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Disassembling the »SAN DOMINICK«

Sovereignty, the Slave Ship, and Partisanship in Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*

Ben Robinson

1.

From the late 15th until the 19th century the political economy of the »Atlantic world« was characterized to a significant degree by two apparently distinct operations. These are in turn imprinted in Atlantic history in two paradigmatic representations: the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), etched by Abraham Bosse,¹ and the diagram of the slave ship *Brookes* (1789). Each presents an aspect of the order and ordering of bodies of people and of people's bodies that defined, in decisive fashion, the Atlantic »common-wealth.«

The famous frontispiece illustrates that »Art« by which, according to Hobbes, »is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE.«² It is as such a representation of representation since, in the *Leviathan*, representation or the ability to personate is the



Fig. 1: Frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan, Or the Matter, Forme & Power Of A Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall And Civill*, London 1651; etching by Abraham Bosse.

¹ The attribution to Bosse is made by Horst Bredekamp in his extensive analysis of the frontispiece. See Horst Bredekamp: *Thomas Hobbes visuelle Strategien*, Berlin 1999, pp. 39–52.

² Thomas Hobbes: *Leviathan*, ed. by Richard Tuck, Cambridge, MA 1996, p. 9. The text will subsequently be cited in brackets under the abbreviation: *Leviathan*.

very condition of political life. Originally a Greek theatrical device, πρόσωπον, the wearing of a mask to express character, it was transposed into Roman law as *persona*, »any Representer of speech and action as well in Tribunalls, as Theaters« (Leviathan, p. 112). For Hobbes, personation is the ascription of a unity where

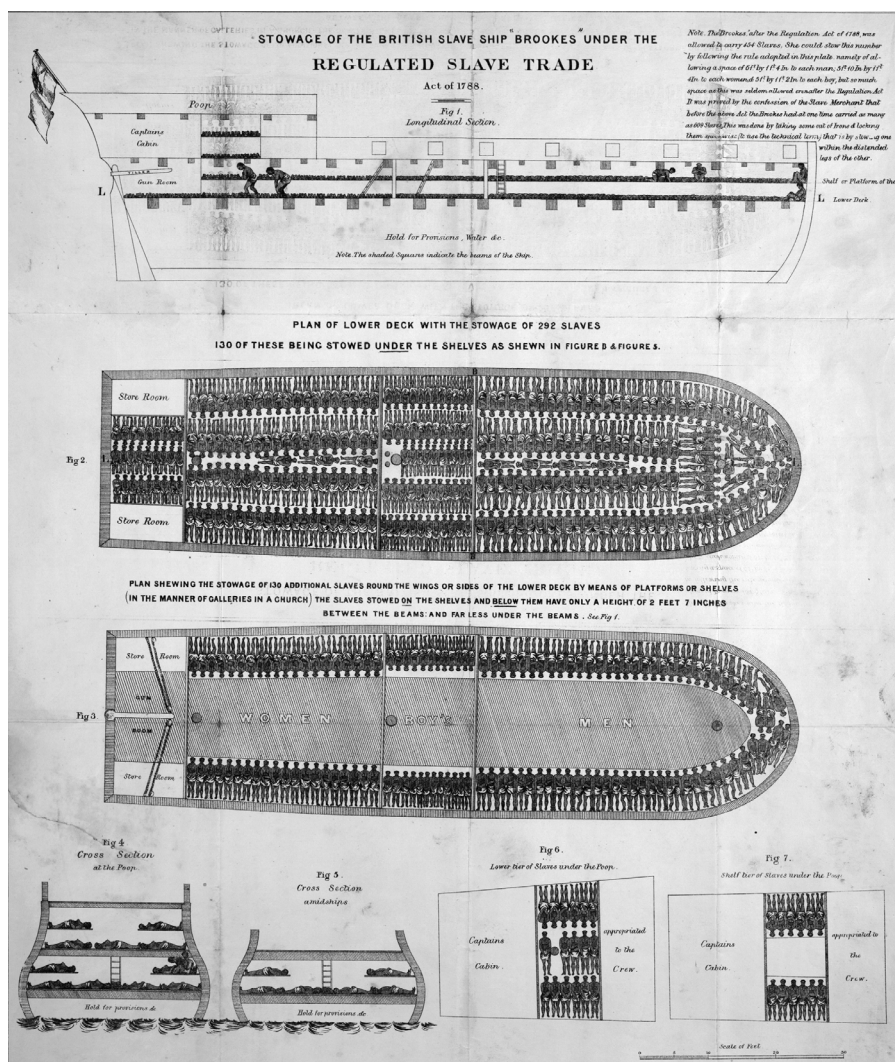


Fig. 2: »Stowage of the British slave ship *Brookes* under the Regulated Slave Trade Act of 1788.« One of several similar versions of the slave ship *Brookes* after the less elaborate Plymouth plan first published in 1789.

otherwise an anarchic multiplicity would exist. By the device of representation, the person produces the coherence of the body, which it represents in speech and action, just as the state is the production of a political body, which can only achieve coherence and become one body when it gives itself a persona—the head of state: »A Multitude of men, are made *One* Person, when they are by one man, or one Person, Represented« (Leviathan, p. 114). The assembly of the body politic is but a function of the representation of its head: »the Members of every Commonwealth, as of a Naturall Body [...] cohaere together; but they depend onely on the Sovereign« (Leviathan, p. 397). In the frontispiece the sovereign is a giant man composed of the bodies of his subjects, who, distinguishable in the engraving, look up in concert at his face or persona. Under the direction of the sovereign head, its members achieve a common sense of order and orientation that in turn secures and stabilizes their own legal and lawful persons and representations. Only in such a state—under one heading as it were—might there be coherent articulation, commerce and communication of all members.

The representation of the *Brookes* is that of a sea-monster-machine of a different kind—the slave ship being devoted to the production of a representativeness of an interchangeable, exchangeable and therefore de-personalized sort. First published by the Plymouth Chapter of the *Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, the image was intended to disseminate awareness about, and generate popular opposition to, the slave trade. It soon became its defining image. That it presented an »enlightened« development in the trade following the Dolben Act of 1788, which imposed certain restrictions on conditions and crowding on the ships and was therefore often published under such headings as »Stowage of the British Slave Ship »Brookes« under the Regulated Slave Trade« only made the image the more repellent. Indeed, by the schematic representation of ship and human cargo, the image exhibits the bio-political operations which the slave ship set out to accomplish: by no means simply the transport at optimal ratio of cargo to unit volume without disproportionate risk to its value, but also, as Marcus Rediker has argued, the transformation of said cargo from people of diverse backgrounds and ethnicities kidnapped, captured and sold from various parts of the African continent into the single category of black chattel slaves.³ And one significant aspect of this operation, as expressed in the image of the *Brookes*, is the packing and compacting of bodies together but in a manner so disarticulate, disconcerted and constrained as to occlude any sort of political gathering. The slave ship brings together in order to dis-assemble: systematically cutting or disabling former bonds—familial, linguistic, ethnic, amicable—while impeding the constitution of new ones.⁴ The

³ Marcus Rediker: *The Slave Ship. A Human History*, London 2007, pp. 9–13.

⁴ Of course, it was never completely successful in this regard and the threat of revolt was a

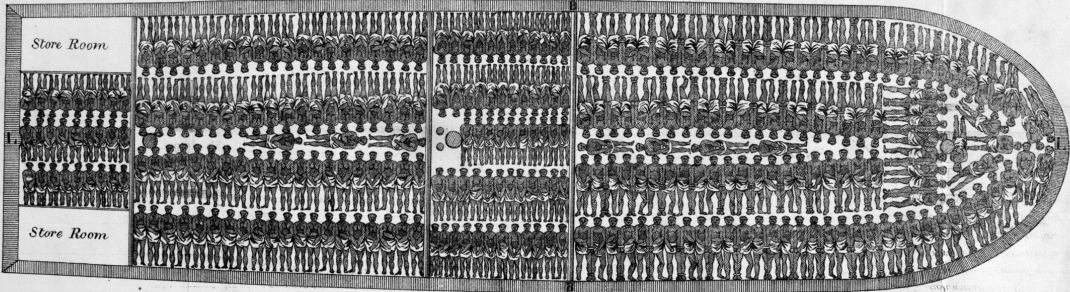


Fig. 3: Detail of *Leviathan* frontispiece (Fig. 1)

Fig. 4: Detail of the *Brookes* (Fig. 2)

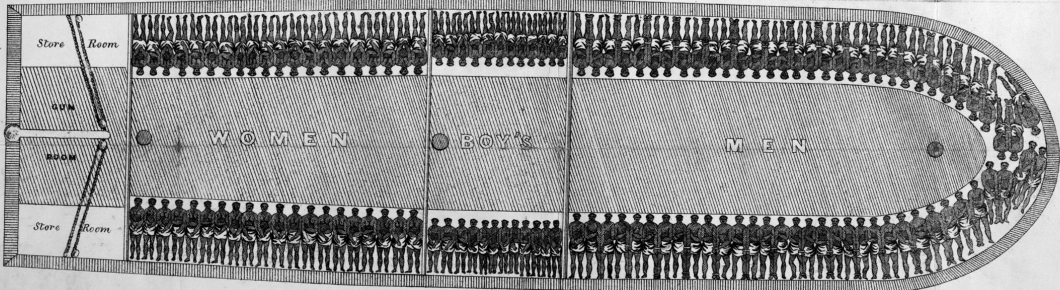
PLAN OF LOWER DECK WITH THE STOWAGE OF 292 SLAVES
130 OF THESE BEING STOWED UNDER THE SHELVES AS SHEWN IN FIGURE B & FIGURES.

Fig 2.



PLAN SHEWING THE STOWAGE OF 130 ADDITIONAL SLAVES ROUND THE WINGS OR SIDES OF THE LOWER DECK BY MEANS OF PLATFORMS OR SHELVES
(IN THE MANNER OF GALLERIES IN A CHURCH) THE SLAVES STOWED ON THE SHELVES AND BELOW THEM HAVE ONLY A HEIGHT OF 2 FEET 7 INCHES
BETWEEN THE BEAMS: AND FAR LESS UNDER THE BEAMS. See Fig 1.

Fig 3.



slave ship, as »ideal type,« generates a state of disassembly, the regulation of a crowded but apolitical site by techniques of corporal violence and terror.

These apparently contrasting representations of two aspects of the political economy of the Atlantic world share—if paradoxically and by no means always effectively—a common concern with the preservation and organization of life. Or rather, it would be more accurate to speak of the production of certain types of life—of certain corporations, comportments and corporalizations—in which case, according to a typology familiar from the work of Giorgio Agamben, the frontispiece would represent the production of »political life« while the *Brookes* diagram would represent that of an apolitical but nonetheless intensively politicized »bare life,«⁵ albeit one that may also be aptly characterized as »social death.«⁶ In Hobbes' own terms political life is the achievement of sovereign representation: »the *Sovereignty* is an Artificiall Soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body« (Leviathan, p. 9). It is thus at once that living entity, »the great LEVIATHAN« generated by the unanimity represented in the sovereign head of state, and the way of life—coherent, articulate, measured—which that »*Mortall God*« guarantees by the exclusion of the threat of arbitrary violent death (Leviathan, p. 120). In contrast, the *Brookes* image represents the exclusion of political life by the organization of a space of »bare life« insofar as it is subject to relentless exposure to arbitrary violence. The bare life occluded because it is protected in the sovereign state, is foregrounded because it is exposed in the slave ship. If in the historical period that witnessed the emergence of the Atlantic world, the ship of state, in its distinctive sovereign manifestation, and the slave ship, that exemplary proto-capitalist vehicle of the nascent global economy, ran parallel courses, it is because they are structurally related, presenting two poles of the emergent preoccupation with life as the end and substance of »the political.« The slave ship is then exemplary of that all-too-political state of exception from the political in which, as it were, the mutilated underside of the Leviathan is exposed.

persistent risk and anxiety, one which in turn made for the increasingly oppressive practices of incarceration and punishment on the ships. Bonds were indeed formed onboard (a theme of Rediker's study) and former bonds were doubtless never completely dissolved. The tabula rasa image of the middle passage—to which the *Brookes* diagram and much Abolitionist discourse contributed—is itself both spurious and suspect: »The notion that the Middle Passage was so traumatic that it functioned to create in the African a tabula rasa of consciousness is as odd as it is a fiction, a fiction that has served several economic orders and their attendant ideologies.« Henry Louis Gates: *The Signifying Monkey. A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Oxford 1998, p. 4.

⁵ Giorgio Agamben: *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford 1998.

⁶ Orlando Patterson: *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study*, Cambridge, MA 1982.

If the slave ship is a paradigm, to be sure an exceptional one, for the politics of the Atlantic world, slave revolts on slave ships present sites of exception and of exceptional life that are truly irregular. For this reason, on board slave revolts have always presented singular and perplexing cases in the history of international law. In the famous *Amistad* case (1841), for instance, John Quincy Adams had to demonstrate not only that the slaves, who were newly arrived from Africa and therefore not »legally« slaves, had the right to fight for their freedom according to the laws of nature on the open seas but equally that, as such, they should not be treated as pirates. What was the status of a boat in which people, severed from a recognizable political and cultural context and treated as property, rose up to make an unambiguously political claim? Did such a politics fit, as Adams maintained, the troubled discourse of the rights of nature or did the slave ship present a different iteration of political existence and political life, of the relation between politics and life? And where indeed did such people belong—given that »Africa« was as much an invention of the Atlantic slave trade as the »blacks« whom it deposited on American shores? Taking the ship, the rebels produced a distinct kind of political space. Set adrift without the recognition or protection of an established power, without a country to make for or a territory upon which to lay claim, the question of the conditions and legitimacy of political existence in the absence of any priority in claims of ownership, property or standing, imposes itself in barest form. Such appears to be the case in the ship, or the representation of the ship, called the *San Dominick* in Herman Melville's 1855 novella, *Benito Cereno*.⁷

2.

The story was a favorite of Carl Schmitt who read it as a geopolitical allegory presenting the situation at the end of the »*jus publicum Europaeum*.« Schmitt never, however, acknowledges the singular fact that the story concerns a *slave ship*, one named the *San Dominick* no less.⁸ In his reading, the rebellious slaves on the slave ship become simply pirates on a pirated ship and Schmitt claims to identify with

⁷ »Benito Cereno«, in: Herman Melville: Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860, volume nine, Scholarly Edition, ed. by Harrison Hayford et al, Evanston 1987, pp. 47–117. The text will subsequently be cited in brackets under the abbreviation *BC*. On Melville's story and the *Amistad* case see Carolyn Karcher: The Riddle of the Sphinx: Melville's »Benito Cereno« and the *Amistad* Case, in: Robert Burkholder (ed.): Critical essays on Herman Melville's »Benito Cereno«, New York 1992, pp. 196–229.

⁸ For a survey of Schmitt's reading of *Benito Cereno* (drawing attention to the noted absence of slavery) as well as subsequent Schmittian interpretations, see Thomas O. Beebe: Carl Schmitt's Myth of Benito Cereno, in: Seminar 42/2 (2006), pp. 114–134.

the hapless Spanish captain, Benito Cereno, representative of the old European-Catholic order, who finds himself subject to the vicissitudes of the revolutionary multitude with whom he is forced to play the part of impotent collaborator over and against the naïve and apparently humanitarian interventions of the American captain, Amasa Delano.

Schmitt's suppression of the slave-question in Melville's story—as well as in the larger account of the political significance of the discovery and appropriation of the New World he gives in *Nomos of the Earth*⁹ and elsewhere—is remarkable since the status of a slave ship in revolt presents an extraordinary case of the sort of anomalous political scenarios Schmitt treated in his studies of such para-legal and para-political figures as privateers on the sea and partisans on land. These were irregular but distinctly modern figures who could not be assigned to the age-old category of »pirate,« owing to their political significance in the transformation of the *nomos* of the earth.

In Schmitt's account, privateers, who differ from pirates insofar as they are licensed by a sovereign power, played a pivotal role in the »world historical struggle« that shifted the concrete balance of power, and, more fundamentally for Schmitt, the very self-understanding of the world-order from a Catholic to a Protestant one in the 17th century.¹⁰ The partisan would play a similarly effective role in the revolutionary and independence struggles that unsettled the Euro-centric international order in the 20th—such, at least, seems to be the impetus of Schmitt's *Theory of the Partisan* (1963), which is subtitled: »Intermediary Remark on the Concept of the Political.« Like privateers, partisans are affiliated with a party, which characterizes their engagement as political as opposed to piratical. They also share with privateers, as an aspect of their irregularity, an increased tactical and technical mobility, which, however paradoxically, is complemented in the case of partisans, Schmitt insists—and this is *the* distinction between privateer and partisan—by a singular attachment to the land. If the privateer functions as an intermediate between private and public interests, the partisan is an altogether more elemental political figure; the partisan is the exponent of the earth. Schmitt concludes: »For the moment the partisan still stands for a patch of authentic ground. He is one of the last sentries of the earth insofar as it is not yet a completely destroyed world-historical element.«¹¹

⁹ Carl Schmitt: *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum*, Berlin 1950.

¹⁰ See Carl Schmitt: *Staatliche Souveränität und freies Meer. Über den Gegensatz von Land und See im Völkerrecht der Neuzeit*, Leipzig 1942; cf. also chapter 7 of Carl Schmitt: *Land und Meer. Eine weltgeschichtliche Betrachtung*, Stuttgart 1942, pp. 40–44.

¹¹ Carl Schmitt: *Theorie des Partisanen. Zwischenbemerkung zum Begriff des Politischen*, Berlin 1963, p. 70.

But even these supplementary determinations—the pirate, the privateer, the partisan—which are intended to complete the theoretical articulation of the space of »the political,« fail to account for the phenomenon of a slave revolt on a slave ship. Would such rebels, with no determinate attachment to any fixed place on earth, certainly not to a sovereign power as Schmitt would define it, not be something like partisans of the sea? And would this not then make the last outpost of »authentic ground« akin to the deck of the ship upon which they find themselves thrown? This would be a different kind of place, indeed, a barely political place—indefinite, anomalous, and almost unreal—but nonetheless not the null-space, legally speaking, of the pirate ship nor the non-place of a utopia nor any nihilistic space in the sense Schmitt tended to characterize zones subject to the element of the sea. It would be a question rather of a shadowy entity of the sort that makes its appearance in the figure of a strange ship in Melville's novella. I read *Benito Cereno* as a partisan account, one that provides an »intermediary remark« of a different sort on »the concept of the political.«

3.

Benito Cereno is loosely based on, and follows in form, an historical description given by Captain Amasa Delano in his *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817).¹² Delano records encountering a strange ship—apparently a Spanish slave transport in distress but actually one in revolt—and added as an addendum, as if to confirm the veracity of his account, excerpted documents translated from the legal deposition from the trial in Lima that followed the eventual re-taking of the ship with the Americans' aid. Crucial among the changes Melville makes is the renaming of the Spanish ship from the *Tryal* to the *San Dominick* and the shifting of the year from 1807 to 1799—and so into the midst of the independence struggle in Haiti/St Domingue.

The change of name opens up an historico-political problematic that is concentrated in the very representation of the ship which, in line with Schmitt's analysis, presents the »faded grandeur« of the Golden Age of the Spanish empire in the decrepit midst of the rebellious slave ship; a tension captured in the description of the name: »upon the tarnished head-boards, near by, appeared, in stately capitals, once gilt, the ship's name, »SAN DOMINICK«, each letter streakingly corroded ...; while... dark festoons of sea-grass slimily swept to and fro over the name, with

¹² The account is in chapter 18 of Amasa Delano: *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres*, Boston 1817, pp. 318–353.

every hearse-like roll of the hull« (BC, p. 49).¹³ Hispaniola or *Santo Domingo* was among the first lands »discovered« by Columbus and the first to be settled. By the end of the 17th century, reflecting a broader shift in power, the island was divided in two, the western part *Saint-Domingue* under French dominion. During the 18th century, the French territory became the richest and most productive colony in the world on the back of enormous imports of African slaves. And, of course, at the end of the century it was the site of a slave revolt and revolution that culminated in the declaration of independence of the new state of Haiti in 1804.

The history abbreviated in the name *San Dominick* is the history of the genesis and transformation of a new and exemplary political space—the New World, the colony of colonies, the colonial revolution, and the independent »black« state. The name also recalls the *dominicus* of Roman law, who possessed power of life and death over his household and slaves, and the trajectory of that notion of paternal power into modern times. Further, it suggests the all-too-worldly implication of religious institutions in political, not least colonial, ones—the *dominion* in *Dominican* as it were—as well as, taken in a different sense, the transfer of theological notions into political thought. In this light, the *San* of the *Dominick* presents the defining political-theological concept of the epoch—the notion of a sanctified and absolute mode of domination—the concept of sovereignty.

The Spanish captain, Don Benito Cereno, ostensible sovereign of the *San Dominick*, appears as hollow and worn out as the ship he is supposed to command: »to have beheld this undemonstrative invalid gliding about, apathetic and mute, no landsman could have dreamed that in him was lodged a dictatorship beyond which, while at sea, there was no earthly appeal« (BC, p. 53). Indeed, Delano goes so far as to attribute the apparently disorderly state of the ship to the »involuntary mental disorder« of its captain, as if the state of the ship were a function of the ship's head (ibid.). In fact, of course, Cereno has been deposed. He is but a »paper captain,« to use Delano's term, »a commander who has little of command but the name« (BC, p. 59). Indeed, even the *name* »captain« has been evacuated of its force. Every sign of the captain's authority is emptied or eaten away, to leave but the exoskeleton, or deposit, of his former post: »And that silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command, was not, indeed, a sword, but the ghost of one. The scabbard, artificially stiffened, was empty« (BC, p. 116).

¹³ On the historical juxtapositions in the story, especially St Domingue and Charles V, see H. Bruce Franklin: *Past, Present and Future Seemed One*, in: Robert Burkholder (ed.): *Critical essays* (as note 7), pp. 231–243; and Franklin: *Slavery and Empire: »Benito Cereno«, in John Bryant and Robert Milder (eds.): Melville's Evermoving Dawn*, Kent 1997, pp. 147–161. On the significance of San Domingue/Haiti in the context of new world slavery, see chapter 2 of Eric Sundquist: *To Wake the Nations. Race in the Making of American Literature*, Cambridge, MA 1993, pp. 135–221.

The apparent disorder onboard is in fact the sign of a different kind of order, one that Captain Delano is unable to recognize. The new dispensation of the ship, revolutionary though it may be, does not simply invert the previous regime. Babo, referred to as the »plotter« and »ringleader« of the revolt, nevertheless does not take Cereno's sovereign place. Rather than performing a set of displacements and replacements, the revolutionary deposition transforms the very place in which such operations occur. In Cereno's words to Delano, the ship itself is »mined into honey-combs under you« (BC, p. 115). If the »state« is that stable ordered place defined, as in Hobbes, by the unity in space and continuity in time of the representative positioned at its head, then the revolution upsets the composure of the state by de-posing the very position of the head and its sovereign representativeness. This is achieved by means of disparate, dispersive and dis-personalizing devices of which the distracted figure of Benito Cereno is one of the more elaborate.

After spending the day walking the deck of the *San Dominick*, Delano prepares to return, none the wiser, to his ship. It is only when Cereno desperately jumps into his boat followed by the dagger-wielding Babo that the »scales drop from [Delano's] eyes,« the turning point in the American account (BC, p. 99). The disclosure of the ship in its »true state« (as Cereno would have it) coincides with the revelation, indeed the unveiling, of the figurehead that had been concealed under canvas when Delano first boarded. Before only the phrase, »*Seguid vuestro jefe* (follow your leader)« could be made out below the figurehead (BC, p. 49). After, as Delano looks back seeing for the first time the blacks in »ferocious piratical revolt,« the ship swings round to reveal »death for the figurehead, in a human skeleton; chalky comment on the chalked words below« (BC, p. 99).

The figurehead was originally, as Cereno puts it, »Christoph Colon, the discoverer of the New World« (BC, p. 107). The rebels, however, had replaced it with the skeleton of their former master and Cereno's friend, Don Alexandro Aranda, and added the inscription. If the figurehead of »Christoph Colon« represented the discovery and conquest of the New World or perhaps the spirit of discovery or the global vision of the colonist, and in any case the faith in the destiny and direction and above all the Right of European projects, the replacement does not simply oppose that message with a skull and crossbones in the manner of the mere outlaw or pirate but fundamentally deposes the order of signification it represents. Such is the effect of the inscription, which, »rudely...chalked, as in a sailor freak« ironically undermines the »sort of pedestal,« or fundament, on which it is written. »*Seguid vuestro Jefe*,« is translated but also Americanized by the narrator as »follow your leader,« but *jefe*—to be sure also part of the idiom of slavery and colonialism—carries the connotation of »head« from the Latin *caput*, and might be therefore: »follow your captain,« »follow your head,« »follow the figure of the head,«

»follow the heading,« and so also, follow thought, reason, spirit, Right, as well as in a different but related register, follow your capital, capitalize etc.

The rebel slaves decided to kill Aranda because, so Babo told Cereno, they »could not otherwise be sure of their liberty« and because »he wanted to prepare a warning« (BC, p. 106). Some days later, a skeleton appeared at the figurehead, which Babo mockingly asks Cereno to identify and to consider, »whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it a white's« (BC, p. 107). The gesture does not simply ridicule the essentialization of a racial difference but the system of signification that enables such a practice. Babo's semiotics stops dead the metaphorical transport of the sort figured in the ship's figurehead, namely, the ascription of a transcendent spiritual or metaphysical significance to a phenomenological character. If Aranda's death means the death of the rebels' *jefe*, then to replace the figurehead with his skeleton is the death, or the deadening, of the *name* »*jefe*,« which no longer functions as the representative metaphor for a metaphysical or in any case political-theological order of representations. If the figurehead, not unlike the king's two bodies,¹⁴ guaranteed the transcendence of the place of the head even with the demise of the figure personified thereon, henceforth the very place of the head is dead and the whole system of headings is defunct.¹⁵

At one point, Captain Delano, believing he is commiserating with Cereno about Aranda, describes the horror of burying a friend at sea: »like scraps to the dogs—to throw all to the sharks« (BC, p. 61). If such extra- or anti-political forces devour and dismember the sovereign body committed to the sea, the *San Dominick* presents a case of an ocean burial on deck. Rather than disappearing into the sea, the body remains cannibalized by partisan forces from within. Reduced to its bare articulation and torn from the organizing sovereign logic of the *jefe*, the remains represent a different, partisan, political corporation.

As shown in the figurehead, the revolution has been the decapitalization of the »SAN DOMINICK,« the name printed in »stately capitals« on its prow (BC, p. 49). For most of the narrative, however, the figurehead is veiled. Only the inscription is shown, which acts as an ironic heading for the rest of the devices staged on board, each of which rehearses in thinly veiled fashion the singular deposition concealed at the prow. What cannot be tolerated, however, is an attempt to re-assume the position of the head, a gesture of sovereign authority of the sort Delano absentmindedly makes when the water is brought up. The assertion of the head suspends all parts:

¹⁴ Ernst Kantorowicz: *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Princeton, N.J. 1957.

¹⁵ On the »European spirit« and its relation to the head/heading—*cap*—see Jacques Derrida: *L'autre Cap*, Paris 1991.

»In another moment the casks were being hoisted in, when some of the eager Negroes accidentally jostled Captain Delano, where he stood by the gangway; so that, unmindful of Don Benito, yielding to the impulse of the moment, with good-natured authority he bade the blacks stand back; to enforce his words making use of a half-mirthful, half-menacing gesture. Instantly the blacks paused, just where they were, each Negro and Negress suspended in his or her posture, exactly as the word had found them—for a few seconds continuing so—while, as between the responsive posts of a telegraph, an unknown syllable ran from man to man among the perched oakum-pickers. While Captain Delano's attention was fixed by this scene, suddenly the hatchet-polishers half rose, and a rapid cry came from Don Benito« (BC, p. 79).

The captain's »word« is dead and all stop dead. If the characteristic force of the sovereign command is that it is always accompanied by the threat of death—every sovereign sentence is also potentially a capital one—here Delano's unfortunate performance is a »non-play.«¹⁶ His »word« arrests the play on board the *San Dominick* to produce a death-like, and for the captain potentially deadly, tableau that exhibits the very theatricality of proceedings. The hatchet-polishers half-rise and momentarily the tenuous staging of community on the *San Dominick* seems about to descend into sheer violence.

Sensing danger but mistaking Cereno's cry as a signal for a piratical attack, Delano considers leaping overboard, »but paused, as the oakum-pickers, dropping down into the crowd with earnest exclamations, forced every white and every Negro back, at the same moment, with gestures friendly and familiar, almost jocose, bidding him, in substance, not be a fool.« (BC, p. 79) A fool, that is, not for considering the jump, but for his infelicitous sovereign gesture. He can proceed so long as he abandons such sovereign pretensions, in the absence of which all—whites and blacks—return to their parts: »Simultaneously the hatchet-polishers resumed their seats, quietly as so many tailors, and at once, as if nothing had happened, the work of hoisting in the casks was resumed, whites and blacks singing at the tackle« (BC, p. 79–80).

The oakum-pickers are not »old dominies to the rest« (BC, p. 60), as Delano assumes. They are not figures of authority at all but rather, as seen in the incident above, of de-authorization. They sit undoing old bonds and bindings in order to produce shreds for the caulking of the ship. Their work detaches and dis-attaches all that held the old order together so as to achieve a different kind of adhesion—caulking—that nonetheless keeps the ship afloat and community together. This

¹⁶ The term for such »misfires« is from J. L. Austin: *How to Do Things with Words*, Cambridge, MA 1975, pp. 18, 31.

work is complemented by a »continuous, low, monotonous chant,« from which no words, phrases, commands or directions can be made out; it is the sound of the disarticulation of such speech. When interrupted by Delano's »word,« the chant breaks down into an »unknown syllable« that passes telegraphically between them, the automatic repetition of an isolated and unidentifiable fragment or strand (BC, p. 79). Unlike the imperative of the Spanish sailor's knot, »undo it, cut it, quick« (BC, p. 76), and despite their »sphynx-like« (BC, p. 50) appearance, the oakum-pickers are not to be interpreted for coded meaning. Their significance is of a different sort; their drone, from the oakum of language, expresses, as in a hive, a particular communal bond.

Just as the oakum-pickers unravel the coherent narrative of the former state, their chanting preempts the composition of a new account of the same order. This is the case for all the partisan devices of the *San Dominick*. They operate less in order to sustain the appearance of the slave ship under the captaincy of the Spaniard—although this is what Cereno takes them to be doing—than to persistently aggravate the possibility of clear-headed cognition. If thought—sovereign thought—is a function of the unity of space and time, the devices serve to disrupt the continuity of time and upset the coherence of space. Indeed, the ship is nothing more than the complex of operations carried out by these devices that articulate time as interrupting, punctuating, arresting and constitute space as knotted, juxtaposed, and contradictory. Delano is rendered unable to synthesize these particular impressions into a single comprehensive vision. On board the *San Dominick* he finds himself in no state to put his thoughts in order.

If the symbol of sovereignty is the sword—Cereno's it turns out is only the ghost of one—the exemplary arm of the partisans on the *San Dominick* is the hatchet. The hatchet-polishers, stationed along the quarterdeck, are not, however, deck-officers, who Delano remarks would perform the function of »police department« on a populous ship (BC, p. 54). They do not wield the arms as representatives of the hand of the sovereign but prepare them for general use. At intervals, »two-and-two they sideways clashed their hatchets together, like cymbals, with a barbarous din,« an activity which marks the time by interrupting it. Delano is repeatedly distracted by them. The irritating buzz of the polishing and intermittent clashing conducts a veritable guerilla war on Captain Delano's train of thought, just as the hatchets are prepared to conduct the same on his person and property.

But it is the former African chief, Atufal, who makes the most disconcerting impression. »Like a time piece,« he poses every two hours in chains before Cereno. Delano surveys »not without a mixture of admiration, the colossal form of the Negro« (BC, p. 50), and subsequently starts »at the unexpected figure of Atufal, monumentally fixed at the threshold, like one of those sculptured porters of black

marble guarding the porches of Egyptian tombs« (BC, p. 78). His size is all the more striking for the silence and the near-lifelessness of his figure—he seems more a statue than a man. And if, despite his chains, this »pretended rebel, but punctual shadow« (BC, p. 82) seems to Delano more like a guard or a sentry, he does not protect the captain but watches over the tomb, or sarcophagus of the captaincy. A giant artificial man without life or voice, Atufal presents a counter-figure to sovereignty. The opposite of the »royal spirit« Delano imputes to him, his arresting appearance petrifies—it is, as the hapless Cereno shows, the mortification of sovereignty.

Most memorable of Babo's devices is »shaving time,« which explicitly interrupts: »master told me never mind where he was, or how engaged, always to remind him, to a minute, when shaving-time comes. Miguel has gone to strike the half-hour after noon. It is *now*, master« (BC, p. 82). Such »uncommon punctuality,« to use Delano's phrase, describes the temporality of the whole spectacle, punctuated as it is by Babo's repetitive »*now*, master« as he applies the razor to the pale Cereno's neck. The thought of that exemplary revolutionary practice—decapitation—is unavoidable even for the levelheaded Captain Delano who »could [not] resist the vagary, that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white, a man at the block.« The vagary is, however, dismissed as »one of those antic conceits, appearing and vanishing in a breath, from which, perhaps, the best regulated mind is not free« (BC, p. 85). Entering the head as the fatal thought of a decapitation and so as an incapacitating thought, the conceit does not assume the regularity and univocity of the concept. Or rather, the conceit is a partisan concept. It cannot be entertained in the well-ordered mind if the captain is not, himself, to lose his head. The *San Dominick*, however, only appears as such conceits. Of these the one that brings Delano, despite himself, closest to the truth of the ship is at the end of the scene when he cannot suppress the thought that »the Negro seemed a Nubian sculptor finishing off a white statue-head« (BC, p. 87).

4.

The insurrection is put down and the ship re-taken but not before a quite different—and distinctly »American«—set of capital calculations have been made. Delano is keen to lead the attack himself but, convinced otherwise by his officers who remind him of the interests of the ship's owners, he appoints the chief mate, who had been »a privateer's man, and, as his enemies whispered, a pirate—to head the party« (BC, p. 101). In order to encourage the sailors he also promises a bounty against their personal risk. In short: the partisan appearance of the *San Dominick*

turns the *Bachelor's Delight*, renamed by Melville after the historical pirate ship,¹⁷ from a private enterprise into a privateer—its actions underwritten by a global order that is no longer so much a law of nations as a global economy.

En route to Lima, baffled by Cereno's continued despondency, Delano exclaims: »You are saved, Don Benito...you are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?«, and Cereno replies: »The Negro« (BC, p. 116). On the slave transport the *San Dominick* »the Negro« stands for the stateless in the state, for the bodies not represented in the body-politic, for those who are subjected without being subject to the head, whether the head of state, the captain or the capitalist. But »the Negro« is as such also the figure of the partisan who exists in the shadow of the state, indeed, whose existence *is* the shadow of the state as the constant threat of revolution. Don Benito Cereno cannot return to the blessed and serene state suggested in his name—neither the state of mind nor the political state—because he can no longer forget the partisans occluded by the ostensible integrity of such states. If saving means a sense of wholeness or heading, of corporal integrity or spiritual destination, then even in Lima, ministered to by priest and doctor, Cereno can be saved in neither body nor soul. He never recovers from the mortification on the *San Dominick* and so, as the last line of the narrative states, »did, indeed, follow his leader« (BC, p. 117).

Babo, for his part, never says another word: »Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to.« (BC, p. 116) He does not, however, simply say nothing. There is rather a performative force to his silence; it attests to a partisan stratum of political existence that eludes the cephalic machinations of the law. If the end of sovereignty is death by decapitation, which is to say, if sovereign power can extend no further than the capital sentence and the decapitation that is its execution, then some part of the partisan outlasts the decisive sovereign operation. Such is the case with Babo: »Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites.« (BC, p. 116)

By this punishment the law attempts to make an example of the head. But Babo's is not a head but a hive—a »hive of subtlety«—which recalls Cereno's characterization of the *San Dominick* »as mined into honey-combs«. »It is true,« writes Hobbes, »that certain living creatures, as Bees, and Ants, live sociably one with another, (which are therefore by *Aristotle* numbered amongst Politicall creatures) and yet have no other direction, than their particular judgments and appetites; nor speech, whereby one of them can signifie to another, what he thinks expedient for

¹⁷ The ship associated with the famous published accounts of the pirates William Dampier and William Ambrose Cowley.

the common benefit« (Leviathan, p. 119). The partisan is the exponent of a particular life and a life in parts, of a body and a body politic that adheres in its disarticulation, cut-up and disjointed—an *insect* kind of life. It is, as Hobbes observes, a life without direction and without speech, if speech means the conceptual language common to centralized programs and capital projects. But there are partisan expressions, emotions, movements, and demonstrations, communication of an anomalous but altogether more »common« sort, aptly connoted in the word—that is but the sound that it names—»buzz.« In the terms of the *San Dominick*, and in keeping with its anachronicity, one could say that the state achieves its statehood by obscuring all buzzing such that it becomes just »white noise.« It remains, nonetheless, a shadowy expression of those bodies and parts that are neither a part of, nor altogether apart from, the state and which might, at any particular time or place, rise up—as a »black« swarm.

The theory of sovereignty is premised on the suppression of the swarm and a profound anxiety about all partisan agitations, which appear only as that terrifying fanaticism called in German »Schwärmerei.« This serves to clarify the relation between sovereignty and the slave ship: both may be considered anxious reaction-formations against the apparition of a swarm. In this light, the two images form a diptych under the title »Leviathan,« insofar as the slave ship sets out to destroy the particularity that is irreducible to the composed state to which the frontispiece aspires. Melville's representation of the *San Dominick* presents the complementarity of these operations in the context of their dissolution in a partisan revolution, the figure for which is Babo's hive-like head. If Babo is a *Schwärmer*, he is a subtle one. He shows that there are other more subtle ways to lose one's head than sheer fanaticism and headless states that betray a subtle order other than the anomic violence of the swarm Hobbes feared. Nonetheless, the mute gaze of Babo's severed head threatens a *Schwärmerei* that terrifies the subjects of the colonial capital known as the »City of Kings,« on whom it looks out, unabashed.

Picture credits:

Fig. 1: Frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, London 1651; etching by Abraham Bosse.

Fig. 2: »Stowage of the British slave ship Brookes under the Regulated Slave Trade Act of 1788,« etching, Liverpool 1884, from the Library of Congress under: <http://memory.loc.gov/rbc/rbpe/rbpe28/rbpe282/28204300/001dr.jpg> (27.05.2013).