

Race Relations in Black and White:
Visual Impairment as a Racialized and
Gendered Metaphor in Ralph Ellison's
Invisible Man and Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno"

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While scholarship has increasingly acknowledged Ralph Ellison's indebtedness to Herman Melville, whose novella "Benito Cereno" (1855) was used as an epigraph to *Invisible Man* (1952), fewer scholars have discussed their common literary foci on blindness as a racial and gendered visual metaphor. Borrowing from the latest scholarship on whiteness and/as racial dominance, this article revisits "Benito Cereno" to show how Captain Delano's lack of belief in the possibility of a slave insurrection throughout the novella is itself an effect of racism, stemming mostly from the taken-for-granted-ness of white superiority, which Melville shows as distorting the whites' perceptions of blacks. In so doing, I will also explore Ellison's reworking of Melville's racial imagery in *Invisible Man*, which seems to extend the blindness metaphor to both black and white characters, re-presenting cross-racial blindness as reciprocal rather than unidirectional. As part of this argument, the article posits the inseparability of gender and race, suggesting that Ellison's depiction of white racism may be traced back to the (antebellum) definition of American manhood as free and nonenslaved, which Melville's novella both illustrates and undermines. I thus conclude that Ellison's and Melville's works skilfully anatomize, and critique, the discourses on whiteness and/as masculinity of their respective historical moments, highlighting their interdependence, but also their internal contradictions, which the black characters end up using to their own advantage.

Keywords: Herman Melville; Ralph Ellison; "Benito Cereno"; *Invisible Man*; literary influence; black-white relations

Relaciones raciales en blanco y negro: la ceguera como metáfora racial y de género en *El hombre invisible*, de Ralph Ellison, y “Benito Cereno,” de Herman Melville

Si bien la crítica ha reconocido progresivamente la deuda de Ralph Ellison para con Herman Melville, cuya novela corta “Benito Cereno” (1855) fue usada como epígrafe a *El hombre invisible* (1952), menos estudiosos han analizado su interés común en la *ceguera* como metáfora visual marcada por la raza y el género. Usando la crítica más reciente sobre la raza blanca y como dominación racial, este artículo revisa pues “Benito Cereno” para demostrar cómo la incredulidad del Capitán Delano ante la posibilidad de una insurrección de esclavos a lo largo de la novela es de hecho un efecto del racismo, derivado de su asunción de superioridad racial, que distorsiona las percepciones que los blancos tienen de los negros. En este sentido, se explora igualmente la reformulación de las imágenes raciales de Melville en *El hombre invisible*, que parece ampliar la metáfora de la ceguera a personajes blancos y negros indistintamente, re-presentando la ceguera interracial como recíproca antes que unidireccional. Como parte de este argumento, el artículo defiende la inseparabilidad de la raza y el género, mostrando cómo la representación del racismo blanco por parte de Ellison se remonta a la definición de la masculinidad estadounidense (anterior a la Guerra Civil) como libre y no esclavizada, que la novela de Melville ilustra a la vez que critica. Se concluye pues que tanto Melville como Ellison diseccionan hábilmente, y critican, los discursos alrededor de la raza blanca y como masculinidad de sus momentos históricos respectivos, subrayando su interrelación pero también sus contradicciones internas, que los personajes negros acaban usando en beneficio propio.

Palabras clave: Herman Melville; Ralph Ellison; “Benito Cereno”; *El hombre invisible*; influencia literaria; relaciones blancos-negros

I. INTRODUCTION

“You are saved,” cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; ‘you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?’” It is no coincidence that such an intriguing question, posed by the American Captain Amasa Delano to his Spanish counterpart Benito Cereno at the end of Herman Melville’s 1855 novella (1981, 208), is used by Ralph Ellison as an epigraph to his 1952 magnum opus *Invisible Man* (1995b, n.p.). For, even though Don Benito’s answer—namely, “the Negro”—is omitted from Ellison’s epigraph, it is obvious that “the shadow” of blackness (Melville [1855] 1981, 208) lingers in *Invisible Man*, which continued to denounce white racism in mid-twentieth-century American culture. Yet while Ellison’s classic has been seen as reflecting numerous and varied literary influences, and even as scholars like Jeffrey B. Leak (2005) have set out to explore the continued influence of Ellison’s depiction of blackness on contemporary or postmodern fiction, little attention has been paid, surprisingly enough, to its indebtedness to Herman Melville’s nineteenth-century slave fiction.¹ Admittedly, some critics have explored the interrelationship between the two texts. For example, Valerie Gray’s classic study on the relations between Melville and Ellison (1978) explicitly connected *Invisible Man*’s “literary heritage” to Melville’s nineteenth-century apology for American democracy, just as Stuart E. Omans (1975, 15) traced back to Melville’s *Confidence Man* (1857) Ellison’s own portraiture of Rinehart, one of the main characters in *Invisible Man*. Similarly, Mark Busby’s study on Ralph Ellison (1991), particularly its fourth chapter entitled “The Actor’s Shadows,” has identified Melville as one of Ellison’s main literary antecedents. Yet, while there is an acknowledgement of Ellison’s indebtedness to Melville, especially in terms of their shared struggles for democracy, much less has been said, surprisingly enough, about their strikingly similar racial imageries and, particularly, their shared interest in slavery and American racism. One exception was Alan Nadel’s classic study *Invisible Criticism* (1988), which masterfully showed how Ellison’s *Invisible Man* spills over with literary allusions to several nineteenth-century American texts, including Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” which he used “consistently and effectively to engage the issue of canonicity” (xii). Not only does Nadel illustrate how Melville reverberates in Ellison’s text but also how “Benito Cereno” is itself reinterpreted by Ellison through the use of allusions. In other words, allusions, he argues, both alter our understanding of Ellison’s text and of Melville’s original novella.² Challenging traditional critical approaches to Melville,

¹ “I am not so much interested in how Ellison rewrites or revises Wright, Baldwin, and other writers, for that has been done already,” Leak contends. “Rather, I will concentrate on the contemporary or postmodern ‘response’ to Ellison’s ‘call,’ or construction, of black masculinity” (2005, 31). While it is true that much has been said on the influence on Ellison of writers like Frederick Douglass or W.E.B. Du Bois, and while much work still needs to be done on his own influence on postmodern fiction, the influence of “Benito Cereno” on Ellison remains, by comparison, largely unexplored.

² To make his case, Nadel establishes an explicit comparison between “Benito Cereno” and chapter three of *Invisible Man*, the “Golden Day,” both of which he identifies as dealing with an “uprising of enslaved blacks, in which they overthrow their oppressors and take part in a few moments of ultimately futile chaos” (1988, 105).

which he sees as having been “clouded for many years” by the assumption that he was “not very aware of or concerned” about slavery (1988, 110), Nadel thus concludes that “Benito Cereno” was centrally engaged with “the moral burden that the problem of slavery placed on the ideals of American democracy” (1988, 111). Following in Nadel’s steps, other scholars, like Rita Keresztesi, have more recently continued to relate Ellison’s novel to Melville’s antislavery work, arguing that Ellison’s use of the epigraph from Melville’s novella “specifically addresses the issue of white guilt and the national and historical legacy of slavery” (2005, 162). These studies notwithstanding, race does indeed seem to remain the pending subject of most intertextual comparisons between Melville and Ellison. Surprisingly enough, even less attention has been paid to the two writers’ common literary foci on blindness, rather than simply invisibility as a racial visual metaphor, let alone from a specific whiteness studies perspective. Borrowing from the innovative scholarship on whiteness and/as racial dominance—see Aanerud (1997), Frankenberg (1997), Fredrickson (1997), hooks (1997), Mahoney (1997), McIntosh ([1988] 1997), Wildman and Davis (1997) and Young (2015), among others—then, I will revisit Melville’s classic to argue that Captain Delano’s inability to perceive the slave revolt on the *St. Dominick* is a direct result of his assumption of white hegemony as natural, transparent and inalienable. Following in Toni Morrison’s steps in her seminal *Playing in the Dark* (1992), this study takes up her claim that (African) American literary studies should explore both “the racial object” and “the racial subject” of white supremacy discourses. Even though most of the existing critical work on Melville’s story has focused on the effects of racism on the black slaves, I will argue that Delano’s blindness to the possibility of a slave insurrection is itself an effect of racism, stemming mostly from the taken-for-granted-ness of white superiority. In so doing, I will also explore Ralph Ellison’s reworking of Melville’s visual metaphor in *Invisible Man*, showing how even as most scholarship has focused, predictably enough, on the subject of invisibility in the novel, this is indissolubly linked to short-sightedness, too, which Ellison seems to extend to both black and white characters, re-defining it as cross-racial rather than unidirectional. Ultimately, then, this article illustrates the distorting effects of racism on both masters and slaves, revisiting both the benighted character of Delano and *Invisible Man* as victims of their own (racial) delusions. As Morrison herself has argued of Melville’s insights into whiteness, “to question the very [...] idea of white superiority, of whiteness as privileged placed in the evolutionary ladder of mankind, and to meditate on the fraudulent, self-destroying philosophy of that superiority—that was dangerous, solitary, radical work. Especially then. Especially now” (1989, 18).

As a parallel argument, this article will posit the inseparability of the categories of gender and race, particularly masculinity and whiteness, suggesting that Ellison’s depiction of white racism may be traced back to the (antebellum) definition of American manhood as free and nonenslaved, which Melville’s novella specifically both illustrates and undermines. Drawing on the available work on the correlation between whiteness and manhood —Bederman (1996), Frankenberg (1997), McIntosh ([1988] 1997), Sale

(1997), Segal (1997), Van Tassel (1997) and Dyer (2004), among others—this part will thus focus on illustrating the feminization of blacks in both Melville’s and Ellison’s texts, where they are recurrently objectified by their white counterparts as dependent, infantile, docile, simplistic, emotional and sensuous. Following the dominant ideology of his times, Delano does indeed seem to keep in place the distinction between, on the one hand, independent entities—particularly white men—and, on the other, dependent entities—including children, servants, women and slaves. Despite their seeming dependency and feminization, however, the black slaves on the *St. Dominick*, commanded by Babo, are, in fact, determined to reclaim their freedom (i.e., their manhood), which Delano finally has to recognize, even if only as a threat. In this sense, I will also focus on Ellison’s portraiture of Dr. Bledsoe in *Invisible Man* as Babo’s most immediate literary successor, proving Bledsoe’s equally subversive resistance to feminization by whites. Ultimately, then, I argue that Ellison’s and Melville’s works skilfully anatomize, and critique, both the white supremacist and the patriarchal discourses of their respective historical moments, highlighting their interdependence and, above all, their inevitable fissures and contradictions, which black characters end up using, as we shall see, to their own advantage.

2. UNMASKING WHITE PRIVILEGE IN “BENITO CERENO” AND *INVISIBLE MAN*

As is widely known, much of Melville’s “Benito Cereno” revolves around the strange events following the slave mutiny on the *St. Dominick*, a Spanish vessel apparently controlled by the Spanish Captain Don Benito, who, as the action begins, is, in fact, already mastered by the black slaves aboard. However, although the slaves maintain control of the ship, one of them, Babo, directs a masquerade which results in the American Captain Amasa Delano remaining blind to the truth about who is actually in charge throughout much of the story. Delano’s blindness is apparent, both literally and symbolically, from the very start of the story, generating a sense of uncertainty and distrust.³ Soon after landing for water on the desert island of St. Maria, off the coast of Chile, Delano finds himself drenched in “gray vapors” and “creeping clouds” (Melville [1855] 1981, 131). Tellingly enough, such vapors, which he describes as anticipating “deeper shadows” (131) to come, seem to have the effect of weakening his perception, which he himself qualifies, for example, as “equivocal,” “uncertain,” “unreal,” “shadowy,” “colorless” and “gray” (131-135). Clearly, Delano’s great difficulty

³ Such feelings of discomfort are increased throughout the narrative not only by the unreliability of Delano’s voice but also by the story’s own narrative structure, especially Benito Cereno’s final deposition. After all, the deposition, though laying a claim to objectivity as a legal document, cannot be taken at face value since many of its details, as Melville himself writes, are only “irregularly given” (Melville [1855] 1981, 206). In this respect, Sale argues that the very structure of Melville’s story generates an uncertain sense of reality by purposefully suspending sure knowledge of the *St. Dominick*’s history. In so doing, the story makes its readers anxious, “not only about the outcome of the story, but about the reliability of the characters, and ultimately, about their/our own perceptions” (1997, 154).

in “seeing,” symbolized by the mists, represents his inability to perceive, especially his blindness to the revolt on the slave-trader, which seems to remain hidden due to “a deception of the vapors” (132). It is only when Delano is about to leave the *St. Dominick* to return to his ship that Don Benito’s desperate attempt to join him and Babo’s attempt to murder Cereno make the Africans’ rebellion apparent. Only then will he and his crew set out to pursue, board, and eventually recapture the *St. Dominick*. For much of this long first section Delano remains oblivious to Babo’s plot while the text spills with suggestions of rebellion, ranging from Cereno’s saturnine mood to Babo’s and the other slaves’ strange behavior. The question, then, becomes *why* it takes so long for Delano to see what is going on when the Africans’ behavior appears so obviously suspicious from the start? Why does he fail to interpret the obvious signals given out by both Cereno and the slaves? Or, to put it differently, why does he read these signals in the *wrong* way?

Traditionally, white dominance has been legitimized by making it ostensibly normal and neutral. As Ruth Frankenberg has argued, whiteness tries to pass itself off as “natural,” universal and transparent in contrast with the marking of “Others,” especially blacks, on which its transparency relies (1997, 3). Like other superordinate categories such as masculinity or heterosexuality, whites are taught not to recognize white privilege, as it is simply taken for granted.⁴ The normalization of privilege did actually work to transform (racial) privileges into societal norms. As a result of the race power system of white supremacy, white privilege, unless threatened, often remains invisible to its holders. The fact that whites do not need to look at the world from a racially specific perspective may itself be seen as a privilege, a societal advantage. They are, in other words, conferred the privilege of ignoring their own race and racism. As Stephanie Wildman and Adrienne Davis skilfully note, “it [white privilege] is merely there, a part of the world, a way of life, simply the way things are” (1997, 316).

Such ideas may prove extremely helpful, I believe, in understanding Captain Delano’s racial views, which also seem to rest on the common-sense assumption of white supremacy and black inferiority—and, therefore, on the implausibility of organized black action, let alone insurrection. In this vein, as soon as the American captain boards the *St. Dominick*, he criticizes the Africans’ physical appearance, particularly their “unsophisticated” aspect (Melville [1855] 1981, 136) and “small stature” (137), before going on to celebrate their qualities as docile and servile creatures. In particular,

⁴ Hence Peggy McIntosh’s much-cited definition of white privilege as an “invisible package of unearned assets” on which white people can rely, but about which they were meant to remain “oblivious.” Besides “unearned asserts”—things which everyone should have in a just society but are in fact awarded to the dominant race only—such an “invisible weightless knapsack,” as McIntosh ([1988] 1997, 291) describes it, also includes “unearned power”—those things that are damaging in human terms even if they bring advantage and are associated with dominance, such as the freedom not to be concerned about the needs or reality of others. It must be noted, however, that McIntosh states that while whites are in some ways privileged, they are in other ways profoundly damaged and retarded by this system of “unearned dominance” (291). Delano’s blindness to the reality of slavery may be considered, as we shall see, an example of this.

Babo's subservience is explicitly connected by Delano to the slave's allegedly inferior intellectual capacity and skills, his “docility arising from the uninspiring contentment of a limited mind” (71). While briefly suspecting Don Benito of complicity with the blacks, Delano will soon be reassured of the unfeasibility of such a notion, since the blacks were “too stupid” and the whites, “by nature, the shrewder race” (162-163).

Paradoxically, though, Delano's assumption of white supremacy turns into a liability rather than an asset. If part of white privilege is the ability to “not-see” whiteness, another fundamental part, as Martha R. Mahoney reminds us, is “not seeing how what we do appears to those defined as ‘other’” (1997, 306). In “Benito Cereno,” however, white privilege becomes doubly blinding, as whites not only fail to see themselves clearly, they also fail to see how white privilege appears to blacks. Thus, for example, when Atufal, one of the leaders of the slave revolt, simply feigns his refusal to beg his master's pardon, Delano wrongly assumes the slave to be chained, and Don Benito's possession of the key to his padlock he sees as evidence of his lordship over the black slave. Clearly, Delano keeps misreading what he himself defines as “significant symbols” (Melville [1855] 1981, 149) of the role reversal that is taking place between master and slave, since Atufal is only pretending to be enslaved, while Don Benito, though he is seemingly wearing the key to unlock the slave, is himself imprisoned.⁵ In Melville's story, then, Delano's “self-satisfied whiteness” (Aanerud 1997, 47) and his objectification of blackness as simplistic end up backfiring on him, for he is totally blinded from reality by his own white supremacist biases.

Though seldom acknowledged, Melville's visual metaphor is at the root of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, too, which, I would argue, both draws on and revisits “Benito Cereno” in highly subversive ways. It is true that much of the novel focuses on the negative feeling of invisibility experienced by Ellison's black protagonist, who bitterly complains that he is “invisible” because (white) “people refuse to see me.” “Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows,” he elaborates in the Prologue, “it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination” (Ellison [1952] 1995b, 3). No wonder, then, most readings of the novel have focused on the racial/racist process of invisibilization of blacks by whites.⁶ Borrowing from both Lacan's mirror stage and Fanon's study of the racial dynamics of narcissism, Hsuan Hsu, for example, has revisited the visual regime of racism in Ellison's novel, considering it as exemplifying both “identification”—i.e., narcissistic and often hostile projections on the part of both black and white subjects—and “surveillance”—which frames black bodies as objects

⁵ “Against the ideology that saw slavery as the most organic of social relations,” as Michael Rogin (1985, 216) argues, “Melville conventionalized, as stage props, the symbols of authority which slaveowners insisted were theirs by nature.”

⁶ See, for instance, Hogeland (1996), Hsu (2003), Hardin (2004), Kim (2005), Lamm (2003) and Leak (2005, 29-58).

of a “panoptic white gaze” (2003, 108).⁷ For her part, Lisa Hogeland has paid special attention to Ellison’s novel as illustrative of the sex/race analogy of the 1970s, showing how Ellison’s trope of (racial) invisibility vs. hypervisibility was very helpful to second-wave feminists in describing the similar situation of women at the time. In her words, “the visibility/invisibility trope is [...] ironic in the sense that it turns *hypervisibility* into *invisibility*. That is, the Other named as invisible is unseen as an individual, while simultaneously hypervisible as a stereotype” (1996, 36; my emphasis).⁸

Despite, or precisely *because of*, the special emphasis placed upon invisibilization in the novel, I would like to suggest, nonetheless, that this process is indissolubly linked to the parallel visual metaphor of blindness, which Ellison, unlike Melville, uses to describe the racial biases embodied by both black and white characters. As Hsu, one of the few Ellison scholars to acknowledge this, has noted, “blacks are as blind (to both themselves and to whites) as they are invisible” (2003, 109). Thus, Ellison seems to borrow from Melville’s depictions of white male characters as shortsighted, with the invisibility of his protagonist stemming from “a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come into contact” ([1952] 1995b, 3). While *Invisible Man* himself acknowledges that it is sometimes “advantageous to be unseen,” this causes him many troubles, as well, as when he bumps into a white man who had not seen him since “he was in the middle of a walking nightmare!” (4).⁹ Like Melville’s Delano, then, Ellison’s white character is depicted as just “a poor blind fool” (5) who, just as in the case of Don Benito, is portrayed as a sleepwalker “lost in a dream world” (14). Challenging what Ellison himself defined as “pseudoscientific sociological” notions that “held that most Afro-American problems sprang from our ‘high visibility,’” *Invisible Man* thus deals instead with the “invisibility” of black people, showing how the alleged “high visibility” associated with dark skin “actually rendered one *un-visible*” in social, cultural, and political terms (Ellison [1952] 1995a, xv; emphasis in the original).

At the same time, however, Ellison, like Melville, continues to identify (self-willed) blindness as the origin of this invisibilization of colored people by whites. The whole of *Invisible Man* does indeed abound with references to cross-racial blindness, both literal and figurative. Thus, in chapter one, for example, the bronze statue of the Founder of Invisible Man’s college seems to be “lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave,” even though in reality Ellison’s protagonist stands

⁷ More specifically, it is Hsu’s contention that the novel exemplifies an “ethics” of visibility in the specular form of “giving oneself to be looked at.” Thus, Ellison, Hsu suggests, challenges the white power vs. black victimization binary as it “ultimately aligns ‘denigration’ not with the visual but with invisibility as such” (2003, 108).

⁸ This does not mean, however, that Ellison has remained unaffected by charges of sexism. For a critique of his sexual politics in the novel, and the invisibility of women therein, see, for example, Walker (1983, 231-243), Sylvander (1975), Rohrberger (1989) or Nayak K. (1994), who argues that “the picture that emerges of Negro sexuality in *Invisible Man* is one of all-around degradation and insult” (41).

⁹ “Now, aware of my invisibility,” he explains, “I live rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century” (Ellison [1952] 1995b, 5-6).

“puzzled” in front of the statue, “unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient *blinding*” ([1952] 1995b, 36; my emphasis). Clearly, the veiled black figure is reminiscent of W.E.B. Du Bois’ famous metaphor in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) of the (invisible) veil separating blacks and whites. Yet while Du Bois sees the veil as mostly negative for blacks, who are provided with the irreconcilable disjunction or what he calls “double-consciousness” ([1903] 2005, 7) of being American and black, I would like to argue that this separation has a negative effect on whites themselves, too, particularly regarding their ignorance about blacks, as Ellison’s story illustrates. Indeed, the bronze face is not only eyeless but, ironically enough, covered with “liquid chalk” (Ellison [1952] 1995b, 36) from bird droppings. Equally sightless is Homer E. Barbee, one of the college trustees, just as white New Yorkers, though polite, “seemed impersonal” (133) and “hardly saw me” (168; my emphasis). Even more apparent, perhaps, is Mr. Norton’s blindness to (black) reality. While funding a college for blacks, he seems unable to withstand the reality of black poverty when he sees it through Jim Trueblood and his family, which eventually causes him to faint “with his *eyes closed*” (86; my emphasis).

Ellison’s protagonist does himself recognize the (political) vision of both blacks and whites as equally impaired by the end of the novel. As he lectures his audience during one of his political speeches in chapter sixteen, “they[whites]’ve dispossessed us of one eye from the day we’re born. So now we can only see in straight white lines [...] we’re *blind as bats*” (343; my emphasis). Yet for all his admonitions to blacks to “reclaim” their sight, *Invisible Man* himself seems to remain blind to the truth throughout most of the novel. If Ras the Destroyer’s confrontational racial stance “leaves him blind to the possibility of progressive—rather than regressive—change,” Hsu (2003, 100) rightly notes, *Invisible Man*’s initial conformism to white racial norms contributes to his own blindness, too, as his racial overidentification ends up buttressing his own internalization of racism.¹⁰ Only at the novel’s end, after he has gained a deeper understanding of the internal workings of racial prejudice, black and white, will he begin to recover his sight, acknowledging himself that “I’d been asleep, dreaming.”¹¹

¹⁰Ellison recurrently emphasized the connections rather than divisions between black and white American culture, repeatedly stressing their interrelatedness and indivisibility. In his view, African Americans were neither “white” nor “black” but both, since he saw them as deeply involved in “the texture of the American experience” ([1964] 2003b, 299). He not only underlined the centrality of blackness to canonical American literature, but praised the representation of the Negro as “a symbol” of humanity in writers like Whitman, Twain or Melville, suggesting, for instance, that Melville’s “democratic” worldview led him to represent the “symbol of evil” as white (Ellison [1953] 2003a, 88).

¹¹Indeed, the novel seems to provide a harsh critique of all types of racism, black and white, presenting Ras the Destroyer, for example, as an anachronistic and even ridiculous black leader who defends the war on whites as the only “solution” to white racism (Ellison [1952] 1995b, 556-561). While the Brotherhood welcomes blacks and whites in the common struggle against racial inequality, Ellison ultimately exposes its political dogmatism, too, which is clearly reminiscent of Soviet Communism. Indeed, *Invisible Man*’s confrontation of Brother Jack’s narrow-mindedness causes the latter to drop his glass eye, which literally and figuratively exposes him as half-blind, as well (555).

Thus, he ultimately remains “invisible” (Ellison 1952 [1995b], 444), as he himself recognizes, but “not blind” (537) looking for the first time “through the gray veil that now seemed to hang behind my eyes” (576).

3. THE WHITENESS OF MASCULINITY, OR THE FEMINIZATION OF BLACKNESS

If, as it seems, both Melville and Ellison expose the blinding effects of racism on blacks and whites alike, I believe both texts are also equally concerned with illustrating the inseparability of gender and race and, especially, of masculinity and whiteness. In *Slow Motion* Lynne Segal (1997) argues that hegemonic masculinity, white and heterosexual, has traditionally been defined by opposition. The power of dominant models of masculinity, she suggests, stems from their difference from, and superiority to, that which they are “not”. In her words, “[t]o be ‘masculine’ is not to be ‘feminine,’ not to be ‘gay,’ not to be tainted with any marks of ‘inferiority’—ethnic or otherwise” (1997, xxiv; emphasis in the original). Much of the existing theoretical work on whiteness does indeed seem to confirm the strong association between masculinity and whiteness and, by implication, between blackness and “the feminine.” Such a connection, as Gail Bederman reminds us, became particularly strong during the nineteenth century, when white Americans elevated whiteness to a manly ideal, linking gender to racial dominance through the discourse of “civilization” (1996) As white middle-class men of the time actively worked to reinforce male power, their race became a factor central to their gender. These men repeatedly resorted to the idea of civilization to explain male supremacy in terms of white racial dominance and, conversely, white supremacy in terms of masculine power. Recurrently, white Americans contrasted civilized white men with savage dark-skinned men, “depicting the former as paragons of manly superiority” (1996, 22).¹²

Since maleness and whiteness thus seem to be constructed together, and because hegemonic—i.e., white—masculinity has usually been defined in opposition to both women and black men (Segal 1997, xxxiv), it should come as no surprise that Melville’s “Benito Cereno” mirrors (but, as we shall see, also problematizes) the nineteenth-century classification of both (white) women and (black) slaves as dependent beings, a moral economy of dependency between master and servant which seemed to determine both the institution of slavery and the patriarchal family. The Southern version of domesticity, as Emily Van Tassel (1997, 152-153) states, helped Southern slaveholders articulate a patriarchal vision of slavery based on the “support for labor” ideology,

¹²Admittedly, white Americans had long associated dominant manhood with white supremacy. Since the inception of the US Constitution, American citizenship rights had indeed been defined as “manhood” rights which inhered in white males only. Thus, pro-slavery writers often called into question the manhood of black men, and hence their “manhood rights.” Like women, black males were considered “dependents” and therefore denied the right to vote, among other “civil” rights. By the mid-to-late nineteenth century, however, white Americans were also influenced by the dominant discourses of imperialism and Darwinism, both of which increasingly linked masculinity to whiteness through the racial/racist discourse of “civilization.”

which was nothing but a reflection of the usual domestic relations between husband and wife in the nineteenth century. It is no wonder, then, that most of the arguments for the abolition of slavery connected racism and patriarchal oppression, with numerous collaborations between abolitionism and feminism in the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, the oppression of black men, as Richard Dyer has argued, constantly put them into “feminine” positions by placing them “structurally” in the same positions as women (2004, 112).

Such ideas are important, I believe, because Captain Delano’s firm belief in white supremacy throughout “Benito Cereno” is, in reality, synonymous with his assumption of hegemony as a white male, which leads him to stereotype black slaves as inferior but also, as we shall see, as dependent, submissive and, therefore, as inevitably “feminized.” Drawing on the (racialized) gender prejudices of the time, Delano indeed appears to feminize Babo from the start, his description of the African slave resembling in every aspect that of the ideally submissive and docile nineteenth-century wife. Just as women in nineteenth-century America had been traditionally defined as intellectually inferior and morally subservient beings whose primary (indeed only) function was to act as men’s foundation and support, so is Babo repeatedly feminized. Rather than Don Benito’s slave, Delano sees Babo as the Spaniard’s “devoted companion” (Melville [1855] 1981, 137) a faithful and obedient confidant, who, like a traditional wife, is equally eager to please and to serve. As a result, Delano can do nothing more than accept Don Benito’s “weakness for Negroes” (172), particularly Babo, who, he insists, may be treated “with familiar trust” (137). According to Delano, it is the black man, rather than a woman, who famously makes “the most pleasing body servant in the world” (137), which seems to be confirmed by Babo combing his master’s hair “as a nurse does a child’s” (180), with Don Benito relying upon his servant’s “tasteful hands” (176). Indeed, Delano becomes so envious of the “beauty of [the] relationship” (143) between Don Benito and his confidant that he tries to buy Babo from Cereno for fifty doubloons, even though the slave boasts that his master would not part with him “for a thousand doubloons” (157). It seems clear, then, that Babo is recurrently feminized by Delano, both literally and symbolically, throughout the novel. The American Captain not only applauds, but himself seems to feel a homoerotic affection for Babo, seeking to acquire him for his own “as a man might a wife” (Sale 1997, 158).

Interestingly, however, Babo will use the feminization of blacks as inferior and dependent beings to his advantage, playing the role of the emasculated black slave to meet his own ends. Of all the Africans, it is Babo who remains, arguably, the best actor when it comes to putting on a mask of “female” submissiveness to fool the whites. Like a “Nubian sculptor” (Melville [1855] 1981, 175), Babo, leader and creator of the plot, challenges—indeed, manipulates—white supremacist assumptions of the blacks’ submissive and *feminine* nature for his own profit. This is nowhere clearer, perhaps, than during the shaving scene, wherein the Negro terrifies Don Benito in a reversal of power relations which goes totally unnoticed by Delano. While supposedly shaving—i.e.,

serving—Don Benito, Babo is actually controlling his master, threatening to cut his throat with the razor should he decide to give Delano any clues regarding the rebellion on board the *St. Dominick*. Even as Delano thinks Babo is only a slave playing his natural role as a docile and submissive—i.e., *feminine*—body servant, Babo is using the traditional stereotype of the emasculated black slave to his own advantage, revealing black/female submissiveness itself to be a charade. Undermining the supposedly natural relations of master and slave, Babo’s “exaggerated fidelity” (Rogin 1985, 215) serves to mock the paternalism of not only master and slave but also of husband and wife, while Don Benito, who has in fact lost the authority that his dress suggests, is forced to play the part of master/husband, while he is in reality being manipulated by his slave/wife. By feigning docility and obedience, Babo not only reveals the relation of dependency between master and slave, just as between husband and wife, but also subverts the performance of subordination usually enacted by both women and slaves in the nineteenth century. Cunningly, Babo plays at being innocent while all the while plotting how to overthrow the master. Just as the childlike mask protected the slave from the master, the enslaved rebel must put on the mask of black submissiveness, and hence feminization, since his deceptions are absolutely essential “to his survival and possible escape” (Jay 2008, 387).

In line with the historical alignment of blackness with *femininity*, Ellison’s black characters also seem to be recurrently *feminized* by their white male counterparts, which often results in black male sexual objectification by the white male gaze. In this sense, a number of critics have recently set out to revisit the still largely unexplored role played by homoeroticism in the novel. Thus, Daniel Y. Kim, for example, has focused on the “libidinal” qualities of white male racism in the novel to suggest that “the optics of white male racial vision are fundamentally shaped by homoerotic impulses” (2005, 47). In his view, Ellison depicts white racism as a fundamentally homosocial act which may be seen as “proximate, if not equivalent, to homosexual desire” (47). Quite convincingly, Kim argues that episodes such as the Battle Royal and characters like young Emerson clearly represent white male desire for the black male body. If the Battle Royal, which assumes a paradigmatic status in the novel, depicts a homoerotic performance through which a group of black boys, including the narrator, are forced to fight each other blindfolded, young Emerson is depicted as a white rich homosexual heir who threatens to *emasculate* the narrator by trying to seduce him. Such actions by white men, in Kim’s view, attempt to *feminize* the narrator by defining him as the (sexual) object of the male gaze. Combining racial and sexual desire, they are, in Kim’s words, “voyeuristic rituals in which enjoyment seems to derive from the watching rather than from the doing” (49; emphasis in the original).

Yet while most critics have focused on the racial-sexual objectification—i.e., feminization—undergone by Ellison’s protagonist on the part of white males, and even as others have focused on the narrator’s subversion of the same in the novel, much less has been said about the racialized and gendered oppression experienced by other black

characters, like the narrator’s grandfather, and particularly Dr. Bledsoe, whose strategies of resistance are clearly inspired, I would argue, by Melville’s Babo.¹³ Thus, in chapter one, for example, *Invisible Man* recalls how his grandfather, who had been “the meekest of men,” called his son to his deathbed and declared himself a “traitor” and a “spy,” asking his son to “overcome” white people with “yeses, undermine ’em with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction, let ’em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open” (Ellison [1952] 1995b, 16). While this definition of meekness as treachery seems hard to understand at first, its *mise-en-scène* is nowhere better exemplified than in the character of Dr. Bledsoe, the black President of the state college for blacks. While his grandfather’s strategy to “yes” white people seems to fail *Invisible Man*, it does though work for Bledsoe.¹⁴ Following in the steps of Melville’s Babo, Bledsoe is cunning enough to continue to use white racism for his own gain. Acknowledging that it is dangerous to waken “sleepwalkers” (5), his work will indeed consist in keeping them asleep, using the pretense of black submissiveness to flatter rich white trustees and, in so doing, convince them to keep the school running. As he tells *Invisible Man*, “we take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see” (102). Like Melville’s “Nubian sculptor” ([1855] 1981, 175), Dr. Bledsoe thus hides his real emotions by “composing” his face “like a sculptor, making it a bland *mask*” (Ellison [1952] 1995b, 102; my emphasis), using false humility as a strategy to flatter white people and thus retain his presidential job. Just as Delano had mistaken the crew on the *St. Dominick* for “a ship-load of monks” with “Black Friars pacing the cloisters” (Melville [1855] 1981, 133), so too is the student choir of Dr. Bledsoe’s college made up of “faces composed and stolid above uniforms of black and white” (Ellison [1952] 1995b, 111). And, as in Melville’s story, Ellison’s black characters are just pretending to be nice to whites, their faces “frozen in solemn masks,” with “the voices” of the black choir “mechanically raised in the songs the visitors loved” (111). No wonder, then, that Bledsoe is bitterly disappointed after *Invisible Man* drives Mr. Norton to a poor black area outside the campus, as it causes the white trustee to get dangerously acquainted

¹³ See Hardin, for instance, who contends that Ellison’s narrator is not just *feminized* by the white male gaze, as Kim (2005) suggests, but is himself attracted to other (black) men, as well: “The one failing of Kim’s argument,” he argues, “is that he fails to recognize the narrator’s own desire for the black male body (2004, 110). This is perhaps most clearly seen in the narrator’s description of Tod Clifton, a young member of the Brotherhood: “I saw that he was very black and very handsome, [...] that he possessed the chiseled, black-marble features sometimes found on statues in northern museums and alive in southern towns in which the white offspring of house children and the black offspring of yard children bear names, features and characteristics as identical as the rifling of bullets fired from a common barrel [...] I saw the broad, taut span of his knuckles upon the dark grain of the wood, the muscular, sweated arms, the curving lines of the chest rising to the easy pulsing of the throat, to the square, smooth chin, and saw a small X-shaped patch of adhesive upon the subtly blended, velvet-over-stone, granite-over-bone, Afro-Anglo-Saxon contour of his cheek” (Ellison [1952] 1995b, 363).

¹⁴ Ultimately, *Invisible Man*’s failure results from Bledsoe’s (unfair) decision to expel him from school for his allegedly “inappropriate” behavior with Mr. Norton, which highlights the central role played by Bledsoe in both the novel and its protagonist’s life. As *Invisible Man* himself complains, “I had kept unwaveringly to the path placed before me, had tried to be exactly what I was expected to be, had done exactly what I was expected to do yet, instead of winning the expected reward, here I was stumbling along” (Ellison [1952] 1995b, 146).

with the black poverty, which, Bledsoe claims, sleepwalking whites do not want to see: “Didn’t you know you were endangering the school? [...] the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!” (139). Thus, not only does Bledsoe expel Invisible Man from school for his indiscretion but, in so doing, he also reveals his real Babo-like approach to whites, which consists, in his words, in “acting the nigger”: “The only ones I even pretend to please are *big* white folk, and even those I control more than they control me. This is a power set-up, son, and I’m at the controls [...] I had to be strong and purposeful to get where I am. I had to wait and plan and lick around [...] Yes, I had to act the nigger!” he said, adding another fiery, “Yes!” (142-143; emphasis in the original).

It may be argued, then, that both Babo and Bledsoe are in “virtual blackface” (Lott 1995, 234), as in a blackface minstrel show, performing for whites too blinkered to know better. In order to try to achieve their own ends, these two rebellious blacks feel equally obliged to put on the mask of blackness, thus reassuring the blinded whites of their own delusions. Indeed, the theatrical aspect of this may be more literal than has been usually recognized, for both Babo and Bledsoe indeed seem to re-present the dominant role played by blacks in the popular theatre and literature of the late eighteenth century, that is, that of the docile and contented slave—childlike, illiterate, dependent and so, ultimately, *feminized*. “Probably more whites—at least in the North—received their understanding of African-American culture from minstrel shows,” as Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic have argued, “than from first hand acquaintance with blacks” (1997, 171). If what bell hooks has defined as “the mask of whiteness” presents whites as always “benign” and “benevolent” to blacks (1997, 176), both Babo and Bledsoe will put on “the mask of blackness” in order to always appear happily submissive and subservient to whites rather than dangerous or threatening. Only at the very end, “with mask torn away,” will we come to realize that the racialized and gendered “spectacle of fidelity” (Melville [1855] 1981, 143) between master and slave was indeed a charade, the slave/wife taking revenge on the master/husband, paradoxically enough, in the very act of obeying him.

From this, it is no wonder that Captain Amansa Delano, who, as in a minstrel show, had taken for granted the blacks’ stupidity as well as their natural passivity and feminization, is absolutely amazed when, “now with scales dropped from his eyes” (188), he sees what is actually going on, as it suddenly dawns on him that the African slaves, “with mask torn away” (188), are not simply in misrule but rather “in ferocious piratical revolt” (188). Equally surprised is Ellison’s narrator when he sees Dr. Bledsoe’s true nature. While “acting the nigger” (Ellison [1952] 1995b, 142) and playing the submissive and emasculating role traditionally given to both women and blacks, he is finally revealed to be more masculine than his white (male) counterparts, claiming to control them “more than they control me” (142). Yet both Bledsoe and Babo, I would argue, are as much perpetrators as victims of racial and gendered violence, their masks constituting nothing but strategies of self-defense in the face of white

(male) racism, which has long worked to diminish black men by, literally and/or symbolically, castrating and emasculating them.¹⁵ As Bledsoe himself acknowledges to *Invisible Man*, “it’s a nasty deal and I don’t always like it myself. But you listen to me: I didn’t make it, and I know that I can’t change it. But I’ve made my place in it” (143). Similarly, and despite the seeming wickedness of Babo’s plot in “Benito Cereno,” it must not be forgotten that the *St. Dominick* is a slave-trader, that the black people on board the ship have been enslaved by the Spaniards, and that the Africans’ rebellion simply aims to sail the ship back to their homeland so as to achieve their self-liberation. No wonder, then, that concurrent with Delano’s discovery of the Africans’ rebellion is the unwrapping of the figurehead of the ship, which shows the skeleton of Alexandro Aranda, the Spanish commander of the *St. Dominick* who, as we finally learn, had been murdered by the black slaves at the very start of the mutiny. While seemingly an example of Babo’s brutality, the unwrapping of Aranda’s skeleton may well be read as a “brilliant postcolonial metacommentary” (Wallace 2005, 62), since the ship’s proper figurehead had been the image of Christopher Columbus, the discoverer of the New World.

4. CONCLUSION

While Delano appears to restore the natural order on the *St. Dominick* by finally recapturing the ship, Don Benito remains far from “saved,” for “the negro” seems to have “cast [...] a shadow” (Melville [1855] 1981, 208) over him. Even after Babo is executed, his head, fixed on a pole in the plaza, looks toward the church where Aranda’s (white) bones, once they are recovered, are interred and toward the monastery where Don Benito, bereft of his energy, dies soon afterward. Babo’s dark shadow thus seems to continue to linger in the two white men. Babo’s decapitated head, with its shadow covering Don Benito’s monastery, continues to haunt the Spanish sailor until the very end. In this sense, then, Babo appears to symbolize the death-blowing shadow of blacks on whites, embodying the fear that the former may be as intelligent, rational and independent—in other words, as *masculine*—as the latter. The shadow may be taken, in other words, as a critique of the white supremacist assumption of black inferiority, dependency, submissiveness and, in short, *emasculat*ion, a critique which Ralph Ellison took up, as has been argued, in *Invisible Man*. Both Melville and Ellison seemed to feel obliged not simply to question whiteness as an invisible and dominant social norm, but also to make white privilege visible to whites, warning against the dangers of racial blindness, black or white. Foreshadowing the Civil War to come, Melville warned against the dangers of racial segregation, suggesting that a real understanding between the two races would only be possible if whites learned to see themselves from the

¹⁵ On the infamous homosocial ritual of lynching, which usually involved the castration of black men by white men, see Wiegman’s seminal study (1995).

perspective of blacks, if they learned, that is, to occupy the position of the Other. Unfortunately, it took almost one century for Melville's ideas about race to become completely *meaning-full*, when, in the wake of the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s, writers like Ralph Ellison began to really understand the importance of lifting the (black) shadow cast on Benito Cereno, and that still hung over the nation at mid-century.¹⁶

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¹⁶ On the influence of Melville on the Civil Rights movement, see Sundquist (2008), who has shown, for example, the influence of "Benito Cereno" on Robert Lowell's 1950s poetry.

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