of Massachusetts: 1783-1860* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company), 1921, 62. In relief to his character assault on Delano in "Narrative Self Justification," Richard V. McLamore provides a reasonably fair survey of Delano's life in an entry for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 183, *American Travel Writers, 1776-1864*, eds., James Schramer and Donald Ross (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research, 1997), 90-95. McLamore does, however, play down a positive review of *Voyages* that appeared in *The North-American Review* (July 1817), quoting out of context and omitting the considerable accolades. James B. Connolly's *Master Mariner: The Life and Voyages of Amasa Delano* (1943) is little more than a third-person retelling of Delano's narrative, offering no additional historical background or critical interpretation. Delano family history is recorded in Joel Andrew Delano's *The Genealogy, History and Alliances of the American House of Delano, 1621 to 1899* (New York, 1899). In her introduction to *Delano's Voyage of Commerce and Discovery*, Eleanor Roosevelt Seagraves traces "a distant cousinship, going back about five generations, between F. D. R. and Amasa" (xxii). In *United States and East Asia*, Van Alstyne writes that "President Roosevelt . . .

liked to boast of the adventures of these ancestors of his and give them credit for his wartime notion of China in firm partnership with the United States" (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 19.

30. Canton is the former trade name for the Chinese city of Guangzhou and its large port in the Zhu (Pearl) River delta. Whampoa was the principal anchorage for all foreign vessels.

31. The British East India expedition took Delano from China to the Philippines, Palau, Australia, and throughout the islands of Indonesia, New Guinea, and Timor. Delano claims in 1817 that "No seaman from the United States has enjoyed the same opportunity for observations and discovery in the Eastern Ocean [Pacific], which was afforded to me by the voyage I made with Commodore McClure" (*Voyages* 16).

32. *Voyages*, 402. Delano notes, "They seemed to pay some adoration to the sun, the moon, and some of the stars I observed them at their devotions every night. They kept a religious and constant care over all their actions towards each other, which convinced me that they had lived under a good government . . ." (402). Delano's description of the castaway Japanese may have been in Melville's mind when he writes of whale ships that "often pick up such queer castaway creatures found tossing about the open sea on planks, bits of wreck, oars, whale-boats, canoes, blown-off Japanese junks, and what not; that Beelzebub himself might climb up the side and step down into the

cabin to chat with the captain, and it would not create any unsubduable excitement in the forecastle." *Moby-Dick or The Whale*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershal Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (1851; Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1988) 230-231.

33. On cannibalism in *Benito Cereno* see Barbara J. Baines "Ritualized Cannibalism in 'Benito Cereno': Melville's 'Black Letter' Texts," *ESQ* (1984) 30: 163-169, and Sterling Stuckey, "'Follow Your Leader': The Theme of Cannibalism in Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" in *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's Benito Cereno*, ed. Robert Burkholder (New York: G.K. Hall, 1992).

34 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 67. Malini Johar Schueller, *U. S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790-1890*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

36. Between 1793 and 1807 from ten to twenty American sealing ships including the Delano's *Perseverance* and *Pilgrim* visited islands like Más Afuera where, alone, 3,500,000 fur seals were killed. See James R. Gibson's excellent history, *Otter Skins, Boston Ships, and China Goods: The Maritime Fur Trade of the Northwest Coast, 1785-1841* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 252. Although Delano avidly records many details of the animal life abroad, he cannot foresee the results of the seal slaughters. Over-hunting quickly destroyed the seal population, forcing merchants to seek other trade valuables such as *bêche-de-mer* (sea cucumber) and sandalwood

gathered from the Hawaiian Islands. While they lasted, however, sealskins were in fairly steady demand in China. Delano reports that one fur seal skin could be sold in Canton for as much as three dollars and as little as thirty-five cents, with an average price of about one dollar.

37 Both Delano and Melville may have borrowed from descriptions of the Galapagos in James Colnett's *A Voyage to the South Atlantic and Round Cape Horn into the Pacific Ocean, for the Purpose of Extending the Spermaceti Whale Fisheries* (1798). See Reidar Ekner's "The Encantadas and Benito Cereno—On Sources and Imagination in Melville," *Moderna Språk* LX (1966): 263-264. Russell Thomas notes Delano's statement on the Irishman, Patrick Watkins (*Voyages* 372) as contributing to Melville's story of Oberlus. See Thomas' "Melville's Use of Some Source in The Encantadas," *American Literature* 3.4 (Jan. 1932): 432-456. For a comprehensive discussion of literary sources for "The Encantadas" see NN *Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces*, 600-617.

38 Consequa (Pan Zhangyao 1759-1823) was Delano's Hong merchant, representing the Li-chuan trading house

39 Sullivan Dorr. "Letters of Sullivan Dorr," ed. Howard Corning. *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 67 (1945): 178-364, 181.

40 Quoted in Tyler Dennet, *Americans in Eastern Asia: A Critical Study of the United States' Policy in the Far East in the Nineteenth Century*. 1922. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), 59.

41 Rita A Capezzi, "'Benito Cereno' and the *Narrative of Amasa Delano*: Melville's Re-writing of the Source," in *Reading the Sea: New Essays on Sea Literature*, ed. Kevin Alexander Boon and Karen E. Markoe (New York: Fort Schuyler Press, 1999), 157-171.

42 Every Westerner in Canton in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would have been called, at some point, *fanguei*, literally *foreign devil*. Up until very recently, this term, like the Japanese designation of *gaijin* for Westerners, was part of everyday public speech about foreigners. Delano, unlike many traders at the time, takes no offense.

43 Connections between *Benito Cereno*'s Captain Delano and *Billy Budd*'s Captain Vere are discussed by Wallace and Sundquist. See Wallace's "Fugitive Justice: Douglass, Shaw, Melville," in *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*, ed. Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 43, 61. Eric J. Sundquist finds that "Captain Vere's combined paternalism and rigid justice refine qualities found in both the fictional and the actual Captain Delano." See "Benito Cereno and New World Slavery" (1986), in *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's Benito Cereno*, ed. Robert E. Burkholder (New York: G.K. Hall, 1992), 159. The authorized edition for Melville's *Billy Budd* remains *Billy Budd, Sailor*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Merton Sealts (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

44 Delano, 531. This passage is seriously misrepresented in John Kuo Wei Tchen's *New York before Chinatown* (1999). In a discussion that attempts to show how "The patrician orientalism of admiration began to shift toward disdain," Tchen writes: "Amasa Delano, another merchant and perhaps the one most sympathetic to Chinese government, reported that there was 'only one law in China, which will be condemned by the people of countries where there is more freedom enjoyed.'" Tchen's abbreviated quotation suggests that Delano meant China had only one law, and that such simple justice was repugnant to freedom loving people. Delano clearly states that China's many just laws are enforced with strict impartiality. The *one* law worthy of condemnation, in Delano's view, was *eye-for-an-eye* capital punishment. See Tchen's *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882*. (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 38.

45 André Everard Van Braam Houckgeest, *An Authentic Account of the Embassy of the Dutch East-India Company to the Court of the Emperor of China in the Years 1794 and 1795*, (London: R. Phillips, 1798), Vol II, 184.

46 Charles Gutzlaff, *China Opened; or, A Display of the Topography, History, Customs, Manners, Arts, Manufactures, Commerce, Literature, Religion, Jurisprudence, Etc. of the Chinese Empire*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1838), Vol I, 496.

47 Writing of a sultan's harem in Jolo (current-day Philippines) that included "between two and three hundred" women, Delano does denounce polygamy: "What a sacrifice of the rights and interests of one sex to the caprice and tyranny of the other does a seraglio present! How fatal an enemy to the character, improvement and happiness of woman is this system of polygamy! And how grateful ought we to be to a code of ethics, laws, and religion, by which it is forbidden and prevented!" (180). This denouncement, however, is not based on Christian morality but on the need to protect the rights of women.

52 Gutzlaff, 491.

53 McLamore, "Amasa Delano," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 183, *American Travel Writers, 1776-1864*, eds., James Schramer and Donald Ross (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research, 1997), 94.

54 A review Delano's *Voyages* appears in *North-American Review and Miscellaneous Journal* 5.14 (July 1817): 244-257.

55 *North-American Review* 5.14 (July 1817): 254-255.

56 Alexander K. Liang, *The American Heritage History of Seafaring America* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co, 1977), 211. Geoffrey C. Ward's comments appear on the back cover of Delano's *Voyages of Commerce and Discovery*, ed. Eleanor Roosevelt Seagraves.

57. I thank Ann Bliss, Anne Scheck, Thomas Rand, Peter Eddy and Chloë Myers for a rich discussion of fictional biographies. In obscurity comparable to Amasa Delano's, one might consider Thomas Shadwell whom John Dryden sent up in his poem, "Mac Flecknoe" (1679). Although not a great writer, Shadwell was not the "anointed dullness" crowned by the poet, though he is remembered almost entirely through Dryden's satire. In *Confessions of Nat Turner*, Styron portrays Turner as single, childless, and given to fantasies about sexually assaulting white women. Styron also includes a scene that strongly suggests Turner was sexually attracted to men. One might read Styron's novel alongside Stephen B. Oates' *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

58. H. Bruce Franklin, 156.

59. Melville makes several references to China and the Chinese throughout his work. The ancient and antipodal Middle Kingdom represents vast time and distance, as in Ahab's sense of the sea's "long Chinese ages" (NN *MD* 116) or the "remote Chinese world" in Plotinus Plinlimmon's lecture on chronometricals in *Pierre* (NN *Pierre* 211-212). For Ishmael the Orient has a narcotic effect: "the Yellow Sea lulls us with mortal thoughts of long lacquered mild afternoons on the waves, followed by the gaudiest and yet sleepest of sunsets" (193). There's also a typical Orientalized sense of inscrutability found in Chinese drawings of whales in Chapter 55 of *Moby-Dick* and the "Chinese puzzle" in Chapter 39 of *White Jacket*. Attributed to Melville are one or more light

sketches "On the Chinese Junk" appearing in the short-lived weekly *Yankee Doodle* in 1847. These sketches satirize both the behavior of the Chinese crew visiting New York Harbor and the gawking American spectators. See the NN *Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces*, 430-442. In the poem "The Stone Fleet," Melville expresses nostalgia for China trade vessels, "An India ship of fame was she, / Spices and shawls and fans she bore." See *The Poems of Herman Melville*, ed. Douglas Robillard (Kent State University Press, 2000), 62. The Melville family dined on china decorated in East Asian garden patterns, and Herman collected Chinese art objects including a soap stone carving currently on display at the Melville house, Arrowhead, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

60. The *SS Amasa Delano*, completed in 1944 for service in World War II, was laid up in the Hudson River and sold to Strathport Shipping in 1951. After seventeen years of international service it was scrapped in Taiwan in 1968. A fitting end for a ship named after one of America's first traders in China.