“The Test of Salt Water”: Literature of the Sea and Social Class in Antebellum America

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Abstract

Bryan C. Sinche: “The Test of Salt Water”: Literature of the Sea and Social Class in Antebellum America

(Under the direction of Philip F. Gura)

In “The Test of Salt Water”: Literature of the Sea and Social Class in Antebellum America, I argue that fictional and non-fictional antebellum sea literature offers a valuable lens through which to critique authorial responses to race, social class, and economic mobility. The antebellum sailor populating the pages of the sea narrative was often celebrated as a representative American figure and a source of national pride despite the fact that, as a member of the antebellum working classes, he was a living testament to the limits of economic and social advancement in a nation where such limits were supposedly nonexistent. Authors used this disconnect, as well as the extra-national settings and generic conventions unique to the sea narrative, both to illuminate foundational American ideals and expose the failure of those ideals to improve materially the lives of sailors. In first section of The Test of Salt Water, I draw on writings by common sailors as well as well-known narratives authored by upper-class former seamen such as James Fenimore Cooper and Richard Henry Dana to map the rhetorical battles that helped to define the sailor within antebellum class hierarchies. In the second section, I evaluate sea narratives by Herman Melville, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Delany, each of whom utilized the sailor’s social and economic marginality to investigate the racial dimensions of class, labor, and freedom. Ultimately, these authors confront the limits of opportunity for many Americans by
positioning the sailor as a liminal figure who—despite showing qualities of both—is neither slave nor citizen.
For Melanie
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List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations refer to the Northwestern-Newberry editions of the Works of Herman Melville:

- **BC**—“Benito Cereno” in *The Piazza Tales*
- **M**—*Mardi*
- **M-D**—*Moby-Dick*
- **O**—*Omoo*
- **R**—*Redburn*
- **T**—*Typee*
- **W-J**—*White-Jacket*

The following abbreviations refer to editions listed in the bibliography:

- **B**—*Blake*
- **E**—“The Encantadas” in *Great Short Works of Herman Melville*
- **HS**—“The Heroic Slave” in *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader*
- **JM**—“John Marr and Other Sailors” in *The Poems of Herman Melville*
- **NM**—*Ned Myers; or, A Life Before the Mast*
- **TY**—*Two Years Before the Mast*
I was a sailor ashore as well as on board.

—Richard Henry Dana
1869 Edition of *Two Years Before the Mast*
Chapter One
Introduction

Naval rank is the reward of merit as much as it is in civil or military life, and he who fails to recognize a superior, fails in his conception of human virtue.

—Francis Asbury Roe,
_Naval Duties and Discipline, With Policy and Principles of Naval Organization_

Madison Washington, the noble and talented protagonist of Frederick Douglass’s, “The Heroic Slave,” leads his fellow slaves in a mutiny against the white crew of the _Creole_ transporting the blacks for sale in the deep South. Following the successful revolt, Tom Grant, the white first mate of the _Creole_, speaks to a fellow sailor concerning the slave rebellion. The old salt castigates Grant for failing to quell the uprising and suggests that a stronger man would have exerted his iron will over the slaves and put down the mutiny in short order. Grant responds curtly, insisting that such a strategy of domination could work on land, but it could not pass the “test of salt water” because “on the lonely billows of the Atlantic…every breeze speaks of courage and liberty.”¹ This brief exchange in “The Heroic Slave” points to the hierarchies sustaining both the peculiar institution and the maritime establishment in the antebellum period. More importantly, Tom Grant’s description of the “test of salt water” indicates that the sea is a place where those

hierarchies can be challenged or even overturned. On the sea, sailors and slaves could assert their natural abilities and thereby claim the natural rights attending those abilities.

Natural rights were important to the United States citizens, and particularly its sailors, perhaps because those sailors were removed from the institutions and protections that guaranteed rights to landed citizens. Within this study, I define natural rights according to the Declaration of Independence itself, that is, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Jefferson’s conception of natural rights undoubtedly draws on John Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government*, and his understanding of both the state of nature and natural law is central to the sense of natural rights that pervades antebellum sea narratives. According to Locke, man in nature is in “a state of perfect freedom to order [his] actions and dispose of [his] possessions and persons as [he sees] fit,” though natural law demands that “no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.” Among antebellum sailors, the desire to protect rights to self and property is often antecedent, or even superior, to the desire to protect national interests, which may have contributed to the diverse nationalities of sailors aboard military and merchant vessels during the age of sail.

When antebellum authors set their works at sea, they were using their own “the test of salt water” to assess hierarchical structures of class and race in the geographically displaced world of the sea. Every author who wrote maritime literature was not sympathetic to the plight of lower-class sailors; however, authors’ writings about

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maritime culture signal their acknowledgment of artificial hierarchies as significant
determining factors in American life. Almost universally celebrated for his importance to
the United States, the sailor was almost universally regarded as low-born, unchaste,
rowdy, and threatening. In their writings, however, antebellum authors could elucidate
the problems the sailor faced and imagine potential conflicts and solutions. These authors
recognized that the issues confronting American sailors were issues at the heart of the
American experiment itself: How was the nation to incorporate the “lower orders” into
the imagined meritocracy? Would America extend the natural rights guaranteed in the
Declaration of Independence to the figurative slaves of the forecastle and the literal
slaves of the plantations?

Writing on naval discipline and operations in 1865, Francis Asbury Roe argued
that the ordering of the naval world mimicked the meritorious ordering of society ensured
by the Declaration:

The American Declaration—the most sublime declaration that ever sounded
through the ages—permits men the noble privilege to struggle with their destiny,
and attain superiority wheresoever and howsoever they can, without human
hindrance, and unfettered by arbitrary law. The right to competition among men,
gives the right to its rewards, and the enjoyment of that superiority which claims
honor and obeisance from inferiority, wheresoever it may assert its right.

Naval rank and superiority are based on these broad principles, the same
as others...Naval rank is the reward of merit as much as it is in civil or military
life, and he who fails to recognize a superior, fails in his conception of human
virtue.3

Superiority, as Roe conceives it, inheres in superior rank, and the failure to recognize it
indicates a failure of virtue in the observer; the choice, therefore, is hardly a choice:
Submit to the superior or admit your own lack of virtue (which would necessitate your

3 Francis Asbury Roe, Naval Duties and Discipline, with Policy and Principles of Naval Organization
continued submission). Roe, like many of his contemporaries, imagines the naval vessel as a microcosm of the nation itself and confirms the necessity of military hierarchies through recourse to the idea of a pure natural aristocracy.

The larger point in Roe’s paragraph, however, is that the Declaration guarantees that America itself will remain a natural aristocracy, just like the military and merchant ships sailing under her flag. However, the maritime world that Roe imagined as representative might have also been evidence of something more insidious: an artificial aristocracy inimical to merit-based hierarchies. First, and most obviously, divisions of rank (captain, mate, sailor) prevailed on every national ship throughout the nineteenth century as they do today. Second, the roots of the antebellum American working class are tightly linked to Atlantic seaport towns of the northern states where seasonal labor and immigration created transient communities plagued by scarcity, violence, and poverty. In *The Market Revolution*, Charles Sellers argues that seaport towns and the trades they represent were a significant component in the revolution toward a market society and away from the agrarian subsistence mode of life. As he writes, “wherever sea brought market, growing wealth concentrated in fewer hands, and status became steeply graded.”

The maritime world provides historians with a window to understand the developing American class structure in the antebellum period: In works describing the industry and vehicles that drove the nation’s economy, readers could witness the expanding profits of ownership and the contracting opportunity of workers within that new economy. Perhaps more importantly, they could also witness the various ethnic, social, and cultural

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characteristics that made sailors a separate “class of men” whose unruly presence punctured American myths of equality and mobility.

Class, as figured in this study, refers to the economic divisions resulting from structural inequalities as well as the social divide reinforced by particular behavioral choices. Therefore, when I discuss members of the American working class, I refer not only to manual laborers but to the myriad men and women whose habits and lifestyle left them far outside of the genteel middle class. In *The Test of Salt Water*, class is figured as comparative, rather than structural, and is linked to a particular historical moment when Americans were beginning to confront the social and economic inequalities in a land founded on ideals of universal opportunity. The sailor’s economic circumstances, which I treat at some length in Chapter Two, rendered him one of the poorest workers in the nation. What is more, the behaviors generally ascribed to the working class and sailors in particular suggest that most of these men could never hope to claim middle-class respectability. In fact, the sailor’s peripatetic lifestyle rendered the domestic ideal linked with middle-class culture an absolute impossibility; the circumstances of maritime labor meant that the sailor was, for all intents and purposes, homeless. Within the historical framework of antebellum America, in which the term “middle class” conjured images of domesticity and decorum, cleanliness and comfort, the sailor was representative of something far different: working-class masculinity.5

As maritime fiction emerged as an American genre, the nation was in the midst of a “market revolution” that would move it toward a fully industrialized economy while both navy and merchant sailors were important symbols of American economic and personal liberty. The cry of “free trade and sailors’ rights” had rallied public support for the War of 1812, and the seamen whose rights were protected were crucial to the development of the international business networks that would make America an economic powerhouse in the years to come. Sailors’ labor both turned the engine of the economy and secured American trade overseas, yet the sailor was generally excluded.

from sharing in either the enormous profits made by merchants or the social and political recognition that would normally attend such important service.

My readings of sea narratives from Cooper to Martin Delany, while attentive to the economic and political structures that limited maritime workers, are intended to illuminate the range of subject positions authors could claim by placing sailors at the center of the story. The sea was a dynamic space outside American borders; it brought together wealthy captains and downtrodden sailors; it grouped Gay Head Indians, Nantucket Quakers, and Alabama slaves; it linked Cuban revolutionaries with South Carolina slave traders; it joined Harvard-educated Brahmins with California natives. Furthermore, unlike the heroes of popular antebellum novels like The Last of the Mohicans or The Lamplighter, many characters in antebellum sea narratives interact with men and women of other nations and races and oftentimes imagine those men and women as something more than the “other.” Thus, the sea narrative also provides a counterstatement to theories of American literature and culture that focus on the insularity of the antebellum world.

From an authorial point of view, the heterogeneity of the maritime world provided not only scenes of juxtaposition, but also possibilities for identification. With whom would the author league himself: the forecastle sailor, the steely captain, the rebellious slave, the exploited foreigners? In answering the one question about authorial affiliation, I raise another: How would the authors regard those characters with whom he was not affiliated by fellow-feeling or economic interest? In sum, the sea narrative offered authors different choices than did many other popular genres of the day, and we can read
those choices to learn more about the social and cultural landscape in antebellum America.

The sea narrative, as an American genre, emerged in the 1820s when James Fenimore Cooper published *The Pilot*, a tale of John Paul Jones’s exploits during the Revolutionary War. Cooper originally prefaced his work by writing, “it was not so much [his] intention to describe the customs of a particular age, as to paint those scenes which belong only to the ocean, and to exhibit, in his imperfect manner, a few traits of a people who, from the nature of things, can never be much known.”

Cooper ostensibly used the sailor as a subject, but in his early works, his heroes are of the quarterdeck—captains and officers who embodied American virtues and kept watch over unruly crews that were little more than an extension of the officer’s will. Since these honest officers guarded the rights of their crew, there was rarely unrest on the ship; Cooper’s heroes united mannered nobility with the idea of “natural aristocracy”—in which merit and native abilities are at the root of class mobility and ascension. Though Cooper’s use of a nautical setting is significant historically, he does not use that setting to examine a changing American society. Indeed, the backward-looking nature of his early works suggests that he was far more invested in the nationalist project (as were many novelists of the period) than anything else. The heroic template for the sea narrative generally ignored the fact that the

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maritime world was a grim place for the majority of the men and women inhabiting it. Not only were working conditions brutal and dangerous, but advancement was rare and compensation was bare. Within the pages of the sea narrative, class differences between captains and their crews were often translated into more essential differences, thereby obfuscating the very real economic, social, and racial barriers separating the forecastle from the quarterdeck. Cooper’s natural aristocracy of the quarterdeck had a great deal in common with the “artificial aristocracy” of inherited wealth and status.

Though Dana’s *Two Years Before the Mast* would shift the focus of the sea narrative from the officers of the quarterdeck to the working men of the forecastle, the sea narrative of the 1840s could be divided into two general groups: strongly paternalistic works purporting to speak for common sailors authored by upper-class former sailors such as Richard Henry Dana and James Fenimore Cooper and self-critical narratives written by common sailors themselves in an effort to capitalize on the market created by Dana and Cooper. Both groups of narratives featured former sailors examining their time at sea as a time of temptation, deprivation, and separation from the habits and virtues that defined the middle-class domestic ideal of the antebellum period. Few sailors spoke up for life at sea and the pleasures of freedom, fellowship, and adventure that seafaring life provided. Sailing was most often condemned on the terms set forth in Dana’s famous work, and even when Herman Melville would seek to transgress generic conventions in his sea novels, he did so tentatively, perhaps for fear of offending the middle-class readers who could make his authorial fortune.

Thus, when Herman Melville writes in *White-Jacket*, that the navy is an “asylum for the perverse,” he may have referred to more than the diverse and ramshackle crews of
naval vessels. Perhaps the perverse men to whom he refers are the authors themselves, who are willing to perpetrate heterodoxy against American social and racial norms; in this sense, the asylum they are offered is the sea narrative itself. That is, by writing within a popular form, authors could explore the contentious issues that would otherwise alarm, elude, or offend readers. Though many popular antebellum genres leave unexplored the persistent tension between merit and privilege, the sea narrative—with its standard plots, its focus on heroic exploits, and its persistent obsession with native abilities—allowed authors a “back door” through which they could criticize the myths of mobility and equality at the heart of American society. Working within the genre of the sea narrative allowed authors to dramatize the ongoing conflict between talent and privilege in antebellum society and to reveal the often static hierarchies that limited opportunities for the talented men in the supposed American meritocracy.

Modern criticism of the sea narrative began in earnest in 1961 with Thomas Philbrick’s seminal *James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction*. Though Cooper gives Philbrick his title, he ranges over the entire spectrum of antebellum sea literature to show the importance of the genre and the ways in which Cooper influenced later writers. Directly countering the popular impression of Cooper as an author of wilderness stories, Philbrick suggests that “before 1850 the American frontier was primarily a maritime one, so that the sea rather than the continental wilderness was the principal focus of the yearnings and imaginings of the American dream.”8 Though, as I have written, Cooper’s sea novels place their heroes in different

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settings and situations than do his wilderness tales, most of his nautical fiction shows Cooper to be working a fairly consistent theme, rather than testing the limits of a new genre to see where it might take him. Indeed, in his 1849 preface to a reissue of *The Pilot*, Cooper acknowledged that he wrote his novel not to explore new generic conventions, but as a response to Sir Walter Scott’s *The Pirate*, which Cooper claimed was lacking in terms of “seamanship” because Scott himself had no experience on the sea.\(^9\)

Philbrick’s history of the sea narrative moves from Cooper to Dana, whose *Two Years Before the Mast* inaugurated a shift in the genre toward the common sailor’s first-person narrative. The heroic captains of Cooper’s early work gave way to hard-working tars in the forecastle who battled tyrannical captains and the challenges of seaboard labor. By the late 1840s, sea fiction evolved into what has been hailed as the great American tradition: Melville’s ambiguous explorations of metaphysics, ontology, and the depths of the human psyche. Bert Bender, who takes up temporally where Philbrick stops, argues against Philbrick’s assertion that the genre of sea fiction died out after its apotheosis in *Moby-Dick* due to the coeval decline of the golden age of sail. He links the sea narrative to an individualistic strand in American identity and traces this strand well into the twentieth century. Though I think that Bender’s analysis is astute and most likely

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\(^9\) Cooper, *The Pilot*, 5
accurate, in my work, I am more concerned with complicating the trajectory Philbrick maps in his study as well as his assessment of the genre of sea fiction.

Cesare Casarino begins such a move in his recent book, *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis*. Casarino divides nineteenth century sea narrative into three categories, the exotic picaresque (e.g., *Typee*), the *Bildungsroman* (e.g., *Redburn*), and the modernist sea narrative (e.g., *Moby-Dick*), but breaks from Philbrick in arguing that “these forms need to be understood as structural and synchronic rather than generic and diachronic: all three were not only present throughout the century but also operate in various combinations within the same text.”\(^{10}\) Furthermore, Casarino’s book also suggests a transnational link between Melville and Conrad and implies that the generic qualities of the sea narrative transcend national boundaries. In this sense, I think he makes an important leap forward from Philbrick and Bender.\(^{11}\) The central premise of the work is that the “nineteenth century sea narrative constituted a crucial laboratory for the crisis that goes by the name of modernity,” with modernity being defined primarily as the social structures concomitant with a shift from mercantile toward industrial capitalism. However, Casarino does not adequately historicize his argument by placing the sea narrative in the context of antebellum maritime culture. Thus, though he investigates the sea narrative as a “laboratory” he does not assess the cultural resonance of the genre to ascertain the appropriateness of such a reading. Furthermore, he does little to situation Melville within a literary history of the genre.\(^{12}\)

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\(^{10}\) Casarino, *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis*, 7.

\(^{11}\) John Peck also reads the maritime fiction in an international context, but his work is a history of the genre rather than an exploration of its cultural or political affiliations and possibilities.

\(^{12}\) ibid., 1.
The Test of Salt Water enters the critical fray based on the premise that the sea narrative signaled authors’ concern with the evolution of American society, but that to determine the precise nature and extent of that concern, we must investigate the world—both historical and literary—from which the genre emerged. More than a “laboratory” for working out the transition to industrial capitalism, the sea narrative and the sailors within allowed American authors to consider the foundational American myths of upward mobility and class fluidity that were central to American fiction and political rhetoric throughout the antebellum period. Literary reflections of the remarkable diversity of the antebellum maritime world sometimes hint at the revolutionary ideas that circulated freely and dangerously in the waters and ports of the Atlantic rim. Sailors and slaves living in this fluid and dynamic space participated in rebellions, mutinies, strikes and uprisings that allowed them to assert a narrowly defined liberty in opposition to the dominance of masters and merchants. Though I will not argue that maritime workers were an emergent proletariat or a radical source infecting an otherwise conservative domestic political scene, the exciting work of contemporary historians indicates that the maritime world was definitely a place apart, both physically and intellectually.13 The

crucible of the maritime world gave authors a unique venue in which consider the competing claims of property rights and natural rights at the center of debates over class and slavery. By engaging with maritime culture in their written work, authors were acknowledging both sides of the American story—the promise of American riches, and the exploitation that created those riches.

Chapter two will explain maritime culture alongside antebellum class theories and conclude with a brief examination of the maritime fiction of two former midshipmen: James Fenimore Cooper and William Leggett. These authors, two of the first Americans to work within the genre of the sea narrative, map the contours of the early sea fiction that generally indulged an unabashedly upper-class subject position by embracing the officers and captains of seagoing vessels. In chapter three, I analyze Richard Henry Dana’s *Two Years Before the Mast*, a work that shifts the focus of the sea narrative from earlier heroic scripts (from the officers to the crew) without shifting the subject position from which the sea tale is narrated. *Two Years Before the Mast* ultimately reinforces the class divisions (in society and aboard ship) that figure so prominently in Cooper and Leggett. My interpretation of Dana’s narrative leads me to examine James Fenimore Cooper’s *Ned Myers* and Samuel Leech’s *A Voice From the Main Deck*—two of the more than 100 first-person narratives spawned by *Two Years Before the Mast*—and compare the voices in these narratives to that in Dana’s text.

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*in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630-1850*; Vickers and Walsh, *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail*. Among these Gilje, Rediker, Vickers, and Sager make the most persuasive arguments linking antebellum sailors to the working-classes, though each of these historians makes very different claims regarding the political, economic, and social importance of the sailor within and without his culture. I treat these competing histories more fully in Chapter Two.
In chapter four, I draw on work by the historians David Roediger and Alexander Saxton and the literary critic Samuel Otter to link the maritime world to the culture of voluntarism represented by the working-class, African-Americans and the “savages” of the South Seas. My readings of Typee and Omoo highlight Melville’s thoughtful investigation of “savagery” and its appeal to those ostracized by the coming of industrial capitalism. I go on to focus on Ishmael, the tattooed sailor-savage who narrates Moby-Dick and opens new realms for citizenship and working-class fellowship. Ishmael, I argue, marks a decisive shift in authorial subject positioning within the sea narrative. Finally, in chapter five, I consider three narratives of slave uprisings in which the sea plays a central role: Melville’s “Benito Cereno;” Frederick Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave;” and Martin Delany’s Blake. Each of these works interrogates the competing claims of human rights and property rights within the peculiar institution. Working within the genre of the sea narrative allows Douglass, Melville, and Delany to write boldly of overturning hierarchies, of rebelling against laws that abetted property-owners and privileged classes, and of exploring a new way to judge personal worth. In closing with stories of slave mutinies and uprisings, I show how authors appropriated the sea narrative—and, concomitantly, its fluid national and ethnic boundaries—to imagine a successful, if limited, attack on the powerful institutions that circumscribed the lives of sailors and slaves. However, as I argue in a brief epilogue treating Melville’s later maritime works, success for rebellious sailors and slaves was often constrained by geographical or intellectual isolation that rendered that freedom incomplete.
Chapter Two
Sailors on Land and at Sea

And though the 275th lay was what they call a rather LONG LAY, yet it was better than nothing; and if we had a lucky voyage, might pretty nearly pay for the clothing I would wear out on it, not to speak of my three years' beef and board, for which I would not have to pay one stiver.
—Herman Melville, Moby-Dick

Perhaps, in some small degree, an interest has been awakened in behalf of a very numerous, and what has hitherto been a sort of proscribed class of men, that may directly lead to a melioration of their condition.
—James Fenimore Cooper, Preface to the 1849 edition of The Pilot

I. Class in Antebellum America: Mobility and Myth

Herman Melville first took a turn as a sailor during the financial crash following the Panic of 1837. In 1839, he shipped on a Liverpool packet (a voyage fictionalized in Redburn) and quickly returned home. Decent work was almost impossible to find in the late 1830s, and Melville was in no position to assume the quiet life of the cloistered author. So, following his first voyage, he moved west, hoping for a change of economic circumstance on the plains of Illinois. In Redburn, Melville’s narrator recalls the end of a four months’ voyage and the Captain’s response to his request for payment:

“By running away from the ship in Liverpool, you forfeited your wages, which amount to twelve dollars; and as there has been advanced to you, in money, hammers, and scrapers, seven dollars and seventy-five cents, you are therefore indebted to me in precisely that sum. Now, young gentleman,
I’ll thank you for the money;” and he extended his open palm across the desk. (R, 307)

Undoubtedly, Melville exaggerates the true end of his first voyage, but his point is clear: Seamen profited little by going to sea, and the captain’s mockery of young Redburn as a “gentleman,” reveals how little his perception of himself accords with his monetary circumstances. No matter what he might have wanted to be, and no matter from whence he came, the young seaman was an economic and social outcast whose four months of labor would remain unrewarded.

Though ultimately unsuccessful, Melville undertook his maritime career to remedy his family’s difficult economic circumstances, something many men were forced to do in the turbulent 1830s and 1840s. Almost any man, no matter how unskilled, could find work on a ship, and the wages he earned could help him ascend the class ladder to a more comfortable or prominent place. At the very least, the green hand could hope for adventure, new experiences, and free (if terrible) board. Social and economic climbing was also inspired by the 1828 election of Andrew Jackson and the so-called “rise of the common man,” which would transform perceptions of class, mobility, and opportunity. Even before Jackson, though, Americans’ understanding of social class had been evolving and shifting almost since the moment of the founding.

During George Washington’s presidency, two warring factions vied for control of what was then a single party. On one hand, Thomas Jefferson and other Virginia gentlemen favored a limited federal government that did little to regulate trade or to abet commercial interests. Jefferson imagined America as an agrarian republic wherein the self-sufficient yeoman farmer was the heart of the nation. On the other hand, Federalists like Alexander Hamilton, and, to a lesser degree, John Adams, favored government
control of economic interests. Hamilton supported a national bank that could control the monetary supply and dispense credit to hopeful businessmen; he also supported tariffs that could spur domestic manufacture and purchases by limiting imports. These protectionist policies were derided by agrarian interests because they limited the overseas trade that was becoming increasingly important to the farming community; additionally, tariffs drove up domestic prices, which, alongside a loose credit policy, could lead to inflation.  

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Generally, but by no means absolutely, urban citizens and those invested in the developing mercantile community in America supported the Federalist doctrine. 15 Until 1824, these citizens were concentrated along the seaboard, particularly in the Northeast. Republicans alienated the majority of the northeastern merchants in 1807 when Jefferson inaugurated an embargo to protect American shipping. This policy virtually halted American overseas commerce and destroyed many of the merchants in New York and New England. Though merchants suffered the greatest financial losses during the embargo, they hardly suffered alone. The cessation of foreign trade limited the work of sailors and waterfront laborers, and, with their limited skills, they were forced to live in the streets or turn to nefarious means to satisfy basic wants. 16

14 The contours of this history can be found in numerous sources. Most important to me were Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*; Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

15 Sellers describes the shift in political affiliation from a regional based system to a more class-based system in the Jacksonian era. See also Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1945).

Economic difficulties for sailors and waterfront workers in the 1810s mimicked the deplorable conditions for artisans and other manual laborers who were increasingly relegated to more and more servile roles in the production of goods for the growing American market. During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, labor became far more specialized, and the men who had formerly been proprietors of furniture or glass shops, for instance, were often forced to ply their trades in larger factories that brought lower prices for consumers but eliminated competition for workers. In moving to a new workspace, the former artisan was usually assigned to a role in the production of goods, but the sale of (and profiteering from) those goods was left to the sharply dressed merchants at the front of the workspace. By 1824, urban workers were largely separated from their white-collar counterparts by work environment, dress, and pay. As the split between manual and non-manual labor was replicated in city after city and reinforced by the nascent stirrings of industrialization in Massachusetts and New York, the middle-class became more and more entrenched while workers’ prospects grew less and less sanguine.

At the moment when workers and farmers began to sense the erosion of their economic hopes, however, a political figure moved to the fore who helped to place the working-class American at the center of the national debate: Andrew Jackson. Jackson’s popular victory in 1824, which was followed by his overwhelming electoral victories in 1828 and 1832, showed that the American populace was heavily invested in presidential politics. Indeed, Jackson’s 1828 candidacy spurred what was the largest voter turnout in

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American history, with almost 55% of Americans casting ballots.\textsuperscript{18} And Jackson rewarded the farmer/worker coalition that helped him reach the White House. The new president took a hard line on Indian removal and on money: He authorized the eviction of Indians from the east, thereby guaranteeing security and land to the agrarian interests, and he pursued a hard money policy to destroy the last vestiges of Hamiltonian Federalism. In his war against the national bank and its president Nicholas Biddle, Jackson fought to contain the flood of credit that allowed the entrepreneurial class to flourish. Jackson’s election also represented an early high-water mark for radical politics in America. In the wake of his victory, the Workingman’s Party was organized in New York; it supported the hard-money stance that Jackson would later advocate and agitated for a variety of working-class reforms. The Workingman’s Party even managed to win seats in New York city and state government, but its movement was co-opted by less radical groups, and the party fizzled by the mid-1830s. Nonetheless, the Jackson presidency helped to thrust the concerns of the working classes into the spotlight and helped to galvanize public opinion on the plight of the American worker. For the first time in the nation’s history, a debate over the issue of social class had begun.\textsuperscript{19}

Andrew Jackson’s presidency was rightly seen as a result of a \textit{vox populi} announcing its will over those of genteel career politicians. Though many of Jackson’s policies were amenable to the working classes, they did not always bring salutary results for the new Democratic constituency. Rather than overturning the fundamental inequalities in the capitalist system which created the working class in the first place

\textsuperscript{18} Sellers, \textit{The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846}, 297.

(which is, admittedly, a rather high bar to clear), Jackson sought to level the playing field and to recreate America in the Jeffersonian image. However, the genies of mercantilism and industrialization were long since out of the bottle; even at the beginning of Jackson’s presidency, America was in the midst of a “market revolution” that altered the way people envisioned themselves and the economic structures in which they were enmeshed. The individual artisans or yeoman farmers who were hallmarks of the rural “subsistence culture” were now wage laborers or food producers whose work and wages were closely linked to markets far from their home.20

When he won his war against the national bank, Jackson approved a system of state banks that served essentially similar purposes albeit on a smaller level. These state banks ended the federal government’s participation in lending and extending credit, but they did nothing to stop the flow of credit to budding capitalists. Furthermore, Jackson’s dream of a hard money currency was not realized through the bank veto. And so, the workers and farmers who had helped elect Jackson were not ultimately served by his policies, at least not in economic terms. Jackson, like many Americans before and since, believed in the possibility at the heart of the American system, and, by democratizing the money supply, Jackson believed that he could enable each man to become a capitalist. The goal for the Democrats (unlike that of the radical Workingman’s Party or of controversial theorists like Charles Fourier and Orestes Brownson) was not to redistribute wealth, but to make wealth a possibility for all. In retrospect, Jackson could have done

20 In Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway, eds., *The Market Revolution in America* (Charlottesville: U Virginia P, 1996) several historians take issue with Sellers totalizing conception of the “market revolution” and point out the ways in which his arguments are less pat than they seem at first blush. Nonetheless, for the scholars in Stokes and Conway’s volume, as well as for myself, Sellers’s conception of a shift in American attitudes and social structures in the first half of the nineteenth century is a useful, and accurate, way of evaluating antebellum society.
very little to stem the tide of capitalism in the United States, but he took office at a moment when the ideal of the agrarian republic seemed graspable. Instead, the 1830s saw an enormous increase in industrialization and mechanization that would reinforce the nascent system of wage labor that was becoming common practice in urban centers and was broadening the growing division between workers and their bosses. In 1835, the wealthiest 4% of New Yorkers controlled around 63% of the wealth. By 1845, the situation had worsened, and the richest 4% controlled 80% of the city’s wealth; New York is not atypical, either. These numbers reflect the distribution of wealth in the other major cities in the northeast.  

Reactions to the growing social and economic division between the middle and lower classes were what one might expect. There were protests by radical groups and early unions that sought to remedy work conditions; for example, the General Trades Union (GTU) in New York inaugurated a series of strikes between 1833-1836. At the same time, merchants and owners attempted to explain the class chasm in ways that the majority of Americans would accept. The heart of this explanation was the “harmony of interests,” which suggested that working people and their “superiors” were joined together in a great capitalist enterprise that would benefit them all. Workers needed to labor diligently, and bosses needed to manage firmly but humanely. If each person could accept his role in the great schema, the results would be universally favorable.

21 Pessen, Riches, Class and Power before the Civil War, 35-45.
22 In Chapter Six of Chants Democratic, Sean Wilentz writes an excellent history of the General Trades Union that emphasizes its links with similar movements in England and France.
23 Burke, The Conundrum of Class: Public Discourse on the Social Order in America Burke’s entire work is quite useful; for more information on the harmony of interests, see chapters 4 and 5. Also see Sklansky, The Soul’s Economy: Market Selfhood and American Thought, 1820-1920, 76-90 and passim.
Henry Carey’s 1837 treatise, *The Principles of Political Economy*, contains an early example of this opinion: “the interests of the capitalist and the labourer are thus in perfect harmony with each other, as each derives advantage from every measure that tends to facilitate the growth of capital, and to render labour productive, while every measure that tends to produce the opposite effect is injurious to both.”

Carey’s theory intimates that labor unions were actually fighting against themselves in seeking to derail the growth of capital. The wealthy Philadelphia publisher and capitalist went so far as to suggest that workers’ wages would continually rise as they became more productive, an assumption based on Carey’s belief that increased production would never be expected by owners, and therefore would always be rewarded. Furthermore, Carey argued, increases in productivity tended to drive prices lower, thus the worker would be doubly empowered by his own productivity: His wages would increase and the prices he was forced to pay would decrease.

Since the efforts of unions in the major American cities were constantly counteracted by the words of theorists like Carey during the 1830s and 1840s, social class in America became, as Martin Burke notes, “as much an ideological phenomenon as an institutional matter.” At the same time, I would argue (following Burke) that the very irresolution of the conflict points to its centrality; that is, agreement was impossible when each side had so much at stake. No one could settle on the ordering of American society, and as often as a radical spoke out against class division, a believer in the harmony of interests would rebuff him. In fact, those pro-market thinkers who spoke out against

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radical labor grouped merchants and laborers under the same banner as members of a productive class, thus obscuring the very real differences between the groups. Another technique that conservatives employed in order to shift a discussion of class from the antagonistic language of the Workingmen’s Party and, later, the GTU, was to search for new metaphors to justify those differences that could not simply be elided through rhetorical maneuvering.

For example, differences in labor roles and, concomitantly, social class were compared to differences between the head (the thinking part of the body) and the hand (the laboring part of the body); each portion of the capitalist organism had an important role to fulfill in achieving success. This naturalization of division helped the idea of harmony gain traction, and its common-sense appeal likely helped conservatives shift the focus of debates about class from more salient topics (such as the actual distribution of wealth) toward tangential issues. In The Soul's Economy, Jeffrey Sklanky suggests that men and institutions that endorsed personal improvement—temperance societies, athenaeums, and churches, all of which were heavily funded by the upper classes—drew public attention away from systemic economic inequality and redirect it toward “self-culture.”

A famous example of the idea of self culture comes from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1837 address to the Phi Beta Kappa society at Harvard:

26 Rice, Minding the Machine: Languages of Class in Early Industrial America.

27 Sklansky, The Soul's Economy: Market Selfhood and American Thought, 1820-1920, 33-72 Also see Robert Griffin, Their Brothers' Keepers (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1961). Griffin argues that a “trustee class” in New England saw themselves as the directors for American society and they enlisted the aid of moneyed interests in order to make an ideal America: Federalist, protestant, temperate, and diligent.
The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man…The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden to by the routine of his craft, and his soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney, a statute-book; the mechanic, a machine; the sailor, a rope of a ship. 28

Emerson suggests that the workers of America should not seek fulfillment in their occupations or in financial gain, but in personal development. To become “a man,” the tradesman or sailor should approach his work from the standpoint of its “ideal worth.” The notion that workers have the time or the means, (as Emerson himself did) to contemplate ideas of “ideal worth” reveals the classist assumptions undergirding Emersonian self-culture. Such a celebration of self-improvement entails certain assumptions about the material circumstances of his fellow New Englanders. Even more troublingly, Emerson not only suggests that inequality is immaterial in a metaphysical sense, he also intimates that economic inequality should not even be important to those in the working class.

Democrats were, in some cases, willing to respond to such ideas in the public forum, but the most common argument made by Democrats during the 1830s and 1840s was that monopolies needed to be disbanded, extending to all the opportunity for economic growth. Taking their cue from Jackson himself, even radical Democrats like the Locofoco columnist William Leggett hesitated to imagine an altogether different economic system at the heart of the American democracy. For example, in the December 31, 1836, issue of the Plaindealer, in a column entitled “The Inequality of Human

28 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar" in Essays and Poems (New York: Library of America, 1996), 54. As I mention in Chapter Three, it is quite possible that Richard Henry Dana, an 1837 Harvard graduate, was in the audience for Emerson’s address.
Condition,” Leggett wrote: “If the inequalities of artificial condition bore any relation to those of nature, if they were determined by the comparative degrees of men’s wisdom and strength, or of their providence and frugality, there would be no cause to complain. But the direct contrary is, to a very great extent, the truth.”29 This passage highlights the intractability of the American class debate in Leggett’s era—men on both sides believed in the idea of a natural aristocracy, they simply disagreed with whether or not the United States was in fact a natural aristocracy.

The near-universal acceptance of both natural aristocracy and the harmony of interests is perhaps best illustrated by the cautionary tales of two men who denied those concepts. The first is that of labor leader Thomas Skidmore, who was one of the only political figures to willing to speak out against the capitalist system and the rising market society. In his 1829 book, The Rights of Man to Property!, Skidmore argues:

no man has any just and true title to his possessions at all: that they are, in fact, possessions growing out of injustice, perpetrated by all governments, from time immemorial and continued down to the present hour…and if it is apparent, as I trust it is, that when property is enormously unequal…men of toil, in all countries, can never have the full enjoyment of their labor; it will be conceded, no doubt, that I have shewn [sic] enough to justify my fellow citizens in pulling down the present edifice of society, and to induce them to build a new one in its stead.30

Skidmore ran for the New York State Assembly in 1829 under the banner of the nascent Workingman’s Party and was narrowly defeated. Soon after, the Workingman’s Party

29 “The Inequality of Human Condition,” Plaindealer (December 31, 1836).
was infiltrated by conservatives who aimed to tone down the radical politics of the new group, barring Skidmore, who died in political exile in 1832.31

Though not affiliated with a labor movement, Orestes Brownson was another radical voice in the class debate, and the reception of his most famous work, “The Laboring Classes,” demonstrates the danger of anti-capitalist radicalism, even following the Panic of 1837. Brownson responds to more conservative renderings of the class division in America by reminding Emerson and those like him that “self-culture is a good thing, but it cannot abolish inequality, nor restore men to their rights.”32 Once he moved beyond this criticism, though, Brownson proved himself to be far out of step with his fellow Democrats. In the first paragraphs of the pamphlet, he announces that slave labor is far less oppressive than wage labor and suggests that the middle class sought to limit opportunity and advancement for those beneath them in the class hierarchy. In other words, capitalism was not a system designed for every man to ascend, but for certain men to ascend and then to keep others beneath them. At other points, Brownson echoes his Transcendentalist brethren by arguing that the “Christianity of the church” (as opposed to the “Christianity of Christ”) subjugates the laboring classes. He goes on to link the working classes of all nations under one banner, thus destroying the notion of American exceptionalism that undergirded the “harmony of interests.”33 In his brief pamphlet, then, Brownson manages to distance himself from Christians, reformers, Transcendentalists,
and political economists such as Matthew Carey. Predictably, the pamphlet turned
Brownson, a low-level Democratic appointee, into a political pariah. Whigs used his
pamphlet to suggest that the entire Democratic Party was similarly out of step with the
majority of Americans. As a result, even the more liberal Democrats wanted nothing to
do with a man who demeaned the middle classes and suggested that inheritance be
abolished.34

Skidmore and Brownson illustrate the problems that radicals faced in the
rhetorical debate over class; by arguing that the lack of wealth and progress among the
lower classes was a result of systemic inequalities in American capitalism, they suggested
that universal opportunity was a myth. As Carl Siracusa argues in A Mechanical People,
neither voters nor their leaders much wanted that myth to be debunked; the failure of the
Democratic Party to oppose the “harmony of interests” and the image of the “respectable
worker” with alternate rhetorical constructs was due to the fact that it would have been
politically inexpedient to do so.35

The scope and vigor of antebellum debates over class suggest that each side
attached great importance to the way in which those debates were conceived and
portrayed in rhetorical terms. The battle to shape class rhetoric in the public arena, more
than any strike or protest, would ultimately define public perception of the class system
in America. The most appealing rhetoric was used by both major political parties: “every
man a capitalist.” In asserting the universality of opportunity, the vast majority of

34 Martin K. Doudna, "Introduction" in The Laboring Classes (Delmar, New York: Scholars' Facsimiles
and Reprints, 1978), ix-xii.
35 Brownson, The Laboring Classes. Carl Siracusa, A Mechanical People (Middletown, Connecticut:
Wesleyan UP, 1979), 75. I find Siracusa’s work especially useful because it locates debates over class in
the political sphere, and, as I do, imagines that those debates were primarily rhetorical.
politicians and public intellectuals distanced themselves from England and European nations that were homes to large and needy working classes. The European working class, widely accepted as evidence of disinterest or even moral failure on the part of American politicians, was simply an impossibility in the American system. In the 1830s and 1840s, believers in the market helped to cement the foundational myth of American potential in the generation when that potential first became myth.36

The myth of economic and social mobility made a middle-class lifestyle—an ideal that emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century—the goal for status-conscious citizens. A particularly American middle-class culture developed along with the evolution of market culture and business relationships based on contract. Stuart Blumin argues that this culture was rooted in the economic divisions I address above. He posits that non-manual laborers were the foundation of the new middle class and that these people developed a range of common attitudes and affiliations that helped to define the economic and social entity that became known as the middle class. According to Blumin, middle-class societies often met in domestic settings and followed strict rules of order that set them apart from rowdier workers whose meetings and demonstrations often spilled into the street. Religious affiliation also tended to break down along class lines, with the middling and upper classes far less likely to be associated with evangelical Baptists or Methodists.37

36 “[Matthew] Carey directed the brunt of his argument not against an opposing system of labor, but against an opposing science of society: classical political economy, to which [he] attributed the ominous political and economic conflict dividing the nation.” Sklansky, The Soul’s Economy: Market Selfhood and American Thought, 1820-1920, 75-6.

37 See Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class, especially Chapter 6.
John Kasson echoes Blumin when he suggests that this emphasis on control and
decorum in middle class life extended into marital and sexual relations. In Rudeness and
Civility, Kasson writes, “[N]ineteenth-century urban masses…pursued sexuality within a
context of moderation, self-control, and, above all, privacy.” 38 Though the antebellum
American middle class hardly abstained from sex or otherwise eschewed it, the middle-
class’s concern with privacy had made domestic life generally, and sex particularly, more
private than ever before. This is especially clear when one considers the tenor of protests
against brothels and bawdy houses in antebellum New York as illuminated by Timothy
Gilfoyle in City of Eros. He argues that the difference between prostitution on Broadway
versus the notorious slums of Five Points was in the public displays of “conjugal
connection” in Five Points. Gilfoyle’s history suggests that sexuality was not so much the
issue for the middle class—in fact, his work indicates that the socially conscious middle
classes accepted the importance of male sexual initiation—but the tawdriness of the
setting and of the act itself. Not surprisingly, Five Points (along with the Water Street
district) was a popular haunt for sailors and other members of the working classes. 39 The
scenes of debauchery in the theatres, taverns, boarding houses, and brothels of these
neighborhoods defined the working class as a threat to the social decorum endorsed by
the bourgeoisie.

Thus, during the first half of the nineteenth century, the market revolution not
only reshaped economic relations and changed the rhetoric that politicians and thinkers

38 Kasson, Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America, 170; Blumin, The
Emergence of the Middle Class, 183-186.

Experience, Victoria to Freud, Volume I: The Education of the Senses. For more information on the Five
Points district, see W. T. Lhamon, Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop
used to describe them, but it also inaugurated a genuine class division that was reinforced by patterns of dress, conversation, entertainment, and interpersonal relations. Historians and theorists have spent a great deal of ink and energy debating whether or not this class division spawned “class consciousness” in the Marxist sense; that is, whether the various classes become unified political entities related to specific partisan groups. Though this study does not attempt to answer that question, there is ample evidence both past and present suggests that American social classes are politically polymorphous, and, certainly, those political parties that did support working men in the antebellum period did not meet with success. Nonetheless, a distinct and culturally powerful middle class—bound together by what Peter Gay calls a “family of desires and anxieties”—emerged in the nineteenth century, and working-class affiliations were, in large part, developed through rejection of the desires and anxieties associated with that class.

As Gay notes, “it is a crucial fact of nineteenth century middle-class life, feeding their anxieties and shaping their consciences, that bourgeois were always, everywhere, even in commercial cities, in a minority.” The middle-class men and women “swam in a sea of poverty,” surrounded by members of the working class whose attitudes differed markedly. For example, a principal difference between these two proximate groups was their respective attitudes toward accumulation and gratification. In fact, I believe that

42 ibid., 24.
these differences are not simply *symptoms*, but rather *constitutive elements* of antebellum class division. The middle classes endorsed (though not necessarily followed) numerous strategies predicated on the idea of delayed gratification: waiting until marriage to engage in sex, waiting until heaven for a final reward, and, significantly, saving money to ensure economic rewards. The working classes viewed delay in far different terms; abstinence and religious behavior required those without the ability to ascend economically to follow a moral code that was useful only as it allowed one admission to a higher status group. Additionally, saving money was often impossible because the working poor faced and immediate and necessary expenses. Saving required both the physical removal of money and the use of a savings bank, which was itself anathema to many who were, following Andrew Jackson himself, suspicious of banks in general. When middle-class reformers tried to show those beneath them a different way of living by endorsing savings banks, temperance, abstinence and a host of other strategies, they ultimately endorsed patience and delay.

Men and women who thought themselves able or even likely to ascend to the respectability of the middle class may well have followed strategies of delay in order to achieve that goal. In many cases, such strategies likely proved helpful. Those who rejected strategies of delay were not simply profligate sensualists, however; they may have been making an economic statement of their own, and the historical significance of that statement as a unique contribution to antebellum class debates should not be solely judged according to its ultimate effect.43 Those who resisted reformers’ calls were no

43 Vanneman and Cannon, *The American Perception of Class*. The authors argue that historians should “avoid inferring levels of class consciousness from the outcomes of class conflict,” suggesting that it is not working-class weakness that limits class consciousness, but rather capitalist power (15).
proto-proletariat, and they did not succeed in changing the course of American economic development; however, their behaviors and attitudes were emblematic what I will call the antebellum sailor ethic.

The maritime world was vastly different from that which most Americans inhabited. It was a world without strong national or religious affiliations, though the knowledge, experience, and codes of behavior unique to seafaring men engendered an affiliation to the brotherhood of seamen. Among the traits that allowed for sailor affiliation, I have identified three that seem important: First, an extraordinary attentiveness to ideas of personal rights and personal liberty as defined by natural law and the ideals (but not necessarily the practices) of the United States. Put another way, the founding document of choice for the sailor was the Declaration rather than the Constitution. Second, sailors evinced a disposition toward immediate gratification which led many of them to eschew saving and other “responsible” economic behaviors and to indulge in alcohol, sex, and violence more freely and publicly than other men aspiring to middle-class respectability. Third, sailors generally demonstrate an overarching acceptance of danger and mortality, which was a necessity in the uncertain maritime world and likely contributed to the behaviors described above. As Richard Henry Dana recalls, “Whatever your feelings may be, you must make a joke of everything at sea; and if you were to fall from aloft and be caught in the belly of a sail, and thus saved from instant death, it would not do to look at all disturbed, or to make a serious matter of it” (TY 73).

Sailors’ unique attitudes and behaviors, which created cross-cultural affiliations in the maritime world, allow us to understand maritime culture as a dismissive response to
the prevailing middle class culture at a time when that culture was becoming the norm for an entire society. As opposed to reflecting ascendant middle-class values, antebellum seamen’s behaviors represent of a “culture of voluntarism” that historians have linked to preindustrial workers and, in some cases, to African-Americans.\footnote{Two important works that link the “culture of voluntarism” to African Americans are Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class; Saxton, The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America. Sellers and Wilentz reference such a culture in describing working-class affiliations in antebellum America, while Paul Gilje links a similar “culture of voluntarism” directly to antebellum seamen, as does Bennett, Union Jacks: Yankee Sailors in the Civil War, 99.} Their association with such groups suggests that, by entering the maritime world, workers literally and figuratively left America behind, and America, in turn, lost sight of those renegade seamen. American authors, however, did not lose sight of these men, and in purporting to contemplate America via the popular genre of the sea narrative, they may have contemplated something else: a foreign world in which sailors searched for new affiliations and definitions of success rooted in their particular versions of friendship and manhood.

In Union Jacks: Yankee Sailors in the Civil War, Michael J. Bennett writes, “[M]any of the works churned out about sailors…are anecdotal narratives that seek to describe, rather than explain, their behavior and culture.” This tendency results from nineteenth-century sailors’ frequent inability to record their emotions and motivations while they performed the difficult labor of seamen. Perhaps, as Bennett suggests, “historians have focused on the environment and the nature of ship work as determinative factors in shaping the distinctive look and behavior of sailors.”\footnote{ibid., 99.} Indeed, the nature of ship work may have contributed to the “look” of sailors, but, given the links between the


ship and the seaport, the sailors’ worldview that Bennett describes was likely quite
similar to the outlook of other antebellum maritime laborers and members of the urban
working class. The distinctive culture of men at sea may be a reflection of a larger
working-class culture that became more pronounced in the close spaces and uncertain
atmosphere of the maritime world.46

II. The Sailor Ethic and the Antebellum Middle Class

“Call me Ishmael,” could be the opening line of countless sailor autobiographies, for the
men who would be the subjects of those stories were, like Ishmael, largely unmoored
from society and without future prospects. In choosing to head to sea, a man may have
sought to scratch his “everlasting itch for things remote,” or perhaps they appreciated that
ship owners “make a point of paying [him] for [his] trouble.”47 During the antebellum
period, many men who shipped to sea for the first time did so in search of adventure, but
those who signed on for another voyage almost always did so out of necessity. Who,
then, were these men who enlisted to serve on the merchant and whaling vessels
departing American ports? From whence had they come, and where did they imagine that
their nautical adventure would take them? If the young man were fortunate enough to
move up within or even out of the profession, what opportunities existed for him? And,
most importantly for this study, what were the unique pleasures and challenges of a life at

46 Critics who have dealt with issues of labor and class in the sea narrative are few and far between. Beyond
passing mention in many works on Melville and Cooper, the subject is treated in Blum, The View from the
Mast-Head: Antebellum American Sea Narratives and the Maritime Imagination; Hapke, Labor's Text: The
Worker in American Fiction; Bromell, By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum
America; H. Bruce Franklin, “Herman Melville, Artist of the Worker’s World” in Weapons of Criticism:

47 Herman Melville, Moby-Dick: Or the Whale, eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker and G. Thomas
sea as opposed to the pursuit of a different sort of life on land? The answers to these questions lay in part near the beginning of the nation itself, in a period dominated by burgeoning commerce and the fight for national liberty.

The earliest maritime cultures in America emerged in the seaports of New England, particularly in Essex County, where fishermen plied their trade and extended the search for fish to the banks of Newfoundland and beyond. During the eighteenth century, the fishing industry developed a specialized economy in which merchants and boat owners controlled the means of production and employed wage laborers for the shipboard work that brought great profits to the upper classes in New England. In *Farmers and Fishermen*, Daniel Vickers explains that this early maritime economy in Essex County helped to create the social structure that allowed for industrialization.48 Indeed, many fishermen chose to pursue other careers once work became available in the factories and mills of the north shore. Whether or not experience in the maritime economy had psychologically prepared men to accept their roles as wage laborers is uncertain, but, as Vickers notes, there is no doubt that by 1820, a substantial laboring class had developed in the towns around Boston. As the fishing industry dried up, many members of this class who could not find employment ashore sought employment in the burgeoning merchant marine, the growth of which was rooted in the emergence of the Northwest fur trade.49


49 A number of works have helped me compile this brief history of antebellum American maritime culture. One of the most useful, despite being the first to be published, is Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts* I have also relied on Robert G. Albion, William A. Baker and Benjamin W. Labaree, *New England and the Sea* (Mystic, Connecticut: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1994); Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*;
Growing consumer desire for luxuries from the Orient, particularly China drove the development of the Northwest fur trade in the years following American independence. Once the city of Canton was opened via a small settlement outside the city walls, American traders began to bring Chinese goods back to the states. However, merchants first needed to find something for which Cantonese traders were willing to barter. Though American timber and raw materials were of little value in the Asian markets, American merchants finally found something worth trading on the northwest coast of the American continent: seal and otter skins. The Northwest fur trade required American merchants to send out loads of beads, clothing and other goods for trading along the Pacific coast of North America. In exchange for these items, captains gained the labor and knowledge of native workers on the northwest coast who could obtain and prepare the desired furs. These were, in turn, traded in Canton for silks, spices and other Chinese finery.

This trade, inaugurated by the American ships Columbia, Rediviva, and the Lady Washington in 1788, was enormously profitable for American merchants, especially in Salem and Boston.\(^{50}\) Samuel Eliot Morison suggests that the wages paid to ship captains working the Canton market “were sufficient to attract the best type of New Englander…almost exclusively native-born or adopted Yankees.”\(^{51}\) By 1850, however,

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\(^{51}\) Morison, The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 77.
Nathaniel Hawthorne would write of the Custom House in Salem, “Here, no doubt, statistics of the former commerce of Salem might be discovered, and memorials of her princely merchants…and many another magnate in his day; whose powdered head, however, was scarcely in the tomb, before his mountain-pile of wealth began to dwindle.” From his stool on the first floor of the Custom House overlooking Derby Wharf, Hawthorne could see that the boom was over—the wealth generated by the Northwest fur trade and other American shipping ventures was in a permanent decline.

In 1807—while the fur trade was still in its heyday and France and England were at war—the American government imposed an embargo on foreign shipping in order to stem British impressments of American sailors. This embargo severely limited the fur trade and all other routes that were important to American overseas commerce at the time; as a result, sailors paid a very dear economic price during the embargo years. After the embargo was lifted in 1809, shipping rebounded and the sailor population once again increased; however, impressments of American sailors did not stop. As a result, between the end of the embargo and 1812, when the second war against England began, the sailor’s personal liberty was a major political issue. The appeal to the personal liberty of the American sailor generated public and political support for the war and contributed to the American declaration of war against England in 1812. In Liberty on the Waterfront, Paul Gilje argues that, during this Federalist era, “the sailor as an individual emerged as a central political symbol for the new United States. In large part this symbolic significance

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grew out of the importance of the commerce to the American economy and the recognitions that sailors, in particular, took risks to sustain that commerce.\textsuperscript{53}

Sailors certainly took numerous risks to sustain American commerce, but the rewards for those risks fell disproportionately to the captains, merchants, and owners who ranked above the common seaman, who, though a compelling symbol of liberty in the early years of the American republic, did not necessarily enjoy the economic fruits of that liberty.\textsuperscript{54} The war against England exemplifies of this dichotomy, for “Madison’s war” was fought not only to preserve sailor’s rights, but also to enable the American government to make inroads both in the west and Canada and thereby cement American economic supremacy on the North American continent. Though the sailor was used to facilitate the political maneuvering that led to war, and though the American victories in the war initiated what is now called the golden age of sail, the common seaman himself did not reap substantial benefits from America’s newfound maritime supremacy.\textsuperscript{55}

In the years following the War of 1812, Congress debated the merits of maintaining a powerful and visible naval presence in the world. These debates often broke on geographic lines, with inland states voting against naval funding and coastal states voting for. The momentum generated by the war allowed legislators to overcome this division and to vote for $6 million in funding for the construction of new ships of the line. The postwar navy patrolled cruising grounds in the Mediterranean, South America,

\textsuperscript{53} Gilje, \textit{Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution}, 151.

\textsuperscript{54} As Morison notes, masters and mates aboard Northwest traders received between $20-25 per month, but, they were allotted between $\frac{1}{2}$ to 5 tons of cargo space on the homeward voyage, and with this space, they could operate their own private trade. As a result, the officers aboard Northwest traders were extremely well-compensated for their efforts.

the West Indies, and other locales. By “showing the flag” in foreign ports and limiting piracy and privateering, the American navy protected international commerce and expanded the reach of the merchant class. The symbiotic relationship between the navy and the merchant marine is also evident in the histories of the sailors who, like Herman Melville, plied their trade on military and merchant ships alike.

This fluid and variegated nature of maritime employment ties to several factors: the vagaries of antebellum labor markets, a highly transient workforce, the aggressive and often brutal recruiting practices used by both the military and merchant marine, and, finally, the sailor’s desire to maximize his profit and/or minimize his effort. Wages in the navy were not significantly lower than those in the merchant service, but opportunities for advancement were severely limited. In his history of the Navy, Nathan Miller indicates that the service was full of “aging men who…clung to the rank of commodore, blocking younger men from climbing the ladder of promotion.” This, along with the squalid living conditions on a man-of-war that was home to hundreds of men laboring under the threat of corporal punishment, led to “warships manned…almost entirely by foreigners and social outcasts.” Testament to this claim is the fact that in 1835, 3,000 merchant seamen sailed from Boston, but only 90 men enlisted in the Navy at the same port.56 Such an overwhelming bias against naval service was likely due to the merchant marine’s reward of prior experience. After shipping on a merchant ship as a green hand (a sailor with no previous experience) and receiving paltry wages (around $10 a month in 1830), the sailor could progress up the pay ranks to ordinary or able seaman, and, if he

could distinguish himself in one of these positions, even to a job in the officer corps as second mate, first mate, or even master.\textsuperscript{57} These jobs brought not only responsibility and professional status but also an opportunity to avoid the difficult labor of the seamen and to enjoy improved living conditions far from the filthy forecastle.

George Little, who sailed as a green hand on board a merchant ship in 1807 at the age of 16 advanced to the officer corps relatively quickly and became a master at age 26. When he retired from the merchant service at age 35 due to an eye ailment, he had made enough money to support himself and his family for several years. Such advancement was the ambition of many seamen in the antebellum period, and, for those who advanced up the chain of command quickly, it was an attainable goal. However, most sailors were not as lucky as George Little. Ned Myers, whose story is told in a work by James Fenimore Cooper, could never ascend to a level above that of second mate because of his taste for drinking and his distaste for authority.\textsuperscript{58} Far too often, Myers aligned himself with the crew aboard the ships on which he served and thereby alienated the officers who could ensure his promotion. Though aware of his self-sabotage, Myers, as he tells his story to Cooper, is also unrepentant. One gets a sense that Myers (and many other sailors like him) felt that ascension into the ranks of the officers was not really a step up but a step away from one’s identity as a sailor before the mast. Such an attitude makes the sailor a problematic representative of American liberty—though the sailor was free to roam the world and to make his own chances, he often sabotaged those chances or eschewed them altogether. Myers is typical of many antebellum sailors in that he

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\textsuperscript{57} Information on wages is quite limited (and varied). This estimate comes from Morison, \textit{The Maritime History of Massachusetts}, 257

\textsuperscript{58} I treat Myers at length in Chapter Three.
voluntarily remained economically and socially outcast from the emergent American middle class.\textsuperscript{59}

The sailor living the greatest distance, physically and metaphorically, from the American middle-class was the whaleman. During the 1840s, the peak years of American whaling, an average of 660 ships were actively engaged in the search for leviathan. This search not only made millionaires of countless New England merchants, it also made whaling the fifth largest American industry in terms of monetary output.\textsuperscript{60} By necessity, the whaling industry employed a great many young New Englanders, as well as men from all over the world. As whaling grew as an industry and the need for manpower expanded, captains had to rely more and more on native populations from places like the Azores and other island groups.\textsuperscript{61} Association with these men, who often were regarded as primitive and uncivilized, contributed to a public bias against American whalemen that was rooted in many of the qualities that typified nineteenth-century whaling. Margaret Creighton writes that “whalemen…did not stand well in the social strata of industrializing America. Their work was too erratic, their hands too soiled, their company too mixed, and their ships too far from home.”\textsuperscript{62} As if public opprobrium weren’t enough, even fellow sailors regarded the whalemen with haughty contempt as well. Writing in his 1839 treatise, \textit{Evils and Abuses in the Naval and Merchant Service, Exposed}, William McNally

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\textsuperscript{61} Stanley Lebergott, \textit{Manpower in Economic Growth: The American Record since 1800} (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 26. Stanley Lebergott claims “in the mid 1840s-many believed that two-thirds of our sailors were not native.”

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suggested “If I know any trade that is likely to ruin a young man, and render him
worthless as a seaman for ever after, it is a whaling voyage; there they learn nothing but
to kill and take care of whales, and try blubber.” Because the whaleman was, in addition
to being a sailor, a hunter, blubber-boiler, oarsman, and harpooner, the merchantmen who
made their living by sailing alone looked down upon whalers.

Though the opportunity for profit in the whaling industry was very real, it was
even more limited for the common sailor than it was in the merchant service.
Merchantmen were paid wages by the month or voyage; whalemen were paid by the lay
system, which accorded a share of the profit for a given voyage based on a sailor’s
position on the ship. After a whaler returned to port, the owners paid their bills, sold the
cargo and immediately took 50% of the profits. Afterwards, the remaining profits were
divided among the men on ship. The captain might receive a lay of 1/10th, meaning he
would receive 10% of the sailors’ pool of money. A green hand would usually receive a
lay of 1/185th, which often translated into around $300 or less for 3 years labor. In many
cases, after deductions for medicine, clothing, and advances made in ports of call, sailors
returned to land with no money at all. In fact, between 1840-1856, skilled, semi-skilled,
and unskilled seamen in the whaling industry made less than 60% of the wages of

63 William McNally, Evils and Abuses in the Naval and Merchant Service, Exposed: With Proposals for
their Remedy and Redress (Boston: Cassady and March, 1839), 134.
65 The figures I have used to describe the lays provided to whaling crews represent average lays for over
1000 sailors shipping from New Bedford, Massachusetts between 1840-1858. Davis, Gallman and Gleiter,
In Pursuit of Leviathan: Technology, Institutions, Productivity, and Profits in American Whaling, 1816-
1906, 161-6.
unskilled laborers ashore.\textsuperscript{66} Whalemens’s wages were more in line with those of New England textile workers, the majority of whom were women.

Thus, the situation for the young man contemplating a voyage on a whaling ship was none too promising. He could not expect to gain the small measure of intraoccupational prestige accorded to the merchant sailor, and he would earn wages approximately equivalent to those his sister could obtain working in a factory. Though the lay system accorded each sailor the opportunity to participate in what amounted to a large lottery, most men who shipped on a whaling voyage would have been better served economically to labor ashore. This circumstance suggests that labor ashore was not always easy to come by, and it brings us once again to Ishmael, who goes to sea not to chase his fortune, or to learn the skills of a seaman; Ishmael goes to sea to obtain three meals a day and to search for “the ungraspable phantom of life…the key to it all” (\textit{M-D}, 5)

Though a precise count of how many sailors shared Ishmael’s metaphysical motivation is impossible, but numerous young men did go to sea for non-economic reasons. For example, some men shipped in order to avoid the temptations ashore, to avoid drunkenness and its attendant dissipations.\textsuperscript{67} Some men, like Richard Henry Dana, went to sea in order to mend a physical ailment, or to put themselves through a physical trial that would prove their manhood and mettle.\textsuperscript{68} There were also those like the young Ohioan Enoch Carter Cloud who signed on for a three-years whaling cruise with the

\textsuperscript{66} ibid., 185.
\textsuperscript{67} Creighton, \textit{Rites and Passages: The Experience of American Whaling, 1830-1870}, 55; Cooper, \textit{Ned Myers; Or, A Life before the Mast}.
\textsuperscript{68} Creighton, \textit{Rites and Passages: The Experience of American Whaling, 1830-1870}, 56
belief their his time at sea might be full of “ease and happiness;” young Enoch would regret his decision to go to sea almost immediately and he spent the next three years writing fondly of his home and family.\textsuperscript{69} Then, of course, there were many men who went to sea without intending to go at all. The widespread practice of impressment, or crimping, in the antebellum period was a significant source of labor for ship owners. All the same, the majority of the men at sea chose to go, and though they may have signed on for any number of reasons, once a man became a sailor, he would experience pleasures and difficulties that were unique to a life in the forecastle.

Situated in the forward part of the ship, “before the mastm” the close, wet, and dirty forecastle was the living area for sailors. Most ships operated on a watch and watch schedule, which meant that half the crew was on deck at all the time, while the other half was below deck. Thus, sailors had no more than four hours at a stretch to sleep and relax in their living quarters, and, in foul weather, when all hands were needed, they were denied even that. Food was limited in quantity and decidedly poor in quality for those before the mast. Enoch Carter Cloud recalls stopping in the Cape Verde archipelago “to procures hogs, fowls, vegetables, fruit, etc. The 185\textsuperscript{th} portion of these cabin delicacies ought to belong to the greeny’s [sic]—but I suppose our allowance will be ‘short & sweet!’”\textsuperscript{70} In other words, the fresh food obtained by the crew would be served the captain and the other officers; Cloud and his fellow hands would not even receive the 185\textsuperscript{th} portion according to their lay. For the most part, seamen ate salted beef and pork


\textsuperscript{70} Cloud, \textit{Enoch's Voyage: Life on a Whaleship, 1851-1854}, 31.
and hard biscuits except for Sundays when they enjoyed a boiled pudding known as “duff.” As might be expected, such a diet, along with the difficult and unsanitary conditions aboard ship, led to a great many illnesses among forecastle sailors. Widespread illness, along with the dangerous working environment, contributed to a rather high mortality rate and, correspondingly, a young workforce.  

Most galling to the men before the mast was the threat of violent discipline—a reality aboard both merchant and military ships until 1850—meted out by a domineering captain such as Captain Thompson aboard Dana’s *Pilgrim*. In a memorable scene in Dana’s memoir, the captain “danced about, calling out, as he swung the rope, ‘If you want to know what I flog you for, I’ll tell you. It’s because I like to do it—because I like to do it! It suits me!’” (*TY* 155). Captains who found that whipping suited them could always find a pretense to use the lash or the rope (until flogging was outlawed by Congress in 1850). Samuel Leech writes that “justification of…excessive whippings, was found in the pretended existence of several crimes in the helpless offenders.”  

In asserting his authority to whip the sailor, and in constructing crimes to justify the punishment, the captain asserted his position in the hierarchy that many sailors sought to escape by going to sea in the first place. The arbitrariness evident in Thompson’s repeated taunts suggests his own exhilaration in confirming his power aboard the *Pilgrim*. Not every captain flogged his sailors, though, and many officers found the practice odious. George Little recalled using the whip only once, and wrote that he “was


necessarily compelled, much against [his] own feelings, to resort to corporal punishment.” Yet, as Little, Dana, and Cooper would all argue, the power to use corporal punishment helped captains to ensure obedience and to mitigate the threat of mutiny.  

And the fear of mutiny among captains and officers was well-founded. Though seamen rarely acted on their desire to depose their leaders, they certainly outnumbered them, and the time sailors shared in common labor and common quarters bred a unique and sustaining sense of community. Because all of the men in the forecastle were subject to the arbitrary orders and discipline of those above them, they could find common ground in deploiring unfair treatment and imagining a time of retribution. They often found this retribution in carnivalesque rituals at sea, such as the coming of Father Neptune on the first crossing of the equator. The Neptune ritual allowed experienced sailors to initiate green hands through physical and verbal trials in which the veteran seamen could take on the role of the officer, if only for a short time, allowing them to mock their superiors even as they took advantage of their new power to humiliate the men beneath them. This ritual was sanctioned by the officers aboard ship because, in allowing the sailors’ liberty, the officers confirmed their role as arbiters of shipboard behavior and discipline. Samuel Leech recalls, “officers in general highly value your jolly, merry-making, don’t-care sort of seamen. They know the effect of their influence in keeping away discontented thought from the minds of the ship’s company.” The jolly seaman entertained his fellow sailors by sharing songs, stories, and games on deck and in


the forecastle. The vernacular used for this verbal repartee marked the participants as members of a special group: deep-water seamen who knew the trials of shipboard labor. In the bawdy lines of a sea song or the fantastic narrative of an old yarn, the men of the ship enjoyed the right to swear, to laugh, and to boast; in short, they could behave in ways that were not acceptable in polite society.76

Most sailors, however, were hardly part of such a society when they were on land, Samuel Leech characterizes the sailor in port as little more than an error-prone, fun-loving, ne’er-do-well:

When a man of war is in port, it is usual to grant the crew occasional liberty to go on shore. These indulgences are almost invariably abused for purposes of riot, drunkenness and debauchery; rarely does it happen, but that these shore sprees end in bringing “poor Jack” into difficulty of some sort; for, once on short, he is like an uncaged bird, and gay and quite as thoughtless. 77

Paul Gilje argues that the types of behavior that Leech describes were assertions of personal liberty and that “sailor’s liberty represented a counterculture that had special attraction for the working class and for those on the margins of society; it included a strain of anti-authoritarianism that denied hierarchy ashore.”78 Gilje qualifies the political implications of sailor’s liberty, suggesting that “for most of the men on the waterfront their goals and gratifications were more immediate,” but his characterization of the seaman ashore differs from that of Leech, who links the sailor to a carefree bird. At least in his eyes, the sailor was far more interested in having a good time than in making a

76 For example, see R.D. Madison on “Sea Chanteys” in Springer, America and the Sea: A Literary History.
77 Leech, A Voice from the Main Deck: Being the Record of the Thirty Years’ Adventures of Samuel Leech, 68.
78 Gilje, Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution, 13. Peter Leinbaugh and Marcus Rediker advance similar arguments in The Many-Headed Hydra, though they relate sailors’ assertions of liberty to workers’ solidarity more than do Leech or Gilje.
countercultural statement or rejecting middle-class values. Given the pervasiveness of ideas linked to the ascendant middle class, I think that members of the working class were far more likely to their “liberty” to flout such ideals. Moreover, the strict codes of public behavior advocated by genteel authors suggest that the middle classes certainly saw working class liberty as a rejection of—or a direct threat to—their way of life.79

Whatever his motivation, it was not simply Jack’s tendency toward debauchery that caused all his trouble. Port cities usually had well-developed “sailortowns” that specifically catered to returning seamen’s needs.80 Though every sailor needed a place to eat, to rest, and to keep his belongings, the major concerns for many men were female companionship of abundant quantities of intoxicating liquors. Returning seamen could satisfy all these needs at any number of sailortown boarding houses that catered to (and encouraged) the two-week spree that was typical of a newly landed sailor. Richard Henry Dana describes the solicitous boarding-house keepers who board the Alert upon her return to Boston:

Nothing can exceed the obliging disposition of these runners, and the interest they take in a sailor returned from a long voyage with a plenty of money. Two or three of them, at different times, took me by the hand; remembered me perfectly; were quite sure I had boarded with them before I sailed; were delighted to see me back; gave me their cards; had a hand-cart waiting on the wharf, on purpose to take my things up: would lend me a hand to get my chest ashore; bring a bottle of grog on board if we did not haul in immediately,—and the like. (TY 461)

79 For information the behavioral codes endorsed by the middle class, see Kasson, Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America; Haltunnen, Confidence Men and Painted Women.

80 The term sailortown comes from Stan Hugill, Sailortown (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1967). Hugill’s description of a “composite sailortown” was important to my understanding of the symbiotic relationship between the various institutions of the port city.
For sailors (unlike Dana) without a family to return to and without concrete plans for the future, the boarding house was a common destination. The boarding-house keeper would take the sailor’s chest and wages and provision the sailor until the money ran out; prostitutes were connected with particular boarding houses, and sailors could have these women’s services added to their bill. Though the boarding-house keeper was unlikely to share with the sailor details of his account, such commonplace dishonesty seems to have been accepted as a typical business practice, and, after a few weeks, the boarding-house keeper would notify the sailor that his money was all but gone, and the sailor would once again set out to look for work.

The pathetic story I have told in the lines above was by no means universal; numerous reform groups sought to change the sailor to discourage such behavior, and many others tried to mend the boarding house system that prevailed in port towns. A great many sailors worked a two year voyage for the privilege of a two week debauch in a dingy boarding house, and the ready pleasures of the sailortown kept seamen in an endless cycle of exploitation. The condition of seafaring men led former sailor William McNally to write of sailors in 1839, “That they are ignorant, cannot be doubted; but whose fault is it? No institutions have been erected for them, while their own hard earnings have been squandered and misused, but for what purpose none can tell.”

Perhaps none could tell, but authors and readers certainly wanted to find out. The sea narrative asserted generic dominance during the period of rising tensions over class and race that accompanied the expanding power of American commercial and military

81 McNally, Evils and Abuses in the Naval and Merchant Service, Exposed: With Proposals for their Remedy and Redress, iii.
interests. Sailors were at the nexus of each of these issues, and their particularity made them fit subjects for literary contemplation. Cooper, Leggett, Dana, Melville, and a host of contemporary commentators refer to seamen as a unique “class of men” who they looked, walked, smelled, and acted differently, who had a knowledge of the world which surpassed that of almost every land-bound American, and who lived a rough-and-tumble existence diametrically opposed to that endorsed by reformers and other members of the economic or religious elite. Appropriately, then, most antebellum sea fictions examine the sailor in all his stereotypical glory as a jargon-spouting ne’er-do-well, and early works by William Leggett and James Fenimore Cooper are no exception. These works do not take up the question of sailor reform or working-class politics as much as they contemplate maritime leadership and its relationship to the forecastle masses. In Cooper’s work, for example, readers can locate the aristocratic ideal of shared economic and political interest characteristic of Henry Carey and his ilk. Conversely, in William Leggett’s stories, readers can sense the emergence of Jacksonian politics and an increasing willingness to question or even to malign authority figures. As the genre of the sea narrative emerged and developed, the authors had not yet found a voice for the crew. After Leggett, however, they began to question whether or not the captain’s voice always spoke for the best interests of the laboring men before the mast.

III. Cooper and Leggett: Contesting the Quarterdeck

James Fenimore Cooper was the most important American author of maritime fiction before Herman Melville, and his early work represents a particular class position and outlook that would define much sea writing throughout the 1820s and 1830s. While books have treated Cooper’s maritime writings, I will make no attempt to treat them
completely; rather, I will mention two of his early works to sketch the contours of the sea narrative as well as Cooper’s understanding of the subject positions therein. Sea narratives throughout the antebellum period would be characterized by responses to Cooper’s initial fiction, and William Leggett was one of the first authors to imagine alternate subject positions within the sea narrative. The shift enacted by Leggett’s fiction along with his later political affiliations represents an interesting counterstatement to Cooper and paves the way for the forecastle narrative that would emerge as the dominant form of the genre in the 1840s.

Cooper wrote *The Pilot* in 1823 to “paint those scenes which belong only to the ocean, and to exhibit, in his imperfect manner, a few traits of a people who, from the nature of things, can never be much known.”82 The novel tells the story of John Paul Jones’s heroism during the American Revolution, thereby offering a celebratory history for Americans to imbibe. Despite substantial differences in setting and subject matter, in terms of characterization and theme, Cooper’s maritime writings did not differ significantly from his *Leatherstocking Tales*. Like his wilderness stories, Cooper infused his sea fiction with a rigid class hierarchy based on his notion of natural aristocracy—fortunately for the sailors in those stories, ability and humanity cohered in Cooper’s early heroes, so the men before the mast rarely faced a tyrannical captain. Because the captain was almost always a dignified leader who innately grasped the will of his men, Cooper depicted ships’ crews as little more than an absent presence, lacking both agency and voice.83

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82 Cooper, *The Pilot*, 3.

83 Hester Blum agrees that “Cooper did not express particular concerns for the conditions of the seamen in *The Pilot*” noting that the sailors seem to be one with the ships themselves, as opposed to subjects
This dynamic is central to *The Pilot*, a novel bent on national myth-making as well as maritime storytelling. Prior to a battle with a British cruiser during the Revolutionary War, Captain Barnstable of the American ship *Ariel* emboldens his crew with a lengthy harangue, finally crying, “there is a sort of national obligation on us to whip that fellow.” The men of the ship heed his words:

To this specimen of maritime eloquence, the crew cheered as usual; the young men burning for combat, and the few old sailors who belonged to the schooner, shaking their heads with infinite satisfaction, and swearing by sundry strange oaths, that their captain “could talk, when there was need of such thing, like the best Dictionary that was ever launched.”

This response effectively characterizes Cooper’s understanding of a crew. Cheering, “as usual” at their commander’s words, young and old sailors are excited by the prospect of battle (an uncommon reaction according to first-person narratives of maritime combat). No particular sailor praises the captain’s eloquence, but rather a conglomeration, and in doing so they magnify the division between their own rude knowledge and the academic learning that allows the leader to speak like a “Dictionary.” In fact, the absurdity of the compliment itself heightens Cooper’s effect—by dismissing the crew himself, he encourages readers to do the same.

This attitude toward common sailors is not particular to Barnstable or to Americans but is evidence of a particular class position. During a discussion of terms of surrender with British leaders, Barnstable’s colleague Griffith warns their British foes, “We have but to speak, sir, and these rude men, who already stand impatiently handling their instruments of death, will aim them at each other’s lives; and who can say that he possessing individual wills. Blum, *The View from the Mast-Head: Antebellum American Sea Narratives and the Maritime Imagination*, 138.

84 Cooper, *The Pilot*, 192.
shall be able to stay their hands when and where he will!"85 The voice of both crew and army is completely erased here, replaced by the commander’s voice which can bring both to life. “Rude men” indeed, the common sailors and soldiers are anxious to fight, as if the obedient wreaking of violence satisfied a lifelong goal. Significantly, the Americans and the British are united in their understanding of military command and the rights of the common man; they are separated only by their ultimate goals. For Cooper, the Revolution was not about the foremast seaman, who remained an instrument of a greater will, a directive power.

Captaincy, in Cooper’s early works, is the site of agency, voice, and power—the men beneath the captain serve not necessarily because they want to but because they know no other way, because they have no voice to raise. When a ship’s crew does appear in Cooper’s early work, its behavior is enough to instill fear in unfamiliar readers—the anonymous mass becomes an uncontrollable mob. For instance, in *The Red Rover*, the captain of a pirate ship calls the men “to mischief,” the crew begins its topsy-turvy revels, and Cooper spends nearly two chapters detailing the sailor mischief as it moves from a scripted play against the captain’s power into a near mutiny.86 The Rover himself, captain of the *Dolphin*, stops the uprising with strong words: “‘Fall back, fall back, I say; you taint the quarter-deck…Now speak aloud, and let me know at once whether I command a crew of orderly and obedient men, or a set of miscreants that require some purifying before I can trust them.”87

85 ibid., 329.
86 James Fenimore Cooper, *The Red Rover* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 313-34.
87 ibid., 337.
Even on a pirate ship are bold leaders and subservient followers, and the chain of command merely replicates these more abiding traits. When the Rover asks for a mutineer to “speak aloud,” he hears no responses, for though the men play at mutiny and command, their voices are ultimately ineffectual, and they cannot speak with true authority. What sets the Rover, and most captains, apart, is that “not, for an instant, did it seem that he suffered passion to get the mastery of reason.” Captains in all Cooper’s early maritime fiction demonstrate the cool calculus of an enlightenment-era hero while ship’s crews and untamed Indians succumb to storms of passion. The strong leaders in The Pilot and The Red Rover help those works, like many of Cooper’s early efforts to “promote both a maritime and literary nationalism” by celebrating a unique American character within a particular historical context. Such was definitely Cooper’s intent, as he closed his 1823 preface to The Pilot by claiming “if his book has the least tendency to excite some attention to this interesting portion of our history, one of the objects of the writer will be accomplished.” In keeping with contemporary literary mores, fiction taught a history lesson, though it also purported to teach something about the irreligious, unkempt, and unruly men of the sea. Ultimately, it taught that those men were easily (and necessarily) directed and that they were rudderless or even dangerous without the strong guidance of a capable leader. The assumptions driving these characterizations have

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88 Egan, Cooper and His Contemporaries, 67. Cooper’s second sea novel, The Red Rover (1827) is similarly nationalistic in tone, though it deals with the pre-revolutionary period and, therefore, proto-Americans. For more on Cooper’s “literary nationalism,” see Clohessy, Ship of State: American Identity and Maritime Nationalism in the Sea Fiction of James Fenimore Cooper; Philbrick, James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction, Chapter Two; Gilje, Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution, Chapter Eight.

89 Cooper, The Pilot, 4.
profound meanings for the genre of the sea narrative as well as for the American democracy itself.\textsuperscript{90}

Upon reissuing \textit{The Pilot} in 1849, Cooper wrote a new preface that demonstrated how much reading tastes had changed over the course of his authorial career. Rather than focusing on the historical elements in the novel, Cooper devotes several pages to the common seaman and his reformation, writing, “cut off from most of the charities of life, for so large a portion of his time, deprived altogether of association with the gentler and better portions of the other sex…it was time that he should become the subject of combined and Christian philanthropy.”\textsuperscript{91} Despite his associations with his former shipmate Ned Myers, and despite the changing angle of vision in the sea narrative inaugurated by Dana’s \textit{Two Years Before the Mast}, Cooper had not altered his conceptions of common sailors one whit. The text of \textit{The Pilot}, with its strong endorsement of paternalism, had not changed, and, in his revised preface, Cooper endorsed the use of the lash in disciplining the “turbulent men” whom he generalized as “several hundred rude beings…of the lowest habit.”\textsuperscript{92}

Common sailors—like their working-class fellows—were all this and more to William Leggett, a major maritime author of the 1830s. Leggett was not a member of the working class, nor did he believe that forecastle seamen were appreciably different from the typical caricatures of the day. He did believe that power was not to be trusted, and he brought his acute sense of class injustice (and his lingering resentment of the same) to bear on his political writings as well as on his maritime fiction. Born in New York in

\textsuperscript{90} See Philbrick, \textit{James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction}.

\textsuperscript{91} Cooper, \textit{The Pilot}, 8.

\textsuperscript{92} ibid., 7-8.
1801, William Leggett attended Georgetown University but was forced to leave school due to family financial pressure. So, in 1819, he went with his family to Illinois, where he lived until he obtained a commission in the US Navy as a midshipman in 1822. His service in the navy brought him to foreign ports in the Mediterranean and the West Indies, but, in 1826, he was court-martialed for fighting a duel with a fellow crewman and for insubordination to his captain. After leaving the navy, Leggett embarked on his literary career, first as a poet and a fiction writer, and later (more famously) as a political writer for The Evening Post, then edited by William Cullen Bryant. Leggett took over the editorship of the Post in 1834 and, after a period of severe illness in 1835, left the paper to edit his own publication, the Plaindealer. As a writer for both the Post and the Plaindealer, Leggett was an outspoken champion of Jacksonian politics, and he eventually leagued himself with the Equal Rights Party (also known as the Locofocos). As a radical Democrat, Leggett endorsed free trade, female suffrage, abolition, and the right of workers to organize. A powerful agitator and political writer at the apex of his powers, Leggett died in 1839.  

Like Herman Melville, Leggett’s family experienced a fall from an advantaged economic place to a more marginal position, and the young man keenly felt this sudden change in circumstances. His resulting political affiliations and class sensibilities placed him in opposition to the theorists advocating the “harmony of interests,” though he was by no means a socialist. He agitated passionately for equal rights based on the idea of natural law, and he eschewed any form of government interference in national economic policy; appropriately, then, his favorite target during the early 1830s was the national bank. As the decade progressed, Leggett’s support for natural rights translated into an increasing concern with the plight of the working classes and slaves. For instance, on December 10, 1836, Leggett wrote “The Street of the Palaces,” in which he describes an elegant street in Genoa where the “lower orders” pass by and bemoan their own wretched condition:

But is this condition of things confined to Genoa, or to European countries? Is there no parallel for it in our own? Have we not, in this very city, our “Street of the Palaces,”…Have we not, too, our privileged orders? our scrip nobility? aristocrats, clothed with special immunities, who control, indirectly, but certainly, the political power of the state, monopolise the most copious sources of pecuniary profit, and wring the very crust from the hard hand of toil? Have we not, in short, like the wretched serfs of Europe, our lordly masters, “Who make us slaves, and tell us ‘tis their charter?”

Leggett struck the same chord in his December 31, 1836, column, “American Nobility,” when he compares banks with federal charters to noblemen. “We shall hereafter look at [banks] with increased aversion, as the possessors of actual titles of nobility,

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distinguished by more objectionable features than the patents of the European aristocracy.”

Leggett was in the mainstream of the Democratic Party when he took aim at the national bank and other symbols of the artificial aristocracy; however, the logical extension of his equal rights ideals led Leggett to take a heterodox position on slavery and become an abolitionist. The course Leggett steered from anti-abolitionism to anti-slavery is an interesting one because he broke from the Democrats even as he became a more committed partisan writer during the 1830s. As Sean Wilentz explains, “Leggett saw his break [with other Democrats]…not as departures from Jacksonian principles, but as their fulfillment.” Though he always stopped short of actually endorsing slavery, in the early part of the decade, Leggett wrote several columns attacking not only the incendiary tactics of the abolitionists but also their cause. By 1835, however, Leggett was writing freely of his opposition to slavery, and, by 1837, he described himself as an “abolitionist” for the first time. Rather than simply celebrate Leggett’s conversion to abolitionism, though, I want to point out the important connection between abolition and working-class politics, a connection that Leggett saw as self-evident. Many northern labor advocates believed that abolition would result in lower wages for northern white workers and therefore tolerated or even supported the peculiar institution. Nothing if not principled, Leggett saw that his support for a natural aristocracy necessitated a correspondingly

95 ibid., Vol. II, 161.
strong stand against slavery. Only when every man enjoyed equal treatment under the law could the Jeffersonian dream of a natural aristocracy be realized.

The natural aristocracy is a major theme in William Leggett’s short stories based on his experiences at sea collected in the 1834 volume, Naval Stories. These tales, in which the author “[champions] the underdog or subordinate against the tyranny of the officer caste...furnish a literary parallel to his newspaper editorials against these same naval abuses.”98 Certainly, Leggett’s experience in the navy affected the how he wrote about naval discipline later in his life, just as Melville’s experiences aboard the United States likely shaped White-Jacket. This particular biographical influence, however, is the least interesting aspect of Leggett’s nautical fiction. Far more interesting is the link between Leggett’s experience in the navy and his later political affiliations. That is, one can link his distaste for the “officer caste” to his dislike of the moneyed elites who he believed intransigently opposed the working classes. Of course, one can do little to prove that Leggett’s naval career was the sine qua non of his political activism; however, an examination of Naval Stories alongside the political issues of the 1830s suggests that in his maritime fiction, Leggett could imagine a world in which the natural aristocracy could enjoy limited success in fighting the artificial aristocracy as represented by the supercilious officer caste.

Leggett’s “Merry Terry,” written in 1830, shows that he conceived of the ship’s hierarchy in vastly different terms from those of his contemporary Cooper. The story announces its differences in the first sentences:

98 Proctor, William Leggett (1801-1839): Journalist and Literator, 240-1. Between 1829 and 1835, Leggett wrote nearly 40 editorials concerning what he considered to be naval abuses. Proctor reads these editorials alongside his fiction, which is entirely appropriate. I am not arguing that Leggett was disregarding naval abuse, but suggesting that his fiction may have a wider applicability.
“Come, spin us a yarn, Jack my boy,” said a curly-headed, rosy-cheeked young midshipman, to old Jack Palmer, as the vessel to which they were attached was running down the Spanish Main…Jack Palmer was an old sea-dog, and a clever fellow,—that is to say, in the Yankee sense of the word. He had seen all sorts of service, and knew all sorts of stories, which were perhaps not the less amusing for the nautical phraseology in which they were expressed…when called upon for a story…the grog had been served, the bull stowed away in the spirit-room, and the key of the hatch returned to the master…He was immediately surrounded by a knot of midshipman, eager to listen; and, after the usual preliminary of a fresh quid, he begun…

Thus, in the introduction to the tale, a midshipman cedes his power to the “master’s mate of the gun deck” so that the latter can tell a story. The midshipmen gather round the old salt (whom they outrank) like children, and the narrator sets the mood by describing the “pleasant evening” and announcing the close of business for the day. By beginning the tale in this manner, Leggett highlights the contrast between the young middies and the more experienced sailors who performed most of the labor aboard the ship. Furthermore, he grants authority to those experienced sailors by placing Jack Palmer in a position of esteem and authority over his younger compatriots. By having the “old salt” narrate the story, Leggett grants himself the right to speak in a language laden with nautical metaphor. By speaking from the forecastle, Leggett allows the common sailors to speak for themselves, to give their opinions of the men who lead them.


100 Lang, The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century Americaibid. The most important facet of Lang’s work is her discussion of the politics of representation in fiction about social class. She claims that upper-class authors who attempt to inhabit the perspective of a lower-class persona (e.g., Harriet Beecher Stowe in Uncle Tom’s Cabin) deny the essential difference created by class divisions. Lang is surely right, but I believe that Leggett’s use of the working-class voice is defensible because of his career at sea and his own experience as an underling (though certainly not a common sailor) in the naval hierarchy. Given the facts of his biography, it is clear that when Leggett spews vitriol at the officer caste, he is not simply play-acting.
The tale that Palmer shares with the crew bears a striking resemblance to other stories in Leggett’s volume, at least in one major respect. The captain under whom Merry served was a hateful, domineering man, who “used to ride him down like a main tack, and would row him on all occasions, and put him on all sorts of disagreeable duty. It was even thought he had stopped a clapper on his promotion” (70). Though Jack speculates correctly that the captain hates Merry because they both pursued the same woman, that hateful captains dominate Leggett’s tales suggests that the author wanted to denounce the injustices inherent in military hierarchies. Furthermore, in almost every one of Leggett’s tales, the captain’s malignity is not linked to a material cause as much as it is to feelings of inferiority. In “Merry Terry,” for instance, Jack Palmer tells his shipmates that, “When [Merry] had the deck, the old craft herself seemed to know it; and no matter what kind of weather we had, she was sure to behave as obedient as a side-boy” (69). Merry is a natural sailor—he distinguishes himself from his betters through his good cheer as well as his ability. He is the very picture of the natural aristocracy in which Leggett and Cooper believed, but, significantly, he is not in a position of power aboard his ship. Not only do ability and worthiness not cohere in the person of the captain; in Leggett’s stories, it seems that they are actually inimical—power imparts fearsomeness and fecklessness.

The plot of “Merry Terry” is straightforward: Upon receiving sailing orders, the captain leaves the ship and orders all hands to stay aboard. Soon after, Merry receives a note and begs the first mate to let him ashore. After a private conference, the mate demurs, telling Merry, “When military discipline conflicts with the principles of honour, I will be the first to set an example of insubordination” (74). Merry heads to shore, giving
his word that he will return. Upon reaching shore, he steals away and intercepts a carriage in which the captain is absconding with Merry’s lover. A battle ensues between Merry and the captain, and the captain shoots both Merry and his lover. Though both die, Merry perishes only after he has strangled the captain and returned to his ship. Thus, in the moment of his death, Merry obeys the final order of his commanding officer. The tale concludes with Jack Palmer and the rest of the hands aboard the ship being called to duty.

The obvious message in the story is that captains are nefarious creatures who lord their superiority over the crew, no matter how worthy that crew may be. Certainly, this characterization speaks to Leggett’s rather simplistic distaste for authority. Far more significant, though, is the interrelationship between military hierarchies and personal animus. When the captain leaves his ship to abduct Merry’s betrothed, he reminds the mate that no one is to leave the ship and “turned a malicious glance at Mery out of the corner of his eye” (71). When Merry confronts the captain ashore, the captain cries out, “‘Mr. Terry!—I command—you shall suffer for this—a court-martial—’ and various other broken ejaculations” (80). In both cases, the captain uses his position of power to overcome Merry’s natural superiority. By threatening a court-martial even as he attempts to seduce Merry’s lover, the captain attempts to make his military ranking an excuse for his personal transgressions. The fact that William Leggett himself was court-martialed suggests that he understands the court-martial as a tool that officers can use to exercise personal prejudices as opposed to a useful form of discipline. Thus, Leggett does not simply decry the very fact of authority, he shows the ways in which naval hierarchies can be abused for purely personal reasons, and (just as Melville would show in *Billy Budd*) thus attract those who cannot succeed based solely on their merits.
The final reminder of authority in “Merry Terry” is the “abrupt end to [Jack’s] story” that comes when all hands are called back to duty. The frame tale confines the story to a brief respite between the sailors’ duties and suggests the centrality of storytelling to their recreation time. Moreover, the final word in the story does not belong to the virtuous and heroic Merry Terry but to the captain of Jack Palmer’s ship, who reminds the men of their position as underlings. Thus, even though Merry’s story suggests that the men aboard ship may have personal qualities lacking in their leaders, Leggett shows us that those leaders still hold sway on board a naval vessel—any thought of rebellion is bound by the structures of discipline and order inherent in military life.

Those structures are loosened a bit in Leggett’s, “Charles Maitland, or the Mess Chest” which he wrote for for the New York Mirror in December of 1833. The story was re-published in Naval Stories as “The Mess-Chest” the following year. In “The Mess-Chest,” Leggett departs from the American coast on which “Merry Terry” was set and takes us to the shores of Mahon, an island to the east of the Spanish mainland. Leggett himself had made many cruises to the Mediterranean during his naval career, a duty that consisted of “no other task but to show the flag and protect American commerce during the minor crises that periodically flared about the rim of these waters.” In his story, “A Night at Gibraltar,” Leggett tells of a midshipman falling asleep on duty and escaping into a fantastical dream world. Notably, nothing happens to the midshipman in the waking world; the relative calm of Mediterranean service in Leggett’s other stories makes the action of “The Mess-Chest” all the more interesting.

The story begins with a paean to Rafael Riego, who led a rebellion against King Ferdinand of Spain:

There are not many names on the list of those who have sacrificed their lives for freedom which deserve more honorable mention than that of Riego. I was in the Mediterranean at the time of the brave attempt which terminated so fatally for him; and I well remember how eagerly we sought every disjointed scrap of intelligence which could be gathered concerning the romantic adventures of Mina with his little army in Catalonia, and the firm and prudent efforts of his noble compatriot Riego.102

The narrator is crestfallen when he learns that Riego has been executed and Ferdinand restored to power, and he imagines that the people of Mahon share in his grief, “There were bonfires and illuminations in Mahon on receipt of the intelligence; but these outward demonstrations of rejoicing were rendered by fear, not gladness, and were as false as the hollow-hearted monarch whose success they were kindled to celebrate” (91).

As in most of Leggett’s stories, the narrator is a committed anti-authoritarian serving in the Navy; as the story opens, the crew of his ship waits for a relief ship to arrive in Mahon. On a stroll “along the romantic shores” of the bay, his friend and fellow officer Lieutenant Charles Maitland, is accosted by an old woman who passes him a note that leaves the good lieutenant confused and troubled, and thereafter he is aloof and mysterious, leading his shipmates to assume that he is carrying on an affair with a foreign woman.

When the narrator is called to shore duty with his friend, they notice a large number of soldiers “commissioned to search the island for certain proscribed constitutionalists, who were supposed to have taken refuge in Minorca…but the

individual against whom the proclamation of Ferdinand was chiefly directed, had hitherto eluded the vigilance of the bloodhounds…Don Castro de Valero” (97-8). Clearly, Leggett does not want readers to deal with any ambiguity regarding the different parties in the revolutionary struggle—the narrator is deeply committed to the anti-monarchical cause, and he imagines the soldiers as rapacious extensions of the king’s will. When the soldiers enter the house of an old woman, Maitland rushes inside and embraces a young woman who resides therein. This daring act saves her from harassment by the soldiers, but it leaves the narrator disappointed and distraught over his friend’s infidelity. When the Constitution departs for America, Maitland loads his extraordinarily heavy mess chest on board, claiming that he has procured stores for the return journey. Though the narrator notices that “no stores were ever produced from it,” he does not deduce what is obvious to more alert readers (107). Maitland’s chest contains Don Castro De Valero, the man who had posed as the handsome Spanish woman in Mahon. Thus, Maitland is finally vindicated as both a devoted husband and a friend of liberty.

Maitland’s secrecy shocks his close friend, but even more striking is the fact that he apparently conceals his actions from his commanding officer. As the crew members wait for Charles to arrive with his mess chest, the narrator writes, “at length, the patience of our commander was entirely exhausted, and he had given the order to weigh and make sail” when the tardy lieutenant finally arrives (103). If the commander was privy to Maitland’s actions, he would most likely not have given the order to make sail. Upon reaching America, Maitland explains his extreme secrecy and reinforces the notion that he acted alone:

“We were officers of a national vessel…and our government was responsible for any violation of the strict laws of neutrality. If the king of
Spain could show that De Valero was brought to this country by one of our frigates, how should we resist his right to have him rendered up?" (107-8)

Everything in the story suggests that Maitland acted as he did without the approval of his commanding officer, thus demonstrating his allegiance to American ideals. If Maitland does indeed rebel against the prevailing hierarchy on board his ship in order to preserve the revolutionary leader and to return him to America, his actions intimate a link between the aristocratic leaders in Spain and the “aristocracy of the quarterdeck” that separates the revolutionary-minded midshipmen from their more powerful leaders.

Significantly, the messengers of American Revolutionary ideals in Leggett’s story are the mid-rank officers of the US Navy, men who have a measure of power but who also feel the impositions of monarchical power from their captain. Still, these are palatable revolutionaries, not the low-born motleys whom Marcus Rediker links to the “revolutionary Atlantic.” Maitland and the narrator are so committed to the revolutionary spirit and self-government that they defy their captain, violate national rules of neutrality, and risk their own lives to preserve the revolutionary spirit in another man. This decision is at the heart of Leggett’s maritime world—national affiliations break down in the fluid space of the open ocean and those affiliations are replaced with more essential ties such as a common devotion to liberty or justice. Maitland and the narrator, by acting against the stated national position, take an uncompromising stand for such philosophical affiliations.

The narrator of “The Mess-Chest” also believes that the Spanish rebels are acting with the highest principles in standing up to arbitrary power and that their willingness to do so makes them worthy of praise and military support. To the narrator, and to William
Leggett as well, popular European revolutions are an extension of the American revolution—they speak to an innate desire for self-government and freedom that transcends national boundaries. When examined alongside the rhetoric concerning European governments and class structures, then, Leggett’s story becomes even more significant. Not only does he proclaiming the justice of rebellion, but he also is placing such rebellion in a universal context, thereby linking it to movements as disparate as the American Revolution and the English Chartist movement. I want to suggest that Leggett’s “The Mess-Chest” is an attempt to remind Americans of their revolutionary history and of the nobility of standing firm against power in whatever form it may take.

Perhaps William Leggett wrote a story that simultaneously referenced American imperialism and European revolutions to remind his countrymen of their first principles and the emerging gap between those principles and the reality of the new American mission. This is not to say that Leggett was a prescient protester against the abuses that would characterize American foreign and domestic policy for the next century; for example, he never expressed horror or outrage over Jackson’s Draconian policies toward Native Americans. All the same, Leggett’s decision to reintroduce European radicalism in the 1830s signals his willingness to contemplate revolution as a viable political option. Most importantly, Leggett explicitly links the maritime community to the spirit of rebellion manifested in the Spanish Revolution. Officers in the United States Navy listen anxiously for positive news from the Spanish mainland, and, when that news does not come, they are instrumental in protecting the defeated rebels. Far from being neutral observers of a foreign crisis, the narrator and Charles Maitland are engaged participants who side with those who stand against arbitrary power.
This possibility of revolution, finally, is central to Leggett’s maritime world in *Naval Tales*. At the same time, Leggett is no leveler, and he does not use his maritime fiction to imagine the common sailor as a heroic figure on par with captains and lieutenants. Though Leggett used his writing to destabilize hierarchies both at sea and on land, but he stops short of imagining a wholly new class structure. While both Leggett and Cooper prefer a world in which fair and noble officers guide America’s ships, Leggett does seem to be a more skeptical sailor than Cooper—his captains are nothing like the masterful heroes of *The Pilot* and *The Red Rover*. These two competing visions of the quarterdeck as a site of native intelligence and ability reflect Leggett’s awareness of class prerogative in the sea narrative and his willingness to question leaders and their mission. Maritime authors (including Cooper himself) continue this trend as America became an industrial nation in the 1840s, and the working-class common sailor, rather than the captain, occupies the center of the sea narrative. With a new focus on the shipboard laborers rather than their commanders, the sea narrative moved from the quarterdeck to the main deck, where the “people” worked and lived before the mast.
Yet I know began to look on them with a sort of incipient love; but more with an eye of pity and compassion, as men of naturally gentle and kind dispositions, whom only hardships, and neglect, and ill-usage had made outcasts from good society; and not as villains who loved wickedness for the sake of it, and would persist in wickedness, even in Paradise, if they ever got there.

—Herman Melville
Redburn

I then in a careless manner opened my [sailor] coat to show her that I had the dress of a gentleman, & she saw by my voice & manner that I was different from what they supposed.

—Richard Henry Dana, Jr.
Journal, July 20, 1842

The antebellum sailor, unkempt and undomesticated as he most certainly was, appeared often within the pages of Godey’s Lady’s Book, the popular nineteenth-century periodical written primarily for the angels of antebellum American homes. This sailor was in constant physical danger, much like his real-life counterparts; however, the greatest danger faced by the sailors in Godey’s was soul-danger, for the sailor’s wayward habits threatened his salvation far more than a violent storm, a tyrannical captain, or bloodthirsty pirates. Ms. C.F. Orne announced as much in her 1841 poem, “The Sailor”:

WHEN the black sky is scowling,
The furious storm is howling,
And lurid light'nings play;
When the strained masts are bending,
Fierce winds the sails are rending,

Ms. C.F. Orne
“On the Sails”
Godey’s Lady’s Book, July 1841
Pray for the sailor, pray.

When storms the waves are lashing,
And foaming billows dashing,
Shiver in clouds of spray;
When the strained ship is groaning,
And from her heart is moaning,
Pray for the sailor, pray.

When the good ship smooth gliding,
O'er the calm waves is riding,
That treach'rous round her play,
When she rushes all unbidden,
Where the sunk rock is hidden,
Pray for the sailor, pray.

And, oh! when safe in mooring,
The storm no more enduring,
Sea perils past away,
There comes the conflict hour,
With strong temptation's power,
Then for the sailor pray.103

“The Sailor” is decidedly average writing, but the fact that it is average in another sense merits its inclusion here. Orne’s poem expresses the same sentiment that would be repeated time and again in sea narratives of the 1840s: Sailors are brave and able men unable to resist debauchery and dissipation. At the same time, sailors deserved the attention (or at least the prayers) of the polite classes while they did their work on the sea; indeed, those classes could offer little more than prayer to still violent winds or to calm surging seas for the men aboard ship. Prayers could also be effective when the sailor reached port, a place where the dangers he encountered were no longer elemental. More effective than prayers, perhaps, would be the money and time that the polite classes could devote to redeeming the sailor from his irreligious and vile habits.

Since I have previously outlined the social conditions and economic mechanisms that confined many sailors to lives of poverty and alcoholism, this chapter is not concerned with those historical factors. Rather, as my citation of Orne’s poem suggests, this chapter investigates the literary and cultural responses to the conditions of the maritime world, particularly the behavior of the sailors who worked its ships. Like Orne’s poem, much of the non-fictional writing from the 1840s about the sailor is devoted to exposing the physical and moral dangers of he faced or suggesting techniques for his reform. There are several reasons maritime writing evolved toward such a form after its genesis in the quarterdeck tales of writers like Leggett and Cooper: the dominance of the Democratic party; the rise of working-class movements; the development of a distinct and powerful reform culture (especially in New England); and, the emergence of numerous periodicals as venues for publication of such writings. But the most important reason maritime writing changed so completely in 1840 was that, seven years prior, Richard Henry Dana, Jr. contracted measles.

Following his second year of study at Harvard (1832-33), the young Dana visited his friend James Thacher Hodge in Plymouth and “gave himself up to fishing, boating, shooting, and idling of all kinds.”\textsuperscript{104} While enjoying his vacation, Dana came down with the measles, which nearly ruined his eyesight. Unable to read or to study, Dana could not continue his career at Harvard and was forced to remain at home for the 1833-1834 school year. Though the interruption of his studies was troubling enough, the young scholar’s frustration was compounded by another factor. His father, an author of some


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note in local literary circles, had fallen upon difficult financial times. The son of Francis Dana—a former member of the Continental Congress and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Massachusetts until 1806—the elder Dana was a Boston Brahmin if there ever were one, and, though he was never really in danger of a permanent reversal, Richard Sr. was in a bind.105 Hopeful of remedying both his eyesight and his father’s financial condition, young Richard elected to ship as a forecastle hand on a merchant vessel. So, on August 14, 1834—exactly two weeks past his nineteenth birthday—Richard Henry Dana, Jr. changed his clothes from the “tight frock coat, silk cap, and kid gloves of an undergraduate at Harvard, to the loose duck trousers, checked shirt, and tarpaulin hat of a sailor” and shipped aboard the Pilgrim, a merchant ship headed around Cape Horn to California (TY 40). The next day, the Pilgrim left Boston Harbor, and the teenage Dana began one of the most famous sea voyages in American literary history.

Dana’s voyage has remained famous because of the work he authored upon his return to Boston: Two Years Before the Mast. Though Dana kept a journal while at sea, it was lost after his return home, and he wrote his narrative almost entirely from memory, a fact not immediately evident as much of the work includes dated entries that lend it the form of a journal.106 The logic behind this authorial choice becomes clear in the introduction to Two Years Before the Mast, wherein Dana writes, “there has been, of late

105 For biographical data on Dana, see Robert L. Gale, Richard Henry Dana (New York: Twayne, 1969); Samuel Shapiro, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., 1815-1882 (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1961). The most important source for understanding Dana’s early life, besides the text of Two Years Before the Mast, is Dana’s own “Autobiographical Sketch” which he wrote to preface the journal he began keeping in December of 1841.

years, a great deal of attention directed toward the common seaman, and strong sympathy awakened on their behalf. Yet I believe that…there has not been a book written, professing to give their life and experiences, by one who has been of them” (TY 38). Writing as if keeping a log of the voyage, the upper-class Dana confirms his presence on board ship and his status as a seaman. Dana continues by describing his goals for the book: “If it shall interest the general reader, and call more attention to the welfare of seamen, or give any information as to their real condition, which may serve to raise them in the rank of beings, and to promote in any measure their religious and moral improvement, and diminish the hardships of their daily life, the end of its publication will be answered” (TY 39). Intending to fill a void in the existing literature and thereby inform readers of the condition of the common sailor, Dana assumed that his exposé might motivate those readers to undertake (or support financially) the religious and moral reformation of sailors.

Despite Dana’s (at least partially sincere) insistence that he wanted to bring to light the plight of the common seaman, just as his motivations for going to sea had been—in part—pecuniary, so too were his motivations for writing his narrative and giving it to the public. Eighteen months after Dana composed the introduction to his famous narrative, he wrote an autobiographical sketch that begins a journal that he kept faithfully for nearly twenty years. By the time he began his journal, Dana had embarked on his career as an attorney (he composed Two Years while he was in law school) and he attested that he sought publication of the narrative “not because I supposed the book could be of much benefit to me in a literary or pecuniary point of view, but because I thought it would be of some use to me in Boston in securing to me a share of maritime
business, in insurance and other maritime cases."

Of course, this passage suggests that he was certainly supposing that the book could bring him pecuniary benefit, though not in the literary marketplace. A reviewer from the *Southern Literary Messenger* guessed as much upon reading *Two Years*: “We apprehend…that the book was written as a Yankee expedient to identify himself with the interests of seamen, and obtain a moiety of the legal business which poor Jack brings to the bar.”

Dana was correct in assuming that the book itself would not prove remunerative for him; *Two Years Before the Mast* sold extraordinarily well—Harper’s made nearly $50,000 over the twenty-eight year copyright period—but the contract Dana signed meant that he profited little despite such excellent sales. And, though the reviewer quoted above wrote, “if after partaking of their hard lot [Dana] can have the heart to take a fee from the sailor, we must think he has more calculation than belongs to a good messmate,” sailors did indeed bring their legal complaints to Dana. He became a sought-after and successful pleader for sailors who believed themselves wronged by masters or merchants. Additionally, the young lawyer was a popular speaker on the lecture circuit as he reprised his experiences and called for greater attention to the plight of American seamen. Thus, *Two Years Before the Mast* fulfilled both of Dana’s goals for the text: It launched Dana in his career before the bar, thus allowing him to remediate seamen’s difficulties.

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108 “Rev. of Two Years before the Mast,” *The Southern Literary Messenger* 6, no. 10 (November, 1840), 781.
110 Rev. of Two Years before the Mast, 781 Biographer Samuel Shapiro reports that Dana likely made about $10 on a $150 suit brought by an aggrieved seaman. Shapiro, *Richard Henry Dana, Jr., 1815-1882*, 11.
The book did more than propel Richard Henry Dana to a loftier position within the Boston literary and legal communities, though; it also altered the genre of the sea narrative by shifting its focus from the quarterdeck to the forecastle. This shift led literary men like Cooper and Melville to author fictional and non-fictional narratives of life before the mast and also spawned a host of Dana imitators who had themselves been sailors.\footnote{I am hardly the first critic to draw a line between Dana’s narrative and the rise of the first-person forecastle narrative in the 1840s. Thomas Philbrick makes the same case in both James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction and his “Introduction” to Two Years. What separates me from Philbrick is my attention to the different portrayals of sailors in those various forecastle narratives as well as my linking of those portrayals with those in non-literary publications such as reform journals.}

Though earlier maritime writers Cooper, Nathaniel Ames, and William Leggett had themselves been to sea, Dana’s book inaugurated the “sailor-author” tradition, as he was one of the first (and most successful) men to use his own experiences as fodder for a work of non-fiction. Dana’s work and its literary progeny played a major role in shaping the common sailor within the American imaginary. In fact, as a result of his popular work, Dana became the voice of the American sailor, giving speeches to relief organizations, presenting his experiences in lyceum halls, and offering authorial advice to hopeful sailor-authors.\footnote{See Lucid, The Composition, Reception, Reputation and Influence of Two Years before the Mast, 81-88. Lucid claims (rightly, I believe) that the “consistent recognition of Dana’s name in so many quarters…is perhaps the most illuminating evidence of the great popularity of his book.”}

In this chapter, I will investigate works by several prominent sailor-authors to understand how their works defined sailors as members of a unique and separate body—will focus on the rhetoric and anecdotes that the authors use to describe the sailor as well as on their personal responses to sailor behaviors and attitudes. In doing so, I will remain attentive to the class position of each author: Dana, a former (and hopeful) Brahmin beginning a law career; Cooper, a successful author and important New York landholder;
and Samuel Leech, a former sailor seeking to capitalize on the boom in publication that Dana’s work had spurred. I make no attempt to be comprehensive; however, by focusing on three very different sailor-authors and their separate literary products, I position the sailor as an object of rhetorical struggle within antebellum print culture. In addition to the works and authors I named above, this print culture included myriad writings published in various reform journals and other periodicals that many authors explicitly endorsed as vehicles for the moral and economic advancement of the sailor. By examining assumptions and depictions of the sailor in sources from *Two Years Before the Mast* to *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and from *Ned Myers* to the *Sailor’s Magazine and Naval Journal*, I will show how popular literary portrayals of seamen defined the antebellum maritime world and its citizens in antebellum American.

**I: Years Before the Mast**

Richard Henry Dana, Jr. achieved his greatest fame and public importance when he was still in his early twenties. Two years after his voyage concluded, while he was still reading the law in Boston, the young Dana completed the manuscript of *Two Years Before the Mast*. His father’s friend, Washington Allston, read the manuscript and encouraged the new author to seek a publisher. Using another of his father’s connections, this one to William Cullen Bryant who was then the editor of *The Evening Post*, Dana placed the text with Harper Brothers. According to Dana, Bryant told him that the “Harpers were sharp men, but…they would give the book a greater circulation than any other house.” The Harpers would prove Bryant correct on both counts. They offered Dana $250 for the copyright to the book and refused to give him any share of its profits. Dismayed but cowed, Dana took the offer because he was “anxious to have it published
before [he] opened [his law] office." 113 The initial edition of the text was produced in Harper’s Family Library series, and, by August of 1842, Dana asserted that the book was worth $10,000 to the publishers. It would net around $50,000 over the 28-year copyright period; after the copyright expired, Dana authored a new concluding chapter and issued a revised edition in 1869.114

The publication of Two Years Before the Mast in 1840 garnered near-universal acclaim.115 The spate of imitators following in his wake hints at the significance of the work, but it was celebrated for its literariness as well as its subject matter. Reviewers were quick to praise the freshness of Dana’s subject and the clarity of his style, but they revealed something of their own prejudices—and those of their readers—when they discussed the condition of the antebellum sailor in their reviews. For instance, in the October, 1840 Democratic Review, William Cullen Bryant writes, “Sailors are generally so thoughtless, so careless, of the future, and so helpless on account of their improvidence and their unfitness for any other calling, that they are at the mercy of their employers, as regards their comfort and usage on shipboard.” Though this is the picture of the sailor most readers brought to Dana’s text, the book did change some opinions: “It


114 In this study, I will primarily use the 1840 edition of Two Years Before the Mast, which includes the introduction and concluding chapter Dana excised for the 1869 edition. This latter edition also includes a postscript, “Twenty Four Years After,” in which Dana narrates his own return to California and updates readers on the sailors he introduced in the 1840 text. Since this study deals with antebellum maritime literature and culture, it makes sense to use the earlier edition; furthermore, since Dana’s 1840 text inspired countless imitations and various literary responses, my textual analysis will be primarily concerned with that version. To keep the versions distinct when I examine some of the changes Dana made in the latter edition, I will footnote the 1869 version of the text rather than using in-text citations.

115 The only negative review I have located is the one quoted above from the Southern Literary Messenger. The fact that Dana was well connected in literary circles may have had something to do with the extremely favorable press reception for the text; for example, family friends William Cullen Bryant and E. Tyrell Channing wrote the positive reviews I quote below. Robert Lucid discusses the reception of Two Years at great length in Lucid, The Composition, Reception, Reputation and Influence of Two Years before the Mast, 73-130.
is not so much a want of intelligence that prevents them from doing this, for we have conceived a more favorable idea of their intelligence from reading this work of Mr. Dana than we before entertained.” Nonetheless, Bryant still insisted that sailors’ “want of perseverance, their carelessness of their own interest, their love of pleasure and irregular habits while on shore” greatly limited their self-improvement.\

Perhaps sailors were not, after all, the unintelligent reprobates when many readers had previously imagined, but, according to the Bryant, they remained improvident and “careless of their own interest.” Such a distinction is important, as E. Tyrell Channing intimates in his closing assessment for the *North American Review*:

> [Dana’s] calm and reasonable statement, sustained by the authority of experience and his later reflections, recommends itself to the notice of owners and masters, and of those benevolent institutions and individuals, who are trying to effect reforms by investigating the evils incident to particular occupations and classes, and applying a remedy, as far as possible, to individual cases.

Sailors were neither unintelligent nor beyond redemption; they were careless of their interests and victims of sharpers and ruthless masters, but they could be saved. According to Channing, Dana’s book speaks to masters who might improve shipboard conditions for sailors and shows reformers how to remedy port conditions. In the early 1840s, when, thanks to the Transcendentalists, the notion of human perfectibility was more than idle fancy, Dana’s book confirms that even sailors are not beyond reformation.

116 “Rev. of *Two Years before the Mast,*” *The United States Democratic Review* 8, no. 34 (October, 1840), 319.

117 “Rev. of *Two Years before the Mast,*” *The North American Review* 52, no. 110 (January, 1841), 72.

118 Dana himself was no Transcendentalist; his father and he were both high-church Episcopalians, though the younger Dana was a pupil in Emerson’s class in 1826. In 1841, he wrote of the young teacher, “he had not system or discipline enough to ensure regular & vigorous study. I have always considered it fortunate for us that we fell into the hands of more systematic & strict teachers.” Dana, *The Journal of Richard Henry Dana, Jr.*, 13.
was not news to small groups of men and women who had been laboring on behalf of the sailor since the 1820s, but the early reviews of Dana’s book suggest that it was a revelation for a large portion of the reading (and giving) public.

Another insight offered by the reviews is into Dana’s class situation, especially vis-à-vis the subjects of his book. The readers of his work clearly regard him as something other than a common sailor: Dana writes from the forecastle, but he is not of the forecastle. For instance, the *Southern Literary Messenger* review reads, “If there is a single remarkable feature in this picture of sea-life, it consists in the grotesque associations arising from the fact, that the author was transferred from Cambridge College to the forecastle of a merchantman.”119 Bryant concurs, writing, “For our own part, we acknowledge that nothing in this book has given us more pleasure than the evidence of the strong sympathy and brotherhood which grew up between the author and the class of which he was for a time one.”120 Dana’s negotiation of his class position is the story for these two contemporary readers, though one seems more concerned with Dana’s precipitous decline, and the other with the fellowship that prevails before the mast despite class origins.

Origins certainly matter for readers, as Dana’s veracity was assumed by every reviewer and praised as one of the highlights of the work. Returning to the *Democratic Review*, we read, “The author has evidently no view to entertain or surprise his reader, but merely a desire to set before him a faithful account of what actually happened; he

119 *Rev. of Two Years before the Mast*, 781.
120 *Rev. of Two Years before the Mast*, 319.
writes as if he were on oath.” 121 Given the fact that Dana was to take up the cause of sailors before the bar, the word “oath” in this context is particularly noteworthy; in his concluding chapter, Dana writes, “the testimony of seamen against their officers is viewed with suspicion…and great allowance is made for combinations and exaggerations” (TY 386). Sailors were often thought to be of the unreliable poor because of their class position, but, according to Bryant, who was familiar with author’s standing in the social and legal communities on land, Dana’s work reads like an “oath.” According to the North American Review, the book “would but perish for its truth, and the truth might perish but for its vivacity.” So might the truth perish but for its teller.

As I will discuss in Chapter Four, critics were suspicious that Melville’s Typee, was authored by a before-the-mast sailor because the tale was told so artfully. That is, forecastle hands were expected to speak with a certain voice, a voice different from that of Melville’s Tommo. Veracity (and thereby salability) was intricately linked with both voice and social status. Significantly, many reviewers (besides Channing and Bryant) noted that Dana’s tale was noteworthy for its plain and direct style—whether or not these reviewers had actually read sailors’ writing before, Dana’s book seemed to be written by a sailor. As Robert Lucid notes, “few if any of these contemporary recognized that the [realistic] effect was an artistic one.”122 Put another way, Dana had mastered the art of seeming to be what the public expected a sailor to be, an art was almost certainly born of Dana’s time in the forecastle as well as during his extensive education, reading, and legal training. Thus, Dana was one of a very few authors who could have successfully shifted

121 ibid., 318.
122 Lucid, The Composition, Reception, Reputation and Influence of Two Years before the Mast, 95.
the sea narrative: his status made him trustworthy, his connections allowed for
publication, and his voice met expectations readers held for sailor-style simplicity and
directness.

Dana’s sailor-voice is not the only voice we hear in Two Years, and his ability to
speak with two separate voices is crucial to the commercial success and social
significance of the book. The fact that he could speak as a sailor gave the book the ring of
truth that reviewers praised, but Dana’s ability to maintain his separation from sailors
themselves likely helped him to cultivate both a wide readership in Harper Brothers’
Family Series and a reputation as a spokesman for sailor reform. Since one of his goals
in writing was to motivate the moneyed classes to take action on behalf of the sailor,
Dana needed to speak to his fellow Brahmins while sympathizing with his messmates.
This rhetorical division pervades Dana’s text. He is both sailor and scholar, and he is
neither; he speaks with and for the seaman, but he speaks from his law office on Beacon
Hill. The meaning of Dana’s text (as well as those of many other maritime authors of the
antebellum period) can be found in the disjunction between teller and tale, between
speaker and subject.

Dana maintained this gap between himself and his fellow sailors in a few
important ways. First, he created a static narrator who, though he matures before the mast
and behaves like a sailor, never surrenders his privileged status or worldview despite his
lowly associations; second, he constructs antebellum sailors in the typical fashion,
offering little new information concerning the challenges and pleasures of a life before

123 Harper’s published editions with both black and tan covers in their Family Library, number 106. A
Dana, Jr., 45; Lucid, The Composition, Reception, Reputation and Influence of Two Years before the Mast,
69-72.
the mast; third, Dana (the older lawyer, not the younger sailor) breaks into the text to clarify right and wrong for his readers, thereby playing both sailor and juror, reporter and arbiter. In his introduction, Dana announces, “I have carefully avoided incorporating into it any impressions but those made upon me by the events as they occurred, leaving [them] to my concluding chapter” (TY 39). Though this may have been his intent, Dana (as both narrator and author) can no more remove his judgment from the text than he can shed his Harvard education when he boards the Pilgrim. In fact, when he writes that he has shed his Cambridge clothes for sailor garb, Dana goes undercover as the Harvard eye in the forecastle. As such, he takes pains to demonstrate both his educational and social background throughout the text, reminding readers that he is the author of a work in the Harper’s Family Library series and not the sailor that is the subject of its adventures.

D.H. Lawrence approaches this same division from a different angle, suggesting that Two Years Before the Mast represents a chronicle of Dana’s struggle to “KNOW” the sea; however, Lawrence also claims that knowing as “the slow death of being.”¹²⁴ In other words, even as Dana came to know the sea and sailors, he confirms his separateness from them—his knowledge is external to his identity; thus, he writes of sailors without ever being one himself.

Following Lawrence, critics have noted the many divisions that pervade and define Dana’s text. For example, Thomas Philbrick reads the tale as an updated version of the Indian captivity narrative that oscillates between poles of confinement and liberation; James Hart argues that Dana’s voyage dramatizes the tension between two competing models of education; Douglass B. Hill, Jr. notes that the text reveals Dana’s unconscious

struggle over his future career; James D. Cox suggests that Dana’s journey helped him define his life both before and after 1834; William Spengemann claims a major division is between static and dynamic conceptions of the “home” to which Dana would return; and Bryce Conrad characterizes the division in terms of public and private, a division between “the self as seen and his “private probings of self.”\footnote{Bryce Conrad, "Richard Henry Dana, Jr. and Two Years before the Mast: Strategies for Objectifying the Subjective Self," \textit{Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts} 29, no. 3 (1987), 301. See Philbrick, \textit{Introduction}; Douglas B. Hill Jr, "Richard Henry Dana, Jr., and Two Years before the Mast," \textit{Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts} 9 (1967), 312-325; Hart, \textit{The Education of Richard Henry Dana, Jr}, 3-25; James M. Cox, "Richard Henry Dana's Two Years before the Mast: Autobiography Completing Life" in \textit{The Dialectic of Discovery: Essays on the Teaching and Interpretation of Literature Presented to Lawrence E. Harvey}, eds. John D. Lyons and Nancy J. Vickers (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1984), 160-179; William C. Spengemann, \textit{The Adventurous Muse: The Poetics of American Fiction, 1789-1900} (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977). Other critics who treat Dana include Blum, \textit{The View from the Mast-Head: Antebellum American Sea Narratives and the Maritime Imagination}; Hugh Egan, "One of them': The Voyage of Style in Dana's Two Years before the Mast," \textit{American Transcendental Quarterly} 2, no. 3 (1988), 177-190; Hugh Egan, "Gentlemen-Sailors: The First-Person Narratives of Dana, Cooper, and Melville" (PhD, University of Iowa); Martin Burgess Green, \textit{The Great American Adventure} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); Robert F. Lucid, "The Influence of Two Years before the Mast on Herman Melville," \textit{American Literature} 31, no. 3 (1959), 243-256; Robert S. Stone, "Class Acts: Cultural Mastery and the Labor of Writing in Antebellum America" (PhD, Columbia).} Given the fact that Dana played his role as a sailor ably for more than two years, I am suspicious of reading the division between Dana’s roles in the text as actual psychic disjunctions. As Dana wrote regarding his journal in 1842, readers should approach even purportedly private texts as “‘correct account[s] of all such [his] acts, thoughts & feelings as [he] is willing to have known to anyone into whose hands [they] may come.’”\footnote{Dana, \textit{The Journal of Richard Henry Dana, Jr.}, 4.} Exceedingly self-aware at age 27 and a self-consciously public figure for most of his adult life, Dana would have been savvy enough to reveal only the private self that he wished to offer for public consumption. Therefore, limited and frustrating though this approach may be, it is best to read \textit{Two Years Before the Mast} as a public document, published for reasons made public by the author and maintaining a sense of decorum and reserve appropriate for a wide
readership. Dana’s omissions and other authorial decisions help the reading public understand the antebellum sailor and his relation to the more polite classes, of which Dana was—and wanted to remain—a part.

To read the text as a part of print culture through which readers defined sailors and their class opposites, understanding the facts of its composition is important. *Two Years Before the Mast* is an entirely retrospective text, despite the fact that it is formatted as a journal. Since Dana’s original journal was lost upon his return to Boston, the narrator’s observations almost certainly do not recount Dana’s feelings about the events occurring on ship between 1834-1836. Rather, as Dana wrote his story, he would have been forced to dramatize what his remembered self might have felt at a time in the past. In this sense, his text mirrors the most famous slave narrative of the antebellum period, Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*, in which Douglass imagines his response to seeing the ships on the Chesapeake Bay. Writing in the 1840s, it is unlikely that Douglass recalled his exact thoughts from eight years before, but his powerful soliloquy reveals his intelligence and humanity, thereby showing readers that his enslavement was most certainly a travesty—Douglass’s work, like Dana’s, is a plausible fiction framed by facts. Dana’s text uses the facts of his earlier voyage to frame his later responses to sailors, captains, flogging, California, and a host of associated topics. Most importantly, I will argue, Dana uses the sea and his fellow sailors to dramatize the social divide between himself and the men with whom he shipped. Dana shows that even a white-gloved Brahmin can do the work of a sailor and return home with his Boston identity in tact. Rather than indicating a schism in Dana’s psyche, the ability to be sailor and lawyer,
seaman and citizen reveals a static identity that was not to be altered by the narrator’s years before the mast.

The narrator’s desire to become an able seaman without becoming a sailor is obvious early in Two Years Before the Mast as the narrator describes the second mate of the Pilgrim:

It had been obvious to all hands for some time that the second mate, whose name was Foster, was an idle, careless fellow, and not much of a sailor...he was but half a sailor, having always been on short voyages and remained at home a long time between them. His father was a man of some property, and intended to have given his son a liberal education; but he, being idle and worthless, was sent off to sea, and succeeded no better there; for, unlike many scamps, he had none of the qualities of a sailor— he was “not of the stuff that they make sailors of.” (TY 60)

The son of a moderately well-to-do man, in line for a liberal education, Foster sounds not unlike the narrator himself, though Dana is careful to differentiate the second mate by naming him an “idle and worthless...scamp.” At this early stage in the voyage, the narrator may have been curious about his own seaworthiness and wondering whether he was himself “of the stuff that they make sailors of.” When Foster is dismissed from his post as second mate, the honorific “Mister” is taken from him and he becomes simply “Foster,” another sailor before the mast.

This stripping of status has already happened in part the narrator, who surrendered his honorific upon boarding the ship, but his fellow sailors have no illusions about his status. Speaking with the cook and John, “the most ignorant...man in the ship,” the

127 In discussing Two Years Before the Mast, I use the term “narrator” to describe the textual persona “Dana” who sailed aboard the Pilgrim and the Alert. When I use the term “Dana,” I describe the author of the text, the budding lawyer who wrote Two Years Before the Mast two years after his voyage had ended. These two men, both named Richard Henry Dana, had different motivations and faced different situations, which explains my care in differentiating between the two.
narrator denies that Finnish sailors could affect the winds, despite anecdotal evidence to the contrary. The cook responds with disdain:

"Oh," says he, "go 'way! You think, 'cause you been to college, you know better than anybody. You know better than them as 'as seen it with their own eyes. You wait till you've been to sea as long as I have, and you'll know." (TY 81)

This is a fairly common set-piece in any narrative of initiation, and, since the cook has the last word in the chapter, it can be read as the wisdom of experience trumping the callowness of a pampered youth. However, the narrator has just told the cook that winds are variable and bound to change eventually, and the beginning of the next chapter confirms it: “We continued sailing along with a fair wind and fine weather until...” (82). Dana has given the cook his say, but that say is surrounded by the narrator’s rational argument and physical evidence to reinforce it; the narrator and his readers “see it with their own eyes.” The cook is not a wise sailor worthy of respect and admiration, but rather a superstitious old man whose assertions have no more value than the narrator’s. Dana rejects the sea-knowledge of fictional characters like Long Tom Coffin or the grizzled salts of William Leggett’s fiction in favor of rationalism and logic. The sea may indeed be powerful, but it is hardly governed by superstition and magic. It, just like the college, is Dana’s domain as well.

By asserting the value of his own knowledge and experience on board the ship, the narrator carves out a place for himself as a sailor in his own right, a man who can labor upon the sea without becoming what Hugh Egan calls “one of them.”128 Throughout the “outward bound” section of the text, when a typical initiate is learning the ropes and

128 Egan, 'One of them': The Voyage of Style in Dana's Two Years before the Mast, 177-190.
becoming a member of a new community, the narrator carefully balances his emerging abilities as a seaman with reminders of his status as something more than just a seaman. Thus, the narrator includes passages attesting to his seaworthiness: “I will own there was a pleasant feeling of superiority in being able to walk the deck, and eat, and go about, and comparing one's self with two poor, miserable, pale creatures, staggering and shuffling about decks” (*TY* 117). At the same time, he describes that emerging seamanship differently than later sailor-authors:

> Fortunately, I got through without any word from the officer, and heard the “well done” of the mate, when the yard reached the deck, with as much satisfaction as I ever felt at Cambridge on seeing a “bene” at the foot of a Latin exercise. (*TY* 119)

It is impossible for readers to miss the point of passages like this one. The narrator is proud to be a sailor because he can handle himself ably at sea and on land: He is judged “bene” in the classroom and on the ship. Moreover, in asserting his sea knowledge, the narrator does not devalue his background or education. Both Latin scholar and forecastle sailor, he holds two seemingly incompatible identities in tenuous balance.

This balancing act is not his alone, but also that of Ben Stimson, “a young man, like myself…the son of a professional man, and had been in a counting-room in Boston, we found that we had many friends and topics in common” (*TY* 43-44). Planning to enjoy his first liberty day, the narrator explains,

> Stimson and myself determined to keep as much together as possible, though we knew that it would not do to cut our shipmates; for, knowing our birth and education, they were a little suspicious that we would try to put on the gentleman when we got ashore, and would be ashamed of their company; and this won't do with Jack. When the voyage is at an end, you

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129 Dana used a nineteenth-century convention by naming Stimson thusly: “S------.” The only alteration I have made in the text is to use full names whenever possible, as Dana himself did in the 1869 version of *Two Years Before the Mast.*
may do as you please, but so long as you belong to the same vessel, you must be a shipmate to him on shore, or he will not be a shipmate to you on board. (*TY* 102-3)

The point of the passage, however, is that he and Stimson are ashamed of their company. They go to a grogshop with their mates and buy a round of drinks, but the two of them slip away at the first opportunity. The narrator’s great satisfaction is that he has cut his fellow sailors without their realizing it; he has played the shipmate without being one.

The narrator enjoys a similar pleasure a bit later in the journey after pulling ashore with a company of his shipmates:

> I separated myself from the rest and sat down on a rock, just where the sea ran in and formed a fine spouting horn. Compared with the plain, dull sand-beach of the rest of the coast, this grandeur was as refreshing as a great rock in a weary land. It was almost the first time that I had been positively alone—free from the sense that human beings were at my elbow, if not talking with me—since I had left home. My better nature returned strong upon me. Everything was in accordance with my state of feeling, and I experienced a glow of pleasure at finding that what of poetry and romance I ever had in me, had not been entirely deadened by the laborious and frittering life I had led. (*TY* 125)

The allusion to “poetry and romance” comes straight out of Wordsworth or Emerson, two men whose work Dana would surely have known as he wrote his book in 1838-1839.

What allows for the spirit of poetry and romance that the narrator experiences is his separation from the sailors. Solitude allows “his better nature” to return, suggesting that

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100 DOUGLASS B. HILL notes that Dana sometimes demonstrates a “disagreeable tone of superiority.” Hill is quite correct that Dana is revealing his superiority, though the fact that he finds it “disagreeable” says more about the critic than about Dana. Hill, *Richard Henry Dana, Jr., and Two Years before the Mast*, 322.

131 Dana would become friendly with Emerson as both a member of the Saturday club and a fellow lecturer in and around Boston in the 1840s. See Shapiro, *Richard Henry Dana, Jr., 1815-1882*, 251. Interestingly, Dana graduated from Harvard in August of 1837, the same year that Emerson delivered the Phi Beta Kappa address in Cambridge (better known as “The American Scholar”); there is no record of whether Dana was in the audience for that address, though his father was active in the society and the younger Dana would certainly have known of Emerson’s speech.
this nature is dulled or even crushed by the associations he has made aboard ship. One can also assume that the better nature to which Dana refers is somehow associated with his former life, his landed life. It remains unknown whether or not the men with whom he works can access their own better nature, or whether they even have such a nature to access.

The narrator’s desire to portray himself as anything but a “shipmate on shore” is confirmed on another liberty day, when he reminds readers of his status and upbringing:

Soon after breakfast, a large boat, filled with men in blue jackets, scarlet caps, and various colored under-clothes, bound ashore on liberty, left the Italian ship, and passed under our stern; the men singing beautiful Italian boat-songs, all the way, in fine, full chorus. Among the songs I recognized the favorite “O Pescator dell’ onda.” It brought back to my mind pianofortes, drawing-rooms, young ladies singing, and a thousand other things which as little befitted me, in my situation, to be thinking upon. (TY 186)

The men he hears are Italian sailors, nothing more, but the narrator places their song outside a maritime context and removes himself and his readers to a drawing-room with a pianoforte. The Mediterranean sailors become young ladies singing, and though he reminds readers that he need not think of his more effete past, he clearly was. Given the fact that Dana wrote his book years after hearing the Italian sailors singing, he was most likely not reminded of drawing rooms at the very moment he heard “O Pescator dell’ onda,” but that is of little matter. In relentlessly reminding his readers of his education, his background, and his associations while on shore, Dana paints the “strong contrasts” so important to his story. Certainly, readers could hardly miss the contrasts between their lives and those of the seafaring men on the page. Dana wants them to grasp a more important contrast—the strong and abiding contrast between the narrator and the sailors. Dana’s need to separate himself from the subjects of his story makes Two Years Before
the Mast what it is, but it also transforms Dana’s narrator from a sailor into a voyeur. He becomes, like George Lippard, an author of “mole’s eye view” texts that expose the vices of society for a titillated reading public.132 That little titillating matter appears in Dana’s opus is not due to its absence, but its excision.133

Some of the lacunae in the text are simply implied, as they are when Dana describes a liberty day off Santa Barbara:

Our forecastle, as usual after a liberty-day, was a scene of tumult all night long, from the drunken ones. They had just got to sleep toward morning, when they were turned up with the rest, and kept at work all day in the water, carrying hides, their heads aching so that they could hardly stand. This is sailor's [sic] pleasure. (TY 309)

The passage chides sailors for their shortsightedness, for they fail to consider their hangovers during a long night of drinking while the narrator dismisses such short-lived “pleasure.” Nonetheless, Dana acknowledges that, “though I had never drank rum before, and never intend to again, I took my allowance [on board ship] as the rest did” (TY 393). What is a reader to believe? The narrator stands with the “rest” when taking his daily allowance of rum and treating his fellow shipmates at a grogshop, but he stands apart while the crew becomes drunk on a liberty day. He is just sailor enough to fit in, but no so much a sailor as to fall into the dissipated habits that might intimate something about his own moral code. The narrator’s lapses include those for which Dana was teased by his

132 I take the term “mole’s eye” view from John Kasson’s *Rudeness and Civility*. According to his journal, Dana investigated whoresouses and other “low places” in order to learn more about the lower-classes and their entertainments. Biographers Samuel Shapiro and Robert F. Lucid note that his motive for these journeys was fact-gathering, but Dana’s desire to surround himself with squalor and vice does intimate a voyeuristic streak. See Dana, *The Journal of Richard Henry Dana, Jr.*, 76-80; Shapiro, *Richard Henry Dana, Jr.*, 1815-1882.

messmate Ben Stimson following the publication of *Two Years Before the Mast*. Stimson wrote that Dana omitted, “…the beautiful Indian Lasses, who so often frequented your humble abode in the hide house and rambled through those splendid groves attached thereto.”¹³⁴ In the text, the narrator understandably gives no suggestion of his affairs with native women, and the fact of those affairs (or the narrator’s drunkenness) is not grounds for a moral condemnation of Richard Henry Dana, Jr. The “strong contrasts” between the narrator’s Cambridge life and his life as a sailor are more significant than readers are led to believe, and the fact that such details are excised requires readers to approach *Two Years* as a text intended entirely and exclusively for public consumption. The young narrator enjoyed the illicit fruits of sea freedom more than the older Dana is willing to admit, and the narrator’s experiences as a sailor may well have shaped Dana’s adult consciousness and private desires. Dana clearly guards his public persona in his book, and so he must continue to distance himself from the men whose pleasures he shared.

To keep the narrator separate from such negative associations, Dana crafts portrayals of seamen aboard the *Pilgrim* that emphasize the difference between the young scholar and his shipmates. Not only are the sailors superstitious and ignorant of the drawing-room memories that Dana shares with his readers, but they also seem to come from a different place altogether: Their language, their appearance, their experience, and their worldview reveal them to be a wholly separate class of beings. Commenting on his move from the steerage to the forecastle (a move that remediates narrator’s physical separation from the sailors), Dana writes:

You hear sailors talk, learn their ways, their peculiarities of feeling as well as speaking and acting; and moreover pick up a great deal of curious and useful information in seamanship, ship's customs, foreign countries, etc., from their long yarns and equally long disputes. No man can be a sailor, or know what sailors are, unless he has lived in the forecastle with them—turned in and out with them, eaten of their dish and drank of their cup. (TY 93)

“A great deal of curious and useful information” is on display in this paragraph, as Dana reminds readers of his balancing act once again. He argues that “no man can be a sailor” without living among them, nor can he “know what sailors are.” These are two very different things, one an identity, the other simply a category of knowledge. It is the latter that is particularly interesting, because clearly the narrator neither was, nor wanted to be, a sailor. However, he did want to know and relate what sailors are; he regards them (and expects readers to regard them) as a unique group, a type. In the 1869 edition of *Two Years Before the Mast* Dana would write, “I was a sailor ashore, as well as on board,” confirming that sailor identity transcended the physical spaces of ship and sea.135 This admission, made thirty-five years after the narrator’s journey, reveals why Dana could not stomach the idea of becoming a career seaman: Sailor was not simply an occupation, it was an identity. Moreover, because sailors have their own “talk, ways, peculiarities of feeling as well as speaking and acting,” that identity was almost impossible to shed.

Soon after his move to the forecastle, sensing that the voyage might take longer than the two years it was slated to occupy, the narrator imagines himself lost:

This was bad enough for [the sailors]; but still worse was it for me, who did not mean to be a sailor for life; having intended only to be gone eighteen months or two years. Three or four years would make me a sailor in every respect, mind and habits, as well as body—*nolens volens*; and would put all my companions so far ahead of me that college and a

135 Dana, Richard Henry, Jr., *Two Years before the Mast: A Personal Narrative of Life at Sea*, 38.
profession would be in vain to think of; and I made up my mind that, feel as I might, a sailor I must be, and to be master of a vessel, must be the height of my ambition. (*TY* 142-43)

Dana finds the Latin phrase irresistible, but this is hardly news by this point in the text. The first thing that the narrator realizes when considering the possibility of a three year voyage is that he would be transformed, “mind and habits, as well as body,” by an extended journey before the mast. The manner of speech and life that seemed so foreign upon his entrance into the forecastle cannot be avoided for more than two years, and the remainder of the text, despite its digressions and travelogues, is about the narrator’s successful return to Boston before he is transformed into a “were-sailor.” Of course, readers know he is successful; they have the title of the book and a decidedly non-sailor text to guide them, but the conflict of the story remains clear. The narrator does not fight nature, injustice, dissipation, or ill-health; he fights a battle between two identities, and he hopes that the Cambridge youth he left on the Boston wharf in August of 1834 will emerge victorious.

Examples of failed battles abound in *Two Years Before the Mast*, and they suggest to readers that Dana’s victory was by no means assured.¹³⁶ The first cautionary tale is that of Tom Harris, the narrator’s remarkable (and remarkably capable) shipmate on board the *Alert*, and a direct descendent of the fictional Long Tom Coffin. From Harris, the narrator “learned his whole character and history, and more about foreign nations, the habits of different people, and especially the secrets of sailors' lives and hardships, and also of practical seamanship, (in which he was abundantly capable of instructing me,) than I

¹³⁶ Conrad, Richard Henry Dana, Jr. and Two Years before the Mast: Strategies for Objectifying the Subjective Self, 306.
could ever have learned elsewhere” (TY 261). Though practically skilled, Harris also exhibits an amazing quality of mind; Dana claims, “I always felt, when [I was] with him, that I was with no common man” and “like most self-taught men, [Harris] over-estimated the value of an education” (TY 263). Certainly, Harris seems to be a highly intelligent and capable man, but his valuation of education is no mistake, for it is education that sets the narrator apart from Harris himself.137 Dana freely compliments the talented Harris for several pages because the author has enjoyed the “value of an education,” including contacts, status, and entry into the legal profession, that Harris could not hope to enjoy.

Dana does not dwell on the difference in status, however, preferring to focus on Harris’s personal failures as the reason he was “at forty…still a dog before the mast, at twelve dollars a month” (TY 265). A sailor on board as well as on shore, Harris had subjected himself to “every sin that a sailor knows,” especially drunkenness. Many years of dissipation led him to bemoan the “years of manhood he had thrown away,” and Harris was now sober, but his life of sin left had kept him from advancing within the maritime trades (TY 266). Dana celebrates Harris’s numerous talents and abilities, and he eagerly praises his “own strength of purpose” in remaining temperate for the three years prior to his acquaintance with Dana. The import of this lengthy character sketch is also that Harris and sailors like him had only themselves to blame for their personal, professional, and economic failings. The life of a dog before the mast was one that the sailor chose when he surrendered to vice.

Another man who had surrendered himself to vice was George P. Marsh, who “was by no means the man by nature that Harris was.” Nonetheless, something was

137 See Hill, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., and Two Years before the Mast, 322.
different about Marsh, since he had “been born in a different rank, and educated early in life accordingly, but had been a vagabond, and done nothing for himself since” (TY 274). Harris’s exact opposite, Marsh is, like the narrator, a collegian with numerous social and economic advantages. Though he praises Harris for his self-reliance and his ability to rise above his natural station, the narrator feels a genuine affinity toward Marsh, as is evident when the latter leaves the Alert to take an officer’s berth aboard another ship:

[Marsh] left us to take the berth of second mate on board the Ayacucho, which was lying in port. He was well qualified for this, and his education would enable him to rise to any situation on board ship. I felt really sorry to part from him. There was something about him which excited my curiosity; for I could not, for a moment, doubt that he was well born, and, in early life, well bred. There was the latent gentleman about him, and the sense of honor, and no little of the pride, of a young man of good family. The situation was offered him only a few hours before we sailed; and though he must give up returning to America, yet I have no doubt that the change from a dog’s berth to an officer’s, was too agreeable to his feelings to be declined. We pulled him on board the Ayacucho, and when he left the boat he gave each of its crew a piece of money, except myself, and shook hands with me, nodding his head, as much as to say, —“We understand one another,” and sprang on board. (TY 334)

Here Dana reveals himself, especially as he imagines the meaning of the handshake and nod he shares with Marsh. The departing sailor gives money to every member of the boat’s crew except the narrator, who doesn’t need it. Two men of education, the only transaction between them is the silent acknowledgement of mutual understanding, an understanding that carries its own significant rewards in light of the riff-raff surrounding them. After nearly two years before the mast during which the narrator was berated by captains, teased by the crew, and confronted with vice, he enjoys a moment of community with a man who “understands” him.

When the narrator leaves a grogshop to enjoy moments of solitary communion with nature, or when he shakes hands with Marsh, Dana shows his readers that the
Cambridge lad was only hibernating, that the gentleman can return under the proper circumstances. The same is evident when Dana later brings up the very real possibility that he might have been trapped at sea and he begins to reveal the narrator’s true position on board ship:

I was anxious for her arrival, for I had been told by letter that the owners in Boston, at the request of my friends, had written to Captain Thomson to take me on board the *Alert*, in case she returned to the United States before the *Pilgrim*; and I, of course, wished to know whether the order had been received, and what was the destination of the ship. One year more or less might be of small consequence to others, but it was everything to me. It was now just a year since we sailed from Boston, and at the shortest, no vessel could expect to get away under eight or nine months, which would make our absence two years in all. This would be pretty long, but would not be fatal. It would not necessarily be decisive of my future life. But one year more would settle the matter. I should be a sailor for life. (*TY* 239)

As he does when he first broaches the possibility of a lengthy stay at sea, the narrator bemoans his fate, but something is different now, for we realize that the narrator has friends in Boston who have interceded on his behalf. Though the narrator must take orders from Thomson on board ship, he knows that Thomson must take orders from him, too. The tension between sailor and scholar that defines *Two Years Before the Mast* is only temporary, for there is no long-term conflict. All along, the narrator’s friends had been giving orders to have him returned at the earliest possible date, as the narrator was well aware. Though he confronts readers with Thomson’s tyranny and the possibility of a longer stay at sea, Dana relieves the tension by winking at readers, letting them know that he didn’t ship before the mast without a safety net, for that would have been insanity.

The issue crops up again (as it does every hundred pages in the text) as the *Alert* prepares to depart for Boston. Confronting Captain Thomson, who wants the narrator to remain on board the *Pilgrim*, Dana repeats himself, suggesting that such an order would
be akin to, “condemning me to a punishment worse than a Botany Bay exile, and to a fate which would alter the whole current of my future life; for two years more in California would have made me a sailor for the rest of my days” (TY 349). Again and again at regular intervals, readers are reminded that four years aboard ship would turn the Boston scholar into a sailor forever. The crucial words in the title, as it happens, are “Two Years,” for that is the limit of any gentleman’s endurance before the mast. Upon being confronted this time, the narrator becomes more belligerent, openly defying Thomson and reminding him that a power greater than a ship’s captain has ordered the narrator home.

The sailors with whom the narrator ships are not ignorant of their mate’s position either, and they realize that, despite his many actions and protestations, the scholar will be anything but a sailor:

“Oh, yes!” said the crew, “the captain has let you off, because you are a gentleman’s son, and have got friends, and know the owners; and taken Ben, because he is poor, and has got nobody to say a word for him!” I knew that this was too true to be answered, but I excused myself from any blame, and told them that I had a right to go home, at all events. This pacified them a little, but Jack had got a notion that a poor lad was to be imposed upon, and did not distinguish very clearly; and though I knew that I was in no fault, and, in fact, had barely escaped the grossest injustice, yet I felt that my berth was getting to be a disagreeable one. The notion that I was not “one of them,” which, by a participation in all their labor and hardships, and having no favor shown me, had been laid asleep, was beginning to revive. But far stronger than any feeling for myself, was the pity I felt for the poor lad. (TY 350-1)

Of course “the notion” had revived because in fact the narrator was not one of them, and he was fighting tooth and nail to avoid becoming a sailor. Though he has indeed borne their burdens, he finds their life loathsome, worse than a “Botany bay exile.” Such disdain was likely evident to the men on both the Pilgrim and the Alert as well as to the
readers who enjoyed Dana’s book. At play in the forecastle with their knowledgeable
guide, readers and reviewers confirmed their assumptions about sailors with firsthand
knowledge.

That the book gazes downward with paternalistic concern does not make it a
diatribe against sailors, though, and the narrator has certainly taken great pains to play
sailor during his journey: He desires the approval of his crewmates, he celebrates the
praise of an officer, and he partakes in the sensual pleasures of the forecastle hand.

Describing one of the first liberty days he enjoyed, he writes:

A sailor's liberty is but for a day; yet while it lasts it is perfect. He is
under no one's eye, and can do whatever, and go wherever, he pleases.
This day, for the first time, I may truly say, in my whole life, I felt the
meaning of a term which I had often heard—the sweets of liberty. (TY
168)

The “sweets of liberty” were difficult for the grandson of Judge Dana to locate in a
Harvard classroom, but off the coast of South America, freed from the constraints that his
position imposed on him, the young narrator finally understood.138 By writing the text,
Dana gets to relive the exhilarating days when he did not have to be his Boston self, but,
secure in his new profession (as he was secure in his status aboard ship), the experience
of those days will not tarnish him for life. Sailor liberty was indeed enjoyable to the
young man, but, in the public presentation that is Two Years Before the Mast, Dana avers
that being captive to a sailor’s life would be too great a price to pay for liberty. Sailor
identity temporarily granted the narrator a degree of freedom he had never before
experienced in his life, and by writing his book, Dana was able to take imaginative refuge

138 Egan, 'One of them': The Voyage of Style in Dana's Two Years before the Mast, 182.
in those fleeting moments of liberty, both from his Boston upbringing and from the rowdy sailors with whom he served aboard ship.

After his famous voyage, Dana would occasionally recapture his youthful sea freedom by posing as a sailor to roam through undesirable neighborhoods in Eastern port cities. An experience from one of these excursions provides as a neat metaphor for Dana’s use of the sailor identity as a temporary gateway into a nether world. After catching sight of two young prostitutes during a visit to Halifax in 1842, Dana (dressed in the pea coat of a sailor) confronted the woman whom he believed to be the more innocent of the two, encouraging her to renounce her profession and convert to Christianity. He writes, “I then in a careless manner opened my [sailor] coat to show her that I had the dress of a gentleman, & she saw by my voice & man[ner] that I was different from what they supposed.”139 The citizen lurking beneath sailor dress is both the narrator of Dana’s story and the author who sold so many books. Throughout Two Years Before the Mast, Dana reveals the gentleman’s garb beneath his sailor coat and then hastens to put on his pea coat lest that same formal dress give him away. As both his journal and his more famous narrative make clear, however, Dana never sheds his respectable clothes or surrenders his respectable life, for being a sailor is more than a profession; it is—for Dana and for his readers—an identity synonymous with class descent.

Two years after his journey, Dana wrote “We must come down from our heights, and leave our straight paths, for the byways and low places of life, if we would learn truths by strong contrasts; and in hovels, in forecastles, and among our own outcasts in foreign lands,” acknowledging his own descent into the forecastle in search of “truths”

139 Dana, The Journal of Richard Henry Dana, Jr., 77.
The truths he learned below decks, the truths of the lower life in all of society, are the truths of class privilege and stratification. Though he obviously feels an abiding sympathy for the sailor and his fellow outcasts, Dana’s imagination is limited as he grasps at ways to aid the lower classes. Becoming a sailor was certainly fraught with class implications, and so too was benevolence; both Dana and the forgotten poetess from *Godey’s* whose verse began this chapter extended a downward-reaching hand. No matter what metaphoric meanings inhere in sailor identity, no matter what pleasures lurked in the forecastle, sailors and their fellows had to be lifted up to become fully-realized citizens of a middle-class nation.

II. Lives Before the Mast

Richard Henry Dana’s benevolent meanderings through the slums of Halifax confirm his class position and his understanding of his duty toward those beneath him, and this understanding, along with the forecastle setting, reappeared in numerous first-person sea narratives following *Two Years Before the Mast*. In this section, I consider two such narratives: James Fenimore Cooper’s “edited” version of *Ned Myers, or, A Life Before the Mast* and Samuel Leech’s *A Voice From the Main Deck, Being a Record of the Thirty Years’ Adventures of Samuel Leech*. Both books appeared in 1843, with Leech’s enjoying enough popularity to be reissued into the twentieth century in as many as 18 editions. Of course, each text was written in the wake of Dana’s and capitalized on the popularity of sea narratives as well as on the countless maritime reform movements that were so popular in the 1840s. Though the books were little remarked by critics (and have been even less remarked by scholars), they reveal the power of Dana’s narrative form and
voice in shaping sea literature even as they modify the image of the sailor propounded within antebellum print culture.

Born in present-day Quebec in 1793 to a father in the British military, Edward Robert Myers was sent to school in Halifax, where he stayed until 1805. Despite being a member of the polite classes ashore and never having “done any work” as a youth, Myers tired of the floggings that he received in school and (ironically) decided to go to sea. Using a fowling piece given him by the Prince of Wales, the young Ned bribed the mate of a schooner headed for New York and secured passage out of Halifax; he would not return to Canada for nine years, and then only as a prisoner of war following his capture during the War of 1812. After passing the rest of 1805 with a New York family, Myers took to sea for good in 1806 when he signed on to serve as a boy on the Sterling. His fellow crewman on that voyage was the young James Fenimore Cooper, who, having been recently expelled from Yale, was shipping as a foremast hand (as was the custom at the time) in preparation for his career as a navy midshipman. Though Cooper would serve in the navy for only three years before beginning his literary career, Myers would live before the mast until 1840, when injuries forced him to land. In 1842, the crippled Myers met Cooper on the street in New York City and, in 1843, received a letter inviting him to Cooper’s upstate residence. On this visit to the lake country, the career sailor shared his life’s story with the legendary author and thus was born Ned Myers, Or, A Life Before the Mast, published in October of 1843.140

140 This history is assembled from Myers’s story as well as William S. Dudley, "Introduction" in Ned Myers; Or, A Life before the Mast (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989), vii-xix; William S. Dudley, "James Fenimore Cooper's Ned Myers: A Life before the Mast," The American Neptune 57, no. 4 (Fall, 1997), 323-329; Benjamin B. Griswold, “The Original "Ned Myers.,”” The Century XXVIII (May-October, 1884), 957.
Beyond the delight he must have felt upon reconnecting with a shipmate from long ago, Cooper had additional reasons for inviting Myers to Cooperstown. At the time, Cooper had just published *Wyandotté, or the Hutted Knoll*, which would be met with critical disdain. An anonymous reviewer for *The Southern Quarterly Review* described it as having “little or no plot” and being “one of the feeblest books that has ever issued from Cooper’s pen.”\(^{141}\) As a maritime writer, too, Cooper was behind the times, having not written a first-person forecastle narrative in the mode of *Two Years*. Given the overwhelming popularity of Dana’s recent book and Cooper’s recently sagging fortunes, that latter may have sensed that Myers’ story presented him with the opportunity to produce a factual before-the-mast narrative that could both revive his reputation and materially aid his old friend. Nonetheless, Cooper was unwilling to surrender completely the tale to its titular character, and the struggle for control of both the narrative and its messages emerges throughout the text.

Cooper’s introduction highlights his curious relationship to the tale, when he variously describes himself as both the “writer” and the “editor” of Ned’s story. In the standard apologia that begins the introduction, Cooper claims, “It is an old remark, that the life of any man, could the incidents be faithfully told, would possess interest and instruction for the general reader. The conviction of the perfect truth of this saying, has induced the writer to commit to paper, the vicissitudes, escapes, and opinions of one of his old shipmates” (*NM* I). The attraction to the tale, for both Cooper and his readers, is the very unimportance of Ned’s life; he is, literally “any man” while the venerable author

\(^{141}\) Rev. of *Wyandotté, or the Hutted Knoll* in *The Southern Quarterly Review*. Vol. IV, no. 8 (October 1843), 515-16.
is there to tell his tale. This passage also highlights the importance of a “faithful” telling, which Cooper broaches in the following paragraph: “the reader will feel a natural desire to understand how far the editor can vouch for the truth of that which he has here written.” Now the editor of another man’s story (thereby remaining unaccountable for errors), Cooper explains that he “has the utmost confidence in all the statements of Ned, so far as intention is concerned” (NM 1-2, emphasis added). Cooper’s important and meaningful abdication of responsibility allows him to vouch for the intention but not the memory or knowledge of his former shipmate. He repeats himself later in the introduction, reminding readers once again that, “the memory of Ned may occasionally fail him; and, as for his opinions, they doubtless are sometimes erroneous; but the writer has the fullest conviction that it is the intention of the Old Salt to relate nothing that he does not believe to have occurred, or to express an unjust sentiment” (NM 4).

Clearly, Ned Myers was not as reliable or trustworthy as Cooper would have liked him to be. Unlike the narrator of Dana’s book, Myers had never been to Harvard, nor was he “fresh from Yale,” as Cooper claimed to be in 1806 (though he had in fact been expelled in 1805).142 The privilege that Cooper and Dana enjoyed with readers regarding their presumed truthfulness was not available to Myers, and Cooper both vouches for the title character even as he distances himself from any of Ned’s missteps, lies, and confusions. Hence, Cooper cannot decide whether he is to be the writer or the editor, making Ned Myers is such a fascinating text. Though he may have wanted to transcribe the tale directly, in the fashion of the day, Cooper has both his own standards as well as a professional reputation to consider. This double-duty sometimes required him to take

142 See Dudley, Introduction, viii.
action in the text, “In a few instances [Cooper] has interposed his own greater knowledge of the world between Ned's more limited experience and the narrative; but, this has been done cautiously, and only in cases in which there can be little doubt that the narrator has been deceived by appearances, or misled by ignorance” (NM 2-3). The subject of the work, to read Cooper’s introduction, is well-intentioned but also ignorant, easily misled, possessed of a failing memory, and full of erroneous opinions. A reader could rightly wonder why Cooper had chosen to publish this man’s story, or, more cynically, whether Ned Myers the sailor was truly the author of *Ned Myers* the book.\(^{143}\)

Whatever the exact details of composition, the book is certainly not a hoax, for Myers’s existence and friendship with Cooper is well-documented. However, I hope to show that sailor-authors were often trapped by their marginal class position as well as by public perceptions of both their honesty and intelligence. Such circumstances are obvious in *Ned Myers* as Cooper must verify that Ned has earned the right to be heard; he claims that, because of “the sound and accurate moral principles that now appear to govern [Myers’s] acts and his opinions, we find a man every way entitled to speak for himself” (NM 3, emphasis added). The irony of such a statement was apparently lost on Cooper, and his introduction ensures that before Ned’s “speaks” in the book bearing his name, the old sailor has been pushed aside and transformed into a cautionary tale as an anti-role model for Cooper’s readers. Cooper’s need to vouch for Ned helps modern readers might better understand why Dana’s text was so popular and so well-received compared to

\(^{143}\) Egan notes that interlineal manuscript comments by Cooper as well as an outline for the book itself (in Cooper’s hand) suggest that Cooper may have compiled the book based only on oral exchanges with Myers. If this is indeed the case, then the book can be read as an intriguing example of literary ventriloquism rather than a text tightly controlled by its amanuensis. Egan, *Gentlemen-Sailors: The First-Person Narratives of Dana, Cooper, and Melville*, 159-60.
almost every other first-person sea narrative that followed it. *Two Years* satisfied the demand for a truthful tale and a truthful teller, and its subject (purportedly) spoke for himself. Cooper’s introduction to *Ned Myers* also hints at why no sailor penned a compelling counter-narrative—that is, a book that described the sailor ethic without regard to contemporary class hierarchies—to Dana’s famous book.144

Ned’s story, which begins with Cooper’s introduction, unfolds under the firm control of the editor/writer for the first several chapters, a feature due, in part, to Cooper’s early association with Myers and shared knowledge of their shared 1806 voyage aboard the *Sterling* as well as his knowledge of American naval history, especially during the War of 1812. Even when Cooper was not party to Ned’s exploits, though, he insinuates himself into the text via footnotes that gloss the narrative. For example, when Ned claims that Prince Edward (his father’s military commander) left Halifax in “probably about the year 1798 or 1799,” Cooper footnotes the passage with the following note: “Edward, Duke of Kent, was born November 2, 1767 and made a peer April 23, 1799; when was a little turned of one-and-thirty. It is probable that this creation took place on his return to England” (*NM* 8). The lofty language of Cooper’s insertion, itself a marked contrast from Myers’s more rustic speech, not only gives the reader additional information but also verifies Myers’s claim. Perhaps Cooper wants to vouch for Myers’s honesty yet again, or to vouch for his own knowledge of English history; more likely, he demonstrates his own learnedness to cement readers’ admiration and trust. Later in the same chapter, Ned cites

144 Hugh Egan argues that *Ned Myers* is a response to Dana, but that, “In *Two Years*, a reader must look through its self-conscious romantic gesture to determine its essential conservative design; in *Ned Myers*, a reader must look through its self-conscious conservative design to determine its essential romantic gesture.” ibid., 140. As my arguments will show, I believe that Egan overstates the romantic gesture made by Cooper in *Ned Myers*. 

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the name of a Dr. Heizer, the head of a family with which he stayed during his first sojourn to New York in 1805. Cooper footnotes the name thusly: “This is Ned’s pronunciation; though it is probable the name is not spelt correctly. The names of Ned are taken a good deal at random; and, doubtless, are often misspelled” (NM 16).

Contemporary reviewer Benjamin Blake was miffed by Cooper’s many intrusions, writing, “It would be curious to ascertain how often Mr. Cooper is referred to and spoken of as the Editor…Don’t forget to honor the Editor. Oh! no.”¹⁴⁵

Though his “editorial” intrusions give him entré into all of Myers’s life story, Cooper becomes a character in the second and third chapters when Myers narrates their Sterling voyage. Myers’s descriptions of this first voyage are by far the most descriptive (and lengthy) of any in his book, which suggests that Cooper had a great deal to do with jogging Ned’s memory. Moreover, many of the incidents Myers narrates have the sixteen-year-old Cooper at their center. For instance, Myers describes Cooper’s relationship with an old sailor named Bill:

He had taken a great liking to Cooper, whom he used to teach how to knot and splice, and other niceties of the calling, and Cooper often took him ashore with him, and amused him with historical anecdotes of the different places we visited. In short, the intimacy between them was as great as well could be, seeing the difference in the educations and ages. (NM 33)

Thus, the writer/editor of Ned Myers’s story is revealed to be both a generous and friendly shipmate with credibility as a before the mast sailor. Cooper’s relationship to Myers himself is also featured on a couple of occasions, as it is when Myers narrates his rescue from drowning by his young friend. “Had not Cooper accidentally appeared, just

¹⁴⁵ Benjamin Blake Minor, "Rev. of Ned Myers; Or, A Life before the Mast," The Southern Literary Messenger IX, no. 12 (December, 1843), 758.
as he did, Ned Myers's yarn would have ended with this paragraph,” claims the aged sailor, who here makes use of the third person for the first time in the text.

This back-and-forth struggle for authority and control eventually diminishes as Cooper’s admonitory voice can speak neither from experience nor firsthand knowledge concerning Myers’s later career. Nonetheless, the division between the aristocratic man of letters and the impoverished and crippled sailor remains evident in Myers’s discussions of both revelry and regret. The revelry to which Myers refers was the theft of several gallons of whiskey, which he claims to have undertaken “more by the love of mischief, and a weak desire to have it said I was foremost in such an exploit, than from any mercenary motive” (NM 64). This episode ashore, Myers suggests, shows readers “the recklessness of sailors,” but these youthful capers and Myers’s motivation make the affair seem like little more than a schoolboy antic (NM 63).

The same frolicking tone dominates his narration of another war story, this one coming when his ship, the Julia, was captured and the injured Myers ventured below the deck to seek treatment:

A party of English was below, and some of our men having joined them, the heads were knocked out of two barrels of whiskey. The kids and bread-bags were procured, and all hands, without distinction of country, sat down to enjoy themselves. Some even began to sing, and, as for good-fellowship, it was just as marked, as it would have been in a jollification ashore. (NM 99)

This moment is one of many in Myers’s story that illuminate a particular feature of the sailor ethic; in this case, a sense of occupational fellowship trumps national association as men who had moments before been attacking one another sit and enjoy a drink. Though the fun is soon stopped by officers (quite reasonably) bent on enforcing order, the “good fellowship” that Myers remembers lives on for many years. The unlikely, ad-hoc quality
of the jollification makes it worth remarking, and this very sort of momentary meeting typified sailor recreation and community in the nineteenth century. Sailors understood better than most how suddenly life could be altered or ended by weather, war, or whim and they took advantage of their spare moments to forge connections with their fellows.

Myers was still living among his fellow seamen as a resident of Sailors’ Snug Harbor when he met with Cooper, and Myers maintained that he continued to “love the seas” after his sailing years had passed (NM 5). Most likely, he enjoyed the chance to relive the chance meetings, hurried happiness, and foolish exploits of his seagoing years by telling Cooper his life story. As Myers and Cooper were both aware, however, the pleasures of seafaring life were almost always attended by challenges and tragedies; for Myers, one of those tragedies was alcoholism.146 Myers’s embarrassment over his drinking and other moral failures is on display throughout his story; he consistently repents of his former actions in an effort to appear before readers as a qualified moral guide. This tone dominated many sea narratives of the period which, like Dana’s, sought both to raise public awareness of sailors’ plight and to highlight the fact that misguided sailors were in fact redeemable. So common was this narrative move that reviewer Benjamin Minor wrote, “We have neither time, nor space, nor inclination to rewrite Ned’s history. Suffice it to say…he became a great rogue and an abandoned sot; and was a pretty genuine scamp. Of all this, however, he has repented and now preaches very

146 Though he was devoted Christian and a temperance man when he met Cooper in 1843, Myers began drinking again a few years later and died in 1849, due in large part to his alcoholism. See Dudley, Introduction, vii-xix; Dudley, James Fenimore Cooper’s Ned Myers: A Life before the Mast, 323-329.
good morality, especially to sailors.” Clearly no fan of Cooper’s book, Minor has also heard the same story before and finds its repetition unnecessary.

To Cooper and/or Myers, however, this moral component was the most important aspect of book. Myers registers his embarrassment over his immoral past throughout his story, and he consistently repents of his former actions in an effort to appear before readers as a qualified moral guide. Describing the caper ashore during the War of 1812, Myers claims, “I ought to feel ashamed, and do feel ashamed of what occurred that night; but I must relate it, lest I feel more ashamed for concealing the truth. We had spliced the main-brace pretty freely throughout the day, and the pull I got in the grocery just made me ripe for mischief” (NM 63). Later, as a prisoner on Melville Island in Halifax harbor following his impressments by the British and subsequent refusal to work aboard ship, Myers took to running card and dice games to make money that would aid his escape from prison. Quite appropriately for his middle-class readers, Myers looks back on such foul business with a deep sense of regret, lamenting, “All this was wrong I now know, but then it gave me very little trouble. I hope I would not do the same thing over again, even to make my escape from Melville Island, but one never knows to what distress may drive him” (NM 119). Since Cooper himself added the italics to this sentence, we cannot know if Myers himself emphasized the transformation from lost sinner to redeemed soul so clearly.

Sadly, Myers’s life story, unlike his book, does not end so happily. Unable to sustain the temperate habits that he had come to embrace during his first years away from the sea, the old sailor relapsed and died as a result of alcohol abuse in 1849. The tragedy

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147 Minor, Rev. of Ned Myers; Or, A Life before the Mast, 758.
of alcoholism and its prevalence among seafaring men are not something to be celebrated along with the free-spirited frolics that are typical of the “sailor ethic” on display in many sea narratives, but, all the same, sailors were more than simply drinkers. Something besides alcohol led young Ned Myers to sea in the first place, and his success as a foremast hand and even a mate indicates that he did his job well and took pleasure in his abilities. In fact, those abilities earned Myers numerous officers’ berths aboard various ships, berths that he quite often rejected in favor of the forecastle life that he knew and loved. Ultimately, this life is what is missing from the “life before the mast” that Cooper and Myers purport to provide. Through the catalog of moral insufficiencies, ship voyages and frolics ashore, readers are never introduced to the attraction of seafaring life that brought Myers to sea again and again. Instead, they read a narrative with an obvious telos and a didactic moral; such a narrative does not square with the facts of foremast existence or maritime labor, nor should it. The form of the first-person sea-narrative was already entrenched, and, in responding to Dana, Cooper could not see his way clear to write an altogether different story. The birth, education, and life of Ned Myers set him well apart from Dana, but his story (if not his life) ends in much the same way, with reunion, redemption, and a plea for reform.

Marine reformers had been working in the nation’s ports for years before Dana went to sea, though his book and its numerous imitators made reformers’ efforts more noteworthy than ever before. Historian Paul Gilje writes that the maritime reform movement “was only one province in the larger benevolent empire that emerged in nineteenth-century America…it traced its roots to British antecedents; reflected an evangelical fervor born out of the Second Great Awakening; and found its greatest
support among the emerging middle-class.¹⁴⁸ The religious pleas in Two Years and Ned Myers reflect the importance of religion in the maritime reform movement; following Dana, readers expected former sailors to vouch for their conversion and support efforts aimed at other sailors. Samuel Leech does just that in A Voice From the Main Deck, published in Boston in 1843, making a powerful and explicit plea for middle-class support of religious reform movements.

Samuel Leech was born in England in 1798 and served in the English navy during the War of 1812. After being taken prisoner following a gruesome battle between the British ship Macedonian and the United States, Leech renounced his British citizenship and served in the American navy until 1816. Following his service, Leech moved to Connecticut, where he became a storekeeper. He later moved to Massachusetts in the 1830s, and excepting a visit to England to see his mother, Leech remained on American soil until his death in 1848.¹⁴⁹ Leech’s book is not the story of a seafaring life like Ned Myers, but it includes the requisite battles, near-death escapes, dissipation, and redemption that typify antebellum first-person sea narratives. In his preface, Leech makes the standard claim for its truthfulness and dutifully adds, “if this work should, in any degree, stir up the public mind to amend the condition of seamen, I shall feel gratified.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Gilje, Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution, 199. Historians Gilje and Roald Kverndal do an excellent job of summarizing the growth and development of reform societies that served seamen, see ibid., 195-227; Roald Kverndal, Seamen's Missions: Their Origin and Early Growth (Pasadena, Calif: William Carey Library, 1986). I will not rewrite this history; my concern is with the literary output of marine reformers—here Samuel Leech—which was an major component of the popular print culture that defined antebellum seafarers.


¹⁵⁰ ibid., xxiii-xxiv.
Leech’s statement of truth and intention could not be taken at face value, however, as Leech’s first edition includes several testimonials to his character reminiscent of Cooper’s avowal that Ned Myers was fit to “speak for himself.” Such testimonials, like those that prefaced many slave narratives, deem the author fit to tell his story but place determining authority in the hands of those who are his class superiors. Leech’s veracity depends on the verdict of an eminently respectable truth commission, and his desire to obtain its approval may have shaped his narrative. Three pastors (among them the famous Henry Chase),151 a church elder and a school principal “do cheerfully vouch” that Samuel Leech is of “moral and Christian character.” These men continue:

[We] assure the public, that the interesting volume, which [Leech] here presents to the world, may be relied upon as an honest statement of fact, with which the writer was personally conversant; and as having no fellowship whatever with those fictitious tales of the sea, which, under the garb and protestations of truth, have been proffered to the reading community.152

As critics of Dana’s work praised its truthful tone, so too do the recommenders of Leech’s work, carefully distinguishing his book from the “fictitious tales of sea.”

Leech’s book was popular enough to be published in more than twenty editions, including an 1857 reissue prefaced by Richard Henry Dana wherein he would vouch anew for the author’s character and the book itself. The publishers solicited Dana’s recommendation because he was still the preeminent seaman in the national imaginary despite the fact that his transition to a legal and political career. In his endorsement, Dana

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151 Chase was the pastor of the New York Mariners’ Church from 1826-1853 and was, along with Edward T. Taylor, the most famous religious leader in the maritime reform community. See Kverndal, Seamen’s Missions: Their Origin and Early Growth.

152 Leech, A Voice from the Main Deck: Being the Record of the Thirty Years’ Adventures of Samuel Leech, xxv-xxvi.
writes, “We all know Mr. Leech to have been a man of sound religious principle; and, for my part, I do not doubt the exact truth of all he states, as having happened within his own knowledge.” The long-deceased Leech had six men verifying his truthfulness and his Christianity, and both the recommenders and the nature of the recommendations helped establish Leech among the religious middle-class that comprised the bulk of the maritime reform community. Perhaps the only bars to truthfulness for Leech and some of his fellow sailor-authors were the tastes of socially-conscious potential readers who wanted their assumptions reconfirmed and their benevolence applauded.

Though Leech may have well believed everything he wrote (and while I am certainly loath to call Richard Henry Dana and Henry Chase liars), the telos of the book, Leech’s recollection of personal shame, and the various incidents of the plot related render the book a structural twin to its contemporary, *Ned Myers*. For example, when Leech runs from the British ship that had been captured and defected to the United States, he “told several deliberate lies” that he claimed were “inexcusable, and the only palliation that can be offered is my want of religious instruction. I was not then a Christian.” This short passage points the way from Leech’s early errors toward his later redemption, already presumed in his excuse for lying. Narrating another of his youthful lies, Leech castigates himself and other sailors once again, citing “an absence of moral rectitude” that “leaves the offender to meet a fearful weight of responsibility in the day that shall try every man’s work.”

153 ibid., xxii.
154 ibid., 102.
155 ibid., 110.
given that he was escaping from difficult service aboard a military vessel, but this tone of regret and embarrassment continues until the moment of his salvation.

Ultimately, Leech becomes a sailor reformed, describing his conversion as a removal from his former sailor self:

I had stood tearless alike amidst the wailings of the tempest and the roar of the battle, but here, among a few Christians at a camp meeting, my heart was soft as a woman’s and my tears flowed like rain. Does the reader inquire what made the difference? I answer, it was the love of God.156

The hardened seaman is gone, replaced by an emotional, God-loving man suitable for middle-class domestic life. Indeed, the archetypal reformed sailor, Leech married a fellow churchgoer and start a family, remaining temperate, religious, and (significantly) on land until his death. Appropriately for his audience, Leech makes a powerful plea for reform on board ship:

Where is the presence of the meek spirit of Christianity more needed, than on the decks of our merchant and naval vessels?...Vice, irreligion, profanity, and insubordination, would presently flee away before the beautiful purity of religion…Pray, Christian, that this desirable consummation may be speedily attained; and be not satisfied with merely praying; add action to your prayers.157

The explicit request for money to reform shipboard life explains why Leech’s book found ready endorsers in Chase and Dana. Leech even advertises for his own book, demanding that “good and useful literature…should be supplied [to sailors] by the benevolence of the Christian public.”158

Though he advocates reform before the mast, Leech himself (like Dana and Myers) converted to religion on land and never returned to sea again. Leech’s sailing life

156 ibid., 186.
157 ibid., 173.
158 ibid., 175.
and that of his fellow sailor-authors simply preludes a fuller life free from want, sin, and deprivation. The endings of these three books remind readers of their duties vis-à-vis seamen and reinforces middle-class standards of religion and obligation. While middle-class reformers did not harm the sailor, and though religious reform undoubtedly did a great deal to improve materially the lives of seamen, sailor-authors did little to alter public perceptions of sailors or to expose the underlying social and economic forces that caused their continued marginalization. In fact, the literary spell Dana cast would not be broken until another educated New Englander, Herman Melville, went to sea before the mast. Upon his return, he would not narrate his experiences as they occurred, but turned them into fictions that once again changed the American literary seascape.
Chapter Four
Melville’s Forecastle Savages

Long exile from Christendom and civilization inevitably restores a man to that condition in which God placed him, i.e. what is called savagery. Your true whale-hunter is as much a savage as an Iroquois.

— Herman Melville, Moby-Dick

Tattooings, ear-rings, love-locks curled;
Barbarians of man's simpler nature,
Unworldly servers of the world.

—Herman Melville, “John Marr”

I. Melville and the middle class

In the nineteenth century, Maria Susanna Cummins’s The Lamplighter (1854) sold more copies than did all Herman Melville’s novels combined.¹⁵⁹ Her maudlin tale of Gerty Flint’s maturation is representative of the sentimental literature that—depending on your point of view—signals either the “feminization” of American culture or the power of domesticity and emotion to shape behavior. Whatever the cultural impact of a novel like The Lamplighter—likely tied to the fact that Cummins’s novel resonates with the middle class ethos of domesticity central to American market culture—its popularity is beyond

dispute.\(^{160}\) The experience of Willie Sullivan—the young man who travels by ship to the Far East to make his fortune—emphasizes the centrality of this ethos to both literature and the marketplace. When Willie leaves his widowed mother to pursue a job in India, she is wary of the temptations that he will undoubtedly face in that exotic land. Her last words to him before he departs, “Love and fear God, Willie, and do not disappoint your mother,” remind the young man of his heavenly and earthly responsibilities as he leaves the cocoon of the home to travel in the dangerous and debauched maritime world.

With his mind on God and mother, Willie is able to avoid the pitfalls that beset young men away from home, especially those at sea. Cummins makes this idea more explicit in the same chapter:

> At the present moment, when emigration offers rare hopes and inducements, there is scarcely to be found in New England a village so insignificant, or so secluded, that there is not there some mother's heart bleeding at the perhaps life-long separation from a darling son. Among the wanderers, we hope,—ay, we believe that there is many a one who is actuated, not by the love of gold, the love of change, the love of adventure, but by the love he bears his mother,—the earnest longing of his heart to save her from a life of toil and poverty. Blessings and prosperity to him who goes forth with such a motive!\(^{161}\)

Interestingly, Cummins does not accurately characterize the most-common motive for emigration and sea voyaging, which was young men’s economic necessity. As I have documented throughout this study, most men went to sea because they had few other opportunities available to them on land. Instead, by linking travel abroad to fantasies of

\(^{160}\) The contrasting views on sentimentalism that I have gestured to in this paragraph are, respectively, representative of Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture; Jane P. Tompkins, Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860 (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1986). These works, as well as Kasson, Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America; Haltunnen, Confidence Men and Painted Women; Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class reveal the complex interworkings of domesticity, sentimentalism, and market culture.

abundant wealth and excess, Cummins makes clear that the middle-class domestic ethos—in which God and mother are the prime movers—is not dominant in the maritime culture imagined by her readers or in real-world maritime communities themselves. The ocean and lands beyond it were alien realms where savagery and temptation reigned.

The middle-class figuration of foreign territories is revealed to readers in Mrs. Sullivan’s dream of her son’s near fall from grace. In the dream, Mrs. Sullivan describes her imagined journey with Willie into a world familiar to readers of “city mysteries” like *The Quaker City* or *Venus of Boston*:

“There was a group of young men round the table, all well dressed, and some of them fine-looking, so that at first I was quite charmed with their appearance. I seemed, however, to have a strange power of looking into their hearts, and detecting all the evil there was there. One had a very bright, intelligent face, and might have been thought a man of talent.—and so he was; but I could see better than people usually can, and I perceived, by a sort of instinct, that all his mind and genius were converted into a means of duping and deceiving those who were so foolish or so ignorant as to be ensnared; and, in a corner of his pocket, I knew he had a pair of loaded dice...There were many others present, and all, more or less sunk in dissipation, had reached various stages on the road to ruin.”

Here is but one danger of leaving home: sinking into a life among the dandies and fops who call innocent boys away from virtue and toward lives of intrigue, drinking, and gambling. Within *The Lamplighter*, Willie’s memory of his mother leads him away from temptation, but Mrs. Sullivan’s dream—set in the imagined world across the ocean—presents a frightening spectacle of the alternative.

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162 ibid., 170-1.

163 This is a striking parallel to the Melville’s description of Wellingborough Redburn’s evening in a London brothel with Harry Bolton. Redburn rejects the dandified dissipation, though his rejection is not rewarded financially as it is within Cummins’s novel.
Willie returns to New England six years after he leaves and his bearing suggests that his time abroad has seasoned, but not ruined him:

The fresh complexion of the boy had given place to the paler, beard-darkened and somewhat sun-browned tints that mark a ripened manhood; the joyous eye had a deeper cast of thought, the elastic step a more firm and measured tread; while the beaming, sunny expression of countenance had given place to a certain grave and composed look, which marked his features when in repose.

The winning attractiveness of the boy, however, had but given place to equal, if not superior qualities in the man, who was still eminently handsome, and gifted with that inborn and natural grace and ease of deportment which win universal remark and commendation. 164

Willie’s voyage and life abroad has specially suited him for a return to America. His fortune made, his maturity achieved, the young man can now take his place at the head of the household alongside Gerty Flint. Together, they will inculcate a new generation with the lessons of religion and domesticity first gleaned from Mrs. Sullivan. The strength of Mrs. Sullivan’s parenting (described by Richard Brodhead as “disciplinary intimacy”) has trumped temptation and preserved Willie as not only a suitable husband, but also an admirable representative of colonialist capitalism and the accumulative ethic of the American middle-class. 165

Despite his time in India, Willie Sullivan never stopped living according to the middle-class ethos he learned from his mother, thus ensuring his reincorporation into the national body upon his return from overseas. Not all who voyaged across the ocean could hope to meet with success or even acceptance upon their return. Apprehension over his own reacceptance animates Tommo in Herman Melville’s Typee as Karky attempts to

164 ibid., 295.
mark Tommo’s face with native designs. He fears that by allowing the native artist to
tattoo him, he “would be disfigured in such a manner as never more to have the face to
return to my countrymen.” (T, 219) Though willing to have his arms marked, Tommo
believes that the conversion of his white face into a savage visage would render him unfit
for repatriation. In other words, Tommo is unwilling to leave behind prevailing ideas of
civilization and nation, despite his evident discomfort with both those concepts in his
descriptions of the Typee natives.

The narrator’s inability to league himself, decisively, with the American middle-
class or the degraded others whom he encounters is relatively typical of Melville’s sea
fiction prior to Moby-Dick. Indeed, Tommo, Typee, Taji, Redburn, and White Jacket all
separate themselves from the crews of the ships on which they sail. In general, each
narrator does not want readers to associate him with the common sailors who surround
him, and by maintaining his distance, he may freely comment on their behavior and
failings. T. Walter Herbert claims, “The narrative voice that addresses us in Typee is
characterized by [a] kind of subtle ambivalent balancing, and the tensions apparent in that
voice are related to the uncertain identity of its apparent source, the man who is both a
cultured gentleman and a beachcomber.”166 Though Herbert focuses almost exclusively
on Typee, his description of the insider/outsider narrator works for all of Melville’s early
maritime writings, and, given Melville’s consistent narrative positioning, considering

166 T. Walter Herbert, Marquesan Encounters: Melville and the Meaning of Civilization (Cambridge,
Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980), 155. Other critics who have commented on Melville’s “gentleman
narrators” include Egan, Gentlemen-Sailors: The First-Person Narratives of Dana, Cooper, and Melville;
Paul W. Craven, "Charting the Course of Gentlemanliness in the Antebellum U. S.: The Gentleman
Narrator in Poe, Dana and Melville" (PhD, U of Southern Mississippi).
what led him to alter the narrative voice so significantly when he wrote *Moby-Dick* seems wise.

While Herbert notes the narrative tension underlying *Typee* as evidence of Melville’s confused class position in the 1840s, Laura Hapke takes Melville to task for his “complete repudiation of lumpen proletarians” in *Redburn*, arguing that Melville is “really providing a bitter catalog of what indignities a talented, educated, well-born, but poor man—a gent in laboring disguise—must suffer among the poor.”¹⁶⁷ I, like Herbert, am more sympathetic to Melville’s attempts to balance the demands of the marketplace with his obligations to the seamen with whom he served; after all, Melville himself was no rich man when he wrote *Redburn*, and he was likely trying to ingratiate himself with middle-class readers following the economic failure of *Mardi*. Though Hapke correctly notes that Melville’s narrators consistently distance themselves from their fellow sailors in the early maritime novels, I am not interested in criticizing Melville or exploring the psychological motivations for making such an authorial decision beyond noting his own class anxieties as the son of Allan Melvill, whom Hershel Parker has dubbed a “patrician wastrel.”¹⁶⁸ Herman Melville was aware of both his illustrious ancestors and his own dire economic circumstances; this combination of great expectations and diminished hopes must have been psychologically jarring at the least. In this section, however, I want to explore the consequences of his narrative positioning within the novels themselves with the hope that it will shed new light on social class in Melville’s sea fiction.


Melville’s evolving narrative consciousness mimics his own evolving class position and his deepening frustration with a purportedly classless society that was anything but. In his early fiction, as he attempted to create a name for himself as a writer both of and for the polite classes, Melville’s narrators take pains to distance themselves from the sailors with whom they served and savages with whom they lived—the narrators serve as eyes and ears for the curious middle-classes. Though Melville was not always successful in distancing himself from the island savages or the forecastle rowdies, he was successful commercially, and he used his economic freedom to compose *Mardi*. Following this ambitious experiment, Melville completed two “jobs” that paid the bills but did not satisfy his own aesthetic goals. 169 *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*. Wellingborough Redburn announces himself as a “gentleman” in the title of the work, and *White-Jacket*, though more sympathetic toward the sailors in the navy, is very much a reform novel that could capitalize on the powerful and lucrative middle-class reform movements of the late antebellum period. By the time Melville composed *Moby-Dick*, then, he had both experienced success in the market and confronted the limits of his ability to enjoy a remunerative authorial career. The formula for commercial success (and, concomitantly, middle-class acceptance) was relatively clear to Melville, and *Moby-Dick* may well be a rejoinder to both the market and the middling sorts at its epicenter.

169 Melville famously described *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* as jobs in separate (but coeval) letters to Lemuel Shaw and Richard Henry Dana. The full text of the quote, taken from his May 1, 1850 letter to Dana, is, “In fact, My Dear Dana, did I not write these books of mine almost entirely for ‘lucre’—by the job, as a woodsawyer saws wood—I almost think, I should hereafter—in the case of a sea book—get my M.S.S. neatly & legibly copied by a scrivener—send you that one copy—& deem such a procedure the best publication.” Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth, Vol. 14 (Evanston, Ill; Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1993), 160.
Melville’s great book represents a marked departure from his earlier works in that the narrator never returns home. In *Typee, Omoo, Redburn*, and *White-Jacket*, the narrators focus most of their energies on a return to landed society. Though that goal is not realized in the South Sea romances, both Tommo and Typee want to leave their lives among the savages. *Moby-Dick*, however, resolves itself quite differently; specifically, Ishmael never returns home. From the sinking of the *Pequod* to the moment of authorship, no evidence suggests that Ishmael stops moving for long, and the moments when he does stop are contained within the novel: the bower in the Arciades, and at the piazza in Peru. Ishmael has rejected a notion of home (and the domestic space) tied to either America or any specific geographic location. In this sense, he remains very much a savage: He, like many of the whalemens he describes in *Moby-Dick*, is on a “long exile from Christendom and civilization” and he does not care to return.

This distinction, on which I will elaborate significantly in the pages to follow, illuminates the difference between the sailor-author typical of Richard Henry Dana, Ned Myers, and Samuel Leech and the sailor-savage that is Ishmael. The first group of narrators look on a return home as a return to the appropriate, socially acceptable space. When Leech and Myers narrate their own conversion to Christianity, they reincorporate themselves into landed society and the trappings of middle-class life. They were sailors, but now they are authors, and they attempt to capture the economic and social rewards concomitant with their new position. Ishmael, on the other hand, makes no claims to religious or economic affinity with the middle-classes, and his story begins and ends with him well outside the geographic and social boundaries of the United States. Ishmael, the cosmopolitan wanderer, rejects the American gospel of economic ascendancy and
mobility to seek a different sort of mobility, a mobility reminiscent of Marnoo, the taboo native of the Typee valley who moves between white and savage civilizations with ease and safety. The freedom afforded by such a position also entails restriction: namely, the taboo man is also a homeless man. Ishamel’s rejection of middle-class domesticity in favor of cosmopolitan homelessness renders him a permanent exile from his native land.

When Herman Melville enacted a marked shift in narrative perspective when he authored *Moby-Dick*, he also signaled a shift in his own class sensibilities. Having endured declining popularity and remuneration, Melville was especially attuned to his difficult position as he composed the novel. In a June 1851 letter to his new friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville lamented, “What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash and all my books are botches.” This famous letter speaks to Melville’s conflicted position as an author, rehearsing the classic dichotomy between commercial and aesthetic success. But Melville goes on: “but see my hand!—four blisters on this palm, made by hoes and hammers within the last few days…[l]et us swear now that though now we sweat, yet it is because of the dry heat which is indispensable to the nourishment of the vine which is to bear the grapes that are to give us the champagne hereafter.”

In this passage, Melville signals his frustration with labor (both manual and intellectual) and longs for an escape to a world outside money and domestic toils, an escape from the “things manifold which now so distress us.” Hawthorne did not share Melville’s economic challenges, but it is more than poverty torturing Melville, he is also

170 ibid., 191-2.
171 ibid., 191-2.
vexed by the type of labor necessitated by Melville’s marriage to Elizabeth Shaw and his 
attitudes to enter the polite classes.172

Melville was unable to imagine a way out of the system of wages and labor that 
so distressed him, and his major works following Moby-Dick—Pierre, “Bartleby,” Benito 
Cereno, and The Confidence-Man—speak to this sense of entrapment. Pierre 
Glendenning is trapped within middle-class mores and a demanding literary 
establishment; Bartleby is confined by systems of laws and labor; Babo is trapped by 
slavery, and can realize relief only in the limited space of the San Dominick; the 
characters of the Confidence-Man are bound by social customs that privilege display over 
authenticity. Moby-Dick, which represents a clear turning-point in Melville’s authorial 
career, is something different. Written immediately before his “motionless” tales, but still 
resonant with the tales and knowledge born of Melville’s time at sea, Moby-Dick is the 
work of a sailor-savage; the work of a man attempting to exist outside the boundaries of a 
stultifying system of money and labor. Single, impoverished, unencumbered, unmoored, 
and tattooed, Ishmael embodies class alterity and, simultaneously, remains a testament to 
its impossibility given the economic and familial pressures overwhelming Melville 
himself. Thus, Moby-Dick is both a celebration of Ishmaelian savage freedom and a 
requiem for its disappearance from its author’s life.

172 For an examination of the Hawthorne/Melville relationship and the literary career of Nathaniel 
Hawthorne, see Richard H. Brodhead, The School of Hawthorne (Oxford and New York: Oxford 
University Press, 1986). On Melville’s conflicted relationship with the literary marketplace and its effect on 
his writing, see (among others) William Charvat, The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870: The 
Papers of William Charvat (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968), Chapter 12; Michael T. 
Gilmore, American Romanticism and the Marketplace (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 
Chapters 6-7.
II. Herman Melville as Sailor-Author

Long before he wrote *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville went to sea. Like William Leggett (and unlike Richard Henry Dana), Melville went to sea because he had to, despite the fact that he was raised in a decidedly middle-class environment (an upbringing that rarely corresponded to his family’s depressed economic position). After his brief voyage to Liverpool in 1839, Melville was forced to sea once more in 1842, this time on the *Achusnet*, a whaler sailing from Fairhaven (across the river from New Bedford). After jumping ship in the Marquesas, Melville enjoyed a four week residence in the islands, a stay that formed the basis of *Typee*. After leaving the island, Melville joined the crew of the *Lucy Ann* enroute to Tahiti (memorialized in *Omoo*) and eventually joined the *Charles and Henry* which took him to Hawaii, where he worked as a clerk and later shipped aboard the *USS United States* for a cruise to Boston (a story Melville relates in *White-Jacket*). Such a variegated maritime career was not at all uncommon in the nineteenth century, though Melville (like his fictional personas in his early novels) was something of an exception as a highly literate drifter and an acute assessor of the human condition. Melville was at sea until 1845, and though his maritime experiences did not alleviate his precarious financial situation, they proved profitable once he reached land, for it is then that he began his career as a writer.173

The facts of Melville’s maritime career are familiar to many readers, but it is important to note that he began writing almost immediately upon his return. In doing so,

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he entered a profession that signaled his separation from the working-class men with whom he had served. He became, like several other former sailors, a sailor-author. As of 1845, his career path was entirely appropriate for a young man of Herman Melville’s ancestry and experience. As such, Melville positions his narrators outside the working classes from the beginning of Typee and throughout his early maritime works, thereby setting himself apart from the sailors among whom he spent three years of his life.

Writing at a time when facticity was crucial to publication and popularity (as evidenced by Harper’s rejecting Typee due to its implausibility), Melville needed to present himself as an authority. At the same time, in writing for a middle-class audience and seeking economic gain, Melville could not express solidarity with the toughs before the mast who embodied so much of what the middle class abhorred.174 After the British edition of Typee was published in February of 1846, several changes were made for the American edition of the work, which would be published that same March by Wiley and Putnam. The expurgated passages were either sexual in nature or critical of the missionaries working to convert the “savages;” in removing these sections, Melville and his publisher created a sanitized (if still titillating) American version of Typee.175

174 According to Parker, Melville first attempted to place Typee with Harper Brothers, which had published Two Years Before the Mast, see Parker, Herman Melville : A Biography, 376 For information on the authoring and edition of Typee to suit middle-class tastes, see Walter F. Bezanson, "Herman Melville: Uncommon Common Sailor" in Melville's Evermoving Dawn: Centennial Essays, eds. John Bryant and Robert Milder (Kent, OH: Kent State UP, 1997), 31-57. Also see Charvat, The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870: The Papers of William Charvat, 205-211, who suggests that Typee is written from the vantage point of a common sailor, while Omoo is not. As I hope my argument will demonstrate, I do not see such a shift in narrative aspect.

175 The degree to which Melville shaped the expurgated American version is still a matter of debate among Melville scholars. Parker speculates that American publisher John Wiley was probably adamant about making these cuts, and it is quite possible that he made them with the young author’s helpless acquiescence.” Parker, Herman Melville : A Biography, 406. In a July 15, 1846, letter to John Murray, his English publisher, Melville writes, “I have just said that a new edition of the book was forthcoming — This new edition will be a Revised one, and I can not but think that the measure will prove a judicious one... Proceeding on this principle then, I have rejected every thing, in revising the book, which refers to the
Throughout *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville’s twin tales of exploration and ethnography, the narrator takes pains to distance himself from the subjects of his study, be they savages or sailors. When the *Dolly* first enters the bay at Nukuheva, she is greeted by native women whose erotic dancing stirs the narrator and the crew of the ship. Their spirited performance before the sailors leads to “every species of riot and debauchery. Not the feeblest barrier was interposed between the unholy passions of the crew and their unlimited gratification. The grossest licentiousness and the most shameful inebriety prevailed” (*T*, 15). Whatever the narrator’s personal involvement in the spectacle of debauchery he describes, within the pages of the novel, he holds himself aloof from the sensuousness of the native dancing as well as the riotous reactions of the crew. To offer the “Peep at Polynesian Life” promised in the book’s subtitle, the narrator needed to hold back the curtain for readers but keep himself off the stage. Whether Melville’s personal sympathies lay with the toughs in the forecastle or not, his narrators clearly speak from a different perspective from that of the common sailor. As *Typee* suggests in *Omoo*, “A man of any education before the mast is always looked upon with dislike by his captain; and, never mind how peaceable he may be, should any disturbance arise, from his intellectual superiority, he is deemed to exert an underhand influence against the officers.”

missionaries.” In a July 30 letter to Everett Duyckinck he wrote, “The Revised (Expurgated? – Odious word!) Edition of *Typee* ought to be duly announced – & as the matter (in one respect) is a little delicate, I am happy that the literary tact of M’Duyckinck will be exerted on the occasion.” Melville, *Correspondence*, 56, 60-2. Melville’s letters suggest that whatever the initial motivations for the changes to *Typee*, he was likely satisfied with those changes and believed them crucial to the continued marketability of the work. It turns out that Melville was, to some extent, correct, as evidenced by *Typee’s* harsh reception by the domestic and foreign missionary presses (see Daniel Aaron, "Melville and the Missionaries," *NEQ* 8, no. 3 (1935), 404-408).

Like Melville, Typee’s economic position had forced him to sea with the tars whom he disdains, but his education keeps him from communion with those same men.

Though the majority of Typee deals with Tommo’s experience on the island of Nukuheva, he leaves the Dolly not to learn about life with the natives, or even solely to avoid a mean-spirited master (though, like most sailor-authors, he felt the need to gesture toward such a tyranny), but also to escape from the rude and untutored men aboard his ship. Tommo justifies his desertion by writing, “with a very few exceptions, our crew was composed of a parcel of dastardly and mean-spirited wretches, divided among themselves, and only united in enduring without resistance the unmitigated tyranny of the captain.” Like Dana, Melville’s Tommo is a common sailor who is not of the forecastle. His rhetorical posturing, based in large part on stereotypical images of seamen circulating in the popular press and in first-person narratives, obscures the fact that Melville himself was one of the “long-haired, bare-necked youths, who, forced by the united influences of Captain Maryatt and hard times, embark at Nantucket for a pleasure excursion to the Pacific” whom he chides in Typee (T, 21).

After Tommo leaves Nukuheva at the end of Typee, he takes a passage on an Australian whaler, the Julia. Fleeing the natives who would see him tattooed and made a permanent resident of the Typee valley and an outcast from civilization, Tommo finds himself among a group of sailors whom he regards as little more appealing than—or, no different from—the cannibals whom he left behind: “The crews manning vessels like these are for the most part villains of all nations and dyes; picked up in the lawless ports of the Spanish Main, and among the savages of the islands. Like galley-slaves, they are only to be governed by scourges and chains.” (O, 14) A multiracial, multinational
collection of outcasts, the crew of the Julia seems not so different from the “ruthless democracy” of the *Pequod*, but Tommo (who has renamed himself “Typee”) does not seem as accepting as Ishmael. Fortunately for Typee, the *Julia* is also home to a kindred spirit: Doctor Long Ghost. The doctor, who “could refer to an amour he had in Palermo, his lion hunting before breakfast among the Caffres, and the quality of the coffee to be drank in Muscat,” is more gentleman than sailor, and Typee regards him as “an absolute godsend” (*O*, 12).

This divide between the narrator and his fellow crewmen is especially important to Typee as it allows him to maintain an air of objectivity in describing the treatment of the sailors aboard the *Julia*. In describing their complaints, he is careful to note, “so much did I sympathize with the men, at least, as their *real* grievances were concerned,” (emphasis added) suggesting that he can tell the difference between legitimate and illegitimate sailor complaints (*O*, 73). In an effort to assure readers further of his distance from the riotous sailors already described, the level-headed Typee notes that he and his intellectual companion Long Ghost are not “sailors” in the pejorative sense, but gentlemen who “were now bent on making common cause with the sailors” (*O*, 83).

This is the narrator’s—and perhaps Melville’s—delicate balancing act throughout the early novels. He wants his story to be taken as truth, and he wants the readers to sympathize with his plight (and by extension, that of the sailors); at the same time, he wants to retain a sheen of respectability not available to most men before the mast. Typee wants to depart from the ship for personal reasons, but he enlists the collective influence of the entire crew in order to achieve his goal. Typee authors the round robin, but remains silent when the consul comes aboard the ship to question the men. Dispirited when he
cannot leave the *Julia*, he decides that he “must necessarily link [himself], however guardedly, with such a desperate company,” but he complains when he and Long Ghost are “judged by the company we kept” (*O* 84, 103).

Melville may have been reluctant to league his narrators, Tommo and Typee, with the sailors because signaling his sympathy for these renegade narrators could have limited sales of Melville’s books. At the same time, the narrators’ persistent criticisms of the working-class roughs in the forecastle are not simply noteworthy for what they tell us about the narrators and about Melville himself. In mocking the sailors with whom they serve, Tommo and Typee echo their own disparagements of the native populations of Tahiti and Nukuheva and thereby reinforce their respective positions as detached, genteel observers. Interestingly, they also hint at the overlapping rhetorics of race and class during the antebellum period, intimating that, for a genteel writer, the taint of the class other may have been just as threatening as that of the racial other.

In *Typee* and *Omoo*, rhetorics of race and class coalesce around ideas of spontaneity, voluntarism, sensuality, and savagery. Historians David Roediger and Alexander Saxton are attentive to the links between vocabularies of race and class in antebellum America. Roediger indicates that free laborers came to define themselves as white to separate themselves from blacks whose labor was indistinguishable from their own: “the white working class, disciplined and made anxious by fear of dependency, began during its formation to construct an image of the Black population as ‘other’—as embodying the preindustrial, erotic, careless style of the life the white worker hated and

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longed for.”\(^{177}\) White workers hated the ethic of voluntarism because it represented an earlier age in labor history where mobility was not so free as it was in antebellum America. At the same time, the freedom of an earlier work ethic was not compatible with the economic structures that allowed for greater mobility.

Roediger’s adjectives, “preindustrial, careless, erotic” aptly describe many of the sailors whose histories I recounted in Chapters One and Two, suggesting the sailors’ rhetorical commonality with both the working class and antebellum Blacks. The reform movements described in Chapter Two aimed to regularize maritime labor and remove the taint of carelessness and eroticism central to the public imaginary concerning sailors, just as reform movements aimed at free African-Americans sought to lift up “degraded” blacks.\(^{178}\) In positing links between blacks, sailors, and South Sea natives I hope to avoid “equating very different peoples, as well as different historical circumstances,” something John Carlos Rowe cautions against in an allegorical reading of *Typee*. Taking the work of David Roediger as an example, I want to highlight the rhetorical links between savages, Blacks, and sailors in an effort to understand how antebellum perceptions of these groups may have overlapped, and why those overlaps are important to a reading of class in the sea narrative.\(^{179}\)

Roediger describes an example of such rhetorical overlap in noting that slavery (particularly in the phrase “white slavery”) came to mean not only dependency but the

\(\text{\textsuperscript{177}}\) ibid., 14

\(\text{\textsuperscript{178}}\) George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 5. For another example of the imagined links between sailors and the working classes, see the Polynesian review on page 2.

deprivation of certain rights as well.\footnote{Roediger, \textit{The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class}, 65.} For this very reason, early labor organizations did not make common cause with abolition groups; workers wanted to characterize themselves as free laborers with basic rights.\footnote{See Burke, \textit{The Conundrum of Class: Public Discourse on the Social Order in America}; Wilentz, \textit{Chants Democratic} among others.} Appeals to fundamental American rights were more politically salable than appeals to natural law or human equality. A case in point is the rhetoric surrounding the War of 1812, which was ostensibly fought for “free trade and sailors’ rights.” By the middle of the century, however, sailors had a precarious hold on personal liberty, as evidenced by the prevalence of flogging along with draconian work and recruitment practices. Captain Thompson’s enraged cry, “I’m a negro driver,” while beating a white sailor in \textit{Two Years Before the Mast} links slave labor and sea labor.

In the nineteenth century, being classed as a slave did not necessarily mean that one was black; it meant that one did not enjoy unassailable rights to his body and labor. Sailors were not simply working-class representatives, then, but examples of the blurry distinction between freedom and slavery in the rhetorical practice of the day. Though Melville separates his narrators from savages, slaves, and sailors by writing in a mannered style, he (intentionally) does little to dissolve the rhetorical links between the class “other” of the forecastle and the racial “other” that stirred the antebellum imagination.\footnote{Numerous antebellum authors were fond of drawing a comparison between sailors and slaves. Samuel Otter catalogues such responses, and I address the problematic relationship between sailor and slave in the following chapter. Samuel Otter, \textit{Melville's Anatomies} (Berkeley: U California P, 1999), 67-77.} The savages of Nukuheva are, like the black and white workers in the antebellum imagination, spontaneous and carefree, living not to advance, but to enjoy. The first
instances of the savage temperament in the novel include the seductive females swimming out to meet the sailors in the bay off of Nukuheva and the island queen’s exposing herself before the crew of an American vessel. Melville insists not only on the erotic tendencies of the natives, but also on the sailors’ willingness to indulge those tendencies. Upon shore, Tommo wonders “what dependence could be placed upon the fickle passions which sway the bosom of a savage,” reminding readers of the “inconstancy” that defines savagery ($T$, 76). Tommo even notes the spontaneity of the “fruits of the earth” on Nukuheva in considering the consequences of civilizing (and normalizing) the island and its agriculture ($T$, 196). Just as Samuel Leech’s sailor on leave “is like an uncaged bird, and gay and quite as thoughtless,” the savage is neither reliable nor industrious, and his whims may change from moment to moment.\textsuperscript{183} This behavior excites Tommo, though he ultimately rejects it and its attendants: cannibalism and tattooing. Mitchell Breitwieser suggests that, if Tommo were “[t]attooed, his face would always say ‘Typee,’ the boundlessness of personal identity would be permanently sacrificed to one mode of identity.”\textsuperscript{184} In other words, though he would not necessarily be worse off as a tattooed man than as a poor lad forced to sea, Tommo’s loss of mobility would be too much to bear. Tommo likes to play at being a careless sailor and a thoughtless savage, but he stops well short of embracing either identity permanently.

Beyond using rhetorics of race and class to link the island savages to the sailors and the preindustrial working class, Tommo and Typee reflect on the currents of reform that surrounded (and indeed defined) both the racial and the class other in antebellum

\textsuperscript{183} Leech, \textit{A Voice from the Main Deck: Being the Record of the Thirty Years' Adventures of Samuel Leech}, 68.

\textsuperscript{184} Mitchell Breitwieser, “False Sympathy in Melville's \textit{Typee},” \textit{American Quarterly} 34, no. 4 (1982), 412.
culture. Scores of Western missionaries come to Tahiti to instruct the natives in the Christian faith and the tenets of civilization. Like the missionaries who pursue American sailors in New York and Boston, however, the missionaries in Tahiti seem more anxious to highlight the differences between themselves and the savages than to embrace the objects of their compassion. When Typee is confined to the island prison with his motley band of friends, he notes with keen displeasure that the “respectably dressed European” families usually “shunned” the prisoners. Though he avers that such treatment “did not prey on the minds of the others,” Typee himself is so upset that he attempts to signal his class equality with an English family:

"Good evening, ladies," exclaimed I, at last, advancing winningly; "a delightful air from the sea, ladies."

Hysterics and hartshorn! who would have thought it? The young lady screamed, and the old one came near fainting. As for myself, I retreated in double-quick time; and scarcely drew breath until safely housed in the Calabooza. (O, 166-167)

The missionaries are repulsed by Typee’s presumption of equality, suggesting the reformers who seek to uplift the natives also seem to be most invested in demarcating class divisions on the island. No matter what Typee believes himself to be, civilized Europeans clearly regard him as a marine savage just as fearsome as the native islanders, a fact made clear in the sermon Typee hears at the native church.

Typee, like the natives, attends the missionary church services each Sunday, where the congregation enjoys the singing but endures the remainder of the service with benign apathy. The sermon Typee hears is translated for him by an Hawaiian sailor, and the text is purely didactic, criticizing French rule, decrying the influence of sailors on the islanders, and celebrating British benevolence:
"Good friends, this very small island, but very wicked, and very poor; these two go together. Why Beretane so great? Because that island good island, and send mickonaree to poor kannaka. In Beretane, every man rich: plenty things to buy; and plenty things to sell. Houses bigger than Pomaree's, and more grand." (O, 174)

The obvious exaggeration of the economic situation in England seems a direct echo of the class rhetoric that dominated American thought in the antebellum period. The preacher takes care to celebrate the universal wealth of the English and to note the connection between a “good” lifestyle and monetary gain. Beyond simply extolling the material benefits of capitalism, the preacher discusses the processes at the very heart of the economy, the buying and selling of “things.” The possession and sale of objects are a pleasurable part of life in the capitalist system, and the missionary entices the natives by suggesting that they can be a part of that system without noting that the very fact of buying and selling suggests scarcity, a phenomenon previously unknown on Tahiti.

The sermon, made up of what Typee calls the “short, easy cuts of the primer” is intended as behavioral, as opposed to theological, instruction. The missionary preacher uses broad strokes to render obvious the “friends and enemies” of Tahitians. Sailors, because they are debauched and “so bad they no keep 'em home,” are to be feared; missionaries, who come to preach the gospel not as saving grace but as a route to economic glory, are to be embraced. Therefore, to see the missionaries and reformers can reasonably be seen as ambassadors of capitalism while the sailors and natives remain the unconverted. Sailors may have been agents of debauchery when they arrived in Tahiti, but they were likely offensive to the missionaries for a variety of reasons not least of which may have been their rejection of capitalist norms and an aversion to the culture of buying and selling things—sailor’s pleasures were often temporal and ephemeral. In
trying to convert islanders to a new religion and a new mode of economic thinking, missionaries were thwarted by sailors bent on physical and moral freedom out of step with Christian and capitalist morality.

Just as they were frightened by the sailors in Tahiti, the missionaries signal their discomfort with the subjects of their mission by distancing themselves from the natives whom they serve as well as the sailors on the island. For example, in schooling, “the two races are kept as far as possible from associating; the avowed reason being, to preserve the young whites from moral contamination;” the missionaries’ failure is announced in their own practice of segregation (*O*, 188). The moral degradation imputed to the natives goes hand in hand with their lack of industry, which the narrator describes: “The fact is, that the mechanical and agricultural employments of civilized life require a kind of exertion altogether too steady and sustained, to agree with an indolent people like the Polynesians. Calculated for a state of nature, in a climate providentially adapted to it, they are unfit for any other” (*O*, 190). Confronted by a shift to industrial capitalism and regimented work habits, the natives demur; the irregularity and variety of their pre-capitalist society cannot mesh with the schedules and quotas of the Western world. The desire for surplus that drives the businessmen (and their allied reformers) is meaningless to the natives of Tahiti—it offers no benefit. Melville’s narrator senses the hypocrisy of the civilizers and—far more stridently than he does in even the British version of *Typee*—denounces it.

That Melville highlights the frauds of reformers and missionaries is certainly not news, but the reform culture central to the Western maritime world helps us comprehend the union between the savages of South Seas and the savages of the forecastle. Rejects
from the emergent industrial state, both savages and sailors were unable to accustom
themselves to a foreign set of work rhythms and labor standards. The men of the
maritime world lived in a liminal space that allowed them to behave in ways
unacceptable within regimented, landed society. The bodily discipline required by the
six-day work week and the ten-hour workday did not extend to the forecastle because
long periods of shipboard labor were followed by extended shore or port leave during
which sailors could binge on alcohol or women. As I have pointed out at some length in
Chapter One, the decision to go to sea was rarely born of a simple desire to escape the
rapidly changing society on land; rather it was often rendered necessary by
unemployment and economic scarcity. Their (generally deserved) reputation for
debauchery along with their acceptance of a profession of last resort rendered laborers of
the maritime world renegades from a society bent on economic ascension, and few of
them re-entered that society with any success. This lack of success may have been born
of systematic oppression, disinterest, limited ability, alienation from industrial structures
of labor and repose, awareness of the limited opportunities for those at the bottom of the
economic ladder, or (most likely) some combination of all these factors. Whatever the
cause, Melville’s sailors have far more in common with the natives of Typee, Tahiti, and
Imeeo than with the missionaries, merchants, and masters who represent Western
civilization.

Typee understands the appeal of life on the island of Imeeo, especially for that
class of “rovers” and other “penniless people:”

… I cannot refrain from lauding the very superior inducements which
most intertropical countries afford, not only to mere rovers like ourselves,
but to penniless people generally. In these genial regions one's wants are
naturally diminished; and those which remain are easily gratified; fuel,
house-shelter, and, if you please, clothing, may be entirely dispensed with. 

(\textit{O}, 253)

Interestingly, Typee refers to the diminution of the rover’s \textit{wants} as opposed to the plenty of the islands. Dispensing with clothing and shelter, the rover/sailor becomes more like the island savages rather than another exploiter of the island or its residents for monetary gain. When Typee suggests that the island is an excellent place for “penniless people generally” he once more links the conditions of the sailors and the savages, but not without a bit of humor. The island residents are penniless because they live within a preindustrial culture that does not function according the tenets of an accumulative culture such as America. The natives are penniless because there are no pennies in Tahiti; Western currency has no value in the savage realm.\textsuperscript{185}

Of course, as the experiences of Willie Sullivan and the island planters Zeke and Shorty demonstrate, there are pennies to be had in Tahiti, Imeeo, and all the lands within and beyond the Pacific Ocean. The American abroad could, like young Willie, use his acumen and intelligence to mine those lands for economic opportunity and ensure himself a comfortable existence upon his return. At the same time, suggesting that the difference between the sailor/native element and the missionary/merchant element is purely economic is inaccurate. In fact, the very depth of the difference makes the sailor/savage link so compelling. While merchants and missionaries see their lives (and the world) in progressive terms, the sailors and savages seem to regard the experiential mode, as

\textsuperscript{185} Melville echoes many of these ideas in his lecture, “The South Seas,” which he delivered in the winter of 1858-59. Herman Melville, \textit{The Piazza Tales, and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860}, eds. Harrison Hayford and others (Evanston, Ill; Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1987).
opposed to the progressive, as the most fulfilling way of approaching life. In his 1858 lecture on “The South Seas,” Melville describes his meeting an American professor who had become “fully naturalized” on a Pacific island and who was “contented to lead a quiet and lazy life, apart from the walks of restless ambition.” The life of the professor/beachcomber is described in direct contrast to the life of “restless ambition” which can be easily related to both acquisitiveness and social status. Seeking enjoyment in whatever form and divorced from absolute notions of civilization or salvation, Melville’s sailors and savages embody an oppositional ethic that rejects both the profit-seeking merchant or the soul-seeking missionary.

This ethic moves Dr. Long Ghost to leave the pursuit of pennies to someone else by choosing the path of the naturalized professor who adopts the native lifestyle. Typee, however, is unwilling (or constitutionally unable) to embrace that same lifestyle. He leaves the Doctor behind and returns to sea, preferring the possibility of return to his native land to a permanent escape from civilization. These competing desires lie at the heart of both *Typee* and *Omoo*, and though Tommo’s decision to leave the Typee valley is linked to his revulsion at the act of cannibalism and the process of tattooing, Typee’s decision to leave Imeeo is not motivated by similar crises. “The impulse urging me to sea

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186 John Samson writes that the “history of the Typees is open-ended and nonprogressive” which nicely encapsulates that ideas that I am working with in this paragraph. However, Samson argues that “the idea of progress…encompasses the attitudes of Tommo and the missionaries and the sailors.” Clearly, I disagree with this contention as it regards sailors; in fact, I believe that Tommo’s discomfort with the sailor may be due to the fact that their outlook is as nonprogressive as that of the Typees. John Samson, *White Lies: Melville’s Narratives of Facts* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989), 43, 35. C.L.R. James links the “ignorant and superstitious crew” of the *Pequod* with “primitive savages,” suggesting that because they are savage, they are outside of Ahab’s “intellectual and emotional self-torture which [Melville] felt was the primary condition for the survival of modern society” C. L. R. James, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World we Live in* (Detroit: Bewick/ED, 1978), 31-2.

once more, and the prospect of eventually reaching home, were too much to be resisted,” he explains, and so he leaves the Doctor on the island and sets out for the Pacific. Though he calls himself a sailor, Typee links the sea to a return home and “normalcy,” not to the wandering ethos evidenced by Lem Hardy, Dr. Long Ghost, and later, Ishmael.188

That Typee attempts to return to his home and, perhaps, a normal life on land, is ironic given the fact that Melville’s descriptions of missionaries resulted in severe denunciations in contemporaneous religious journals.189 The wholesale rejection of the South Sea novels by the missionary press is not surprising, but the tenor of these rejections suggest that any hope for a return to normalcy à la Willie Sullivan was badly misplaced. For example, in the March 18, 1848, Polynesian, one reviewer opines:

[Melville’s] caricatures of the missionaries, whether in the pulpit or surrounded by a gaping crown of natives—his contempt for the constituted authorities and the consuls and officers—his insubordination—his skulking in the dark where he could not be seen by decent men—his choice of low society—his frequent draughts of “Pisco” or other liquors—his gentle associations with Tahitian damsels—his habits and associations—all prove that he was utterly unqualified to act as an intelligent observer. 190

The entire polemic is not directed at the veracity of Melville’s writing, but at the author’s character. The Polynesian review demonstrates the extent and importance of the

188 Michael Berthold notes the telos of the travel narrative is a return home, but, for Tommo (and, I would argue, Typee as well) what “home” is remains quite ambiguous. My reading does not argue for a particular conception of home beyond the static, as opposed to the nomadic. Michael C. Berthold, "Portentous Somethings': Melville's Typee and the Language of Captivity," NEQ 60, no. 4 (1987), 552-3.

189 For summaries and analyses of these responses, see Aaron, Melville and the Missionaries, 404-408; James L. Machor, "Reading the 'Rinsings of the Cup': Antebellum Reception of Melville's Omoo," Nineteenth-Century Literature 59, no. 1 (2004).

balancing act that Melville was forced to undertake in authoring his South Sea romances. To the missionaries who read his novel, both Tommo and Typee seemed far more sailor than gentleman, and their critics were able to spot the signs of their dissolution quite easily. Unfortunately for Herman Melville, these critics made no attempt to differentiate the author from his erstwhile narrative personas.

Melville was clearly trouble, and just as significant as his drinking and womanizing, according to the review, are his “contempt for constituted authorities” and his “insubordination.” In other words, the sailor narrators of Melville’s works were unwilling to accord authority its proper place. Preferring “skulking in the dark” with “low society” to dutiful worship and polite deference to his betters, Typee cannot hide his sailor affiliations from his readers. The reviewer makes the link between the debauched sailor and working-class rabble quite plain, linking the “constituted authorities” and “officers” against whom those groups would rebel. The Polynesian review shows the impossibility of Melville’s situation (one he would echo a few years later in the letter to Hawthorne quoted above): if he were to write as the missionaries wanted him to, he would betray his own feelings, but, by writing as he chose to, he revealed his own affinities with the working-class toughs of the forecastle and alienated the readers who could make his fortune. It was as if he himself needed to be both economically and socially middle class in order to make a living writing for such an audience.

In one sense, then, Melville’s expurgations and his narrative balancing act proved useless, for the middle-class readers he courted had found him out. On the other hand, Melville’s first books were quite successful commercially, which suggests that his readers were not universally horrified. More likely, the books represented a titillating,
though reasonably safe, mode of transgression for polite readers. If so, then we can read his balancing act as more successful, for he revealed delicate and stimulating scenes for his readers without sinking into the crass sensationalism that could have waylaid his career. But it was not to be enough for Herman Melville, for, once he had mastered one balancing act, he was determined to begin another more challenging than the first.

As his letter to Hawthorne indicates, by the time he was composing *Moby-Dick*, Melville was wrestling with authorial choices that would determine commercial or aesthetic success, but what Melville really wanted was to escape the binary that pitted the two against one another. Perhaps it was this desire to escape that led Melville to create a far different sailor-narrator for his masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael, an outcast and a wanderer, embraces an ethic of savagery that the mannered and well-born narrators of the early novels so assiduously rejected. Geoffrey Sanborn argues that “the Queequegian virtues of inconsistency, irreverence, and gameness” are fundamental to “Melville’s ideal of savagery.” 191 Sanborn complicates the relatively simple Rousseauian characterization of the savage as a noble and spontaneous being and, in doing so, intimates an even closer link between savagery and the racial/class other. The working classes were defined as inconsistent and irreverent by friends and foes alike, and Queequeg’s very consistent gameness is central to the culture of voluntarism that defined antebellum laborers. This is not to posit a transitive equation (*i.e.*, Queequeg=savage=laborer) but to demonstrate the significant rhetorical links between Melvilean savagery, working class voluntarism, and sailors.

Timothy Marr attends to these links in his examination of ethnicity in Melville’s novels:

Melville successfully celebrated sailor ethnicity as a hybridization of class and “race.” A sailor achieved status in such a society by expressing insubordination to exclusive traditions shaped merely by class precedent and racial pedigree and by affirming instead an inclusive aristocracy based on worldly experience.\(^{192}\)

Melville understood the antebellum maritime world as a land apart, and he uses the language of the racial other to mark the extent of the class difference between sailors and their landed peers. The “inclusive aristocracy” that Marr posits is inclusive only to a point, whether that be on the decks separating forecastle from quarterdeck or at the limit of readers’ racial imaginations. At the same time, the aristocracy that Marr describes allows the ethnic other whom Ishmael comes to embody to be not only an outcast but also a member of a distinct group with its own appeals and affiliations.

Such a distinct and foreign group, forever separate from the American mainstream from which Herman Melville and his narrator Tommo emerged, is a powerful presence in the maritime works. Whether the natives of Typee, the roving Dr. Long Ghost, the cannibal Queequeg, or the naturalized professor, Melville’s rovers continually confront the possibility of a radically different lifestyle divorced from “the restless ambition” necessitated by American economic and social structures. This allows us to return to Tommo’s profound fear when contemplating the consequences of his tattooed visage. Imagining the marks of the natives on his own face, he imagines that he “would be disfigured in such a manner as never more to have the face to return to my

countrymen” (T, 219). I return to this passage for two reasons. First, I want to emphasize the centrality of this early narrator’s fear over becoming an outcast from his native society, here realized as he confronts the possibility of a permanent tattoo, and to contrast that fear to Ishmael’s willingness to become an outcast himself. Second, I want to focus on the nature of tattooing itself and to consider the social messages inherent in the act of obtaining and wearing tattoos in the nineteenth century.

III. Marked Men Before the Mast

In Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia, sociologist Alfred Gell suggests that “It is... impossible to make any clear distinctions between western ideas about tattooing which derive from educated perceptions of the practice as characteristic of the ‘ethnic other’—that tattooed native—versus the perceptions of tattooing as a stigma of the ‘class other’—the tattooed sailor or the tattooed criminal.”193 For Western observers, especially in the nineteenth century, tattooing was most definitely stigmatized, but the precise nature of that stigma is uncertain. Gell indicates that trying to confine the tattoo’s meaning to a particular province is problematic, and given the fact that tattooing was, as it is now, important to the maritime world, Tommo’s fears of being tattooed are likely related to his fear of being linked not only to the natives on Nukuheva but also to the forecastle toughs from whom he takes pains to distance himself from during his South Sea adventures. Furthermore, the tattoo remains a potent symbol throughout Melville’s maritime fiction, even when the narrator is removed from the racial fears that animate Tommo’s escape from the Typee valley. Perhaps it is the class other—the tattooed

sailor—that continues to occupy Melville’s imagination long after the racial other has been left behind in the Marquesas.

In 1769, Lieutenant James Cook’s Endeavour landed in Tahiti and his naturalist, Joseph Banks, observed and recorded the process of “tattow” among the South Sea islanders. The word he used replicated the Tahitian term for bodily marking, and it quickly gained currency as a term to describe the myriad marks that the sailors themselves carried on their own bodies. Through Cook’s voyages and his capture and display of a Tahitian man named Omai, these tattoos found an audience in England; in fact, Joshua Reynolds painted a portrait of Omai that illustrated his tattooed arms and hands. Tattooing had existed in the West for centuries, dating to ancient Greece and Rome, where it was primarily used for punitive purposes, and Cook’s voyages focused attention on the exoticism of the custom.194 For the sailing men who had first encountered the Tahitian natives, however, tattooing was nothing new.195 Sailors from different nations had long been marking their bodies with ink, often in an effort to express camaraderie and fellowship with their fellow seamen.196


Simon Newman’s analysis of the bodies of early American seafarers leads him to conclude that “[t]attoos were among the visible indicators of long service at sea; they marked a man as a professional seafarer. Tattooing took place not on land but during extended ocean voyages.”197 By the 1840s, tattooing may have moved to the shore, since Martin Hildebrandt opened a tattoo shop in New York City where he “marked thousands of sailors,” and, in *Two Years Before the Mast* (which concerns a journey taken in 1834) Richard Henry Dana writes of a professional tattooist in Harve for whom the sailors of the world were his clientele.198 By the turn of the century, professional tattooists plied their trade in cities on both coasts, a fact that speaks to the enduring (or even increasing) popularity of tattooing in the maritime world. Most likely, the location of tattooing moved from the ship, where the process was performed with rudimentary instruments in a decidedly unsanitary environment, to the shore, where professionals used the new electric tattoo machine to make tattooing less painful and more artistic. What remained consistent from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century was the custom of tattooing among seamen. According to data compiled from 1796-1818, around 20 percent

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198 Quoted in Albert Parry, *Tattoo; Secrets of a Strange Art as Practised among the Natives of the United States* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1933), 44. See also Dana, Richard Henry, Jr., *Two Years before the Mast: A Personal Narrative of Life at Sea*, 75.
of seamen were tattooed; data collected between 1901-1913 suggest that as many as 60 percent of navy sailors bore “sailors’ marks” on their bodies.\textsuperscript{199}

Though the reasons sailors obtained tattoos are likely as myriad as the men themselves, it is important to consider the most common motivation for men to submit to the painful and permanent process was, as Simon Newman argues, that “[t]attoos functioned a little like artisans’ leather aprons, as distinctive albeit more permanent emblems of trade, experience, and proficiency…men who worked long years before the mast in one of the lowliest and poorest paid professions…displayed their pride in their craft and their country.”\textsuperscript{200} Though Newman’s assessment is accurate in some ways, I take issue with the notion that sailors were tattooed to demonstrate their pride in country. Newman suggests that tattooed symbols such as “1776” and a spread eagle were unambiguously patriotic, but I believe that such markings may reflect sailors’ abiding belief in America’s revolutionary moment and the Declaration of Independence. In memorializing the date of national liberty, seamen could celebrate the escape from domination and their own revolutionary presence in the early republic.\textsuperscript{201} Sociologist

\textsuperscript{199} See Burg, \textit{Tattoo Designs and Locations in the Old U.S. Navy}, 69-75; Dye, \textit{The Tattoos of Early American Seafarers, 1796-1818}, 520-554; Ammen Farenholt, “Some Statistical Observations Concerning Tattooing as seen by a Recruiting Surgeon,” \textit{U.S. Naval Medical Bulletin} 7 (1913), 100-101. Dye and Burg, using older and incomplete data, suggest that 20 percent of sailors were tattooed. Farenholt’s more recent data indicates that that number may be higher. A.T. Sinclair suggests (without documentation, I might add), that 90 percent sailors from almost every nation were tattooed. Though this disparate data renders absolute conclusions problematic, it is clear that 1) tattooing was common among seamen, and 2) tattooing was less common among non-seamen.

\textsuperscript{200} Newman, \textit{Reading the Bodies of Early American Seafarers}, 63.

\textsuperscript{201} See Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," \textit{William and Mary Quarterly} 25, no. 3 (1968), 371-407. for more on the role of the sailor in the American Revolution. In Lemisch’s formulation, the revolutionary sailor was a voluntaristic worker expressing his preference for liberty more than a highly conscious political actor or a patriot.
Alfred Gell indicates that “patriotic” tattoos can have a variety of uses and meanings beyond the political:

Tattooing is…a bodily code for registering social forces as part of the person on whom…social forces impinge, thereby creating a conceptual closure, a unity, out of what is, in fact, a relation of marginality and exclusion. Thus soldiers and sailors…tended to cover themselves with national flags, regimental badges…so as to create an enveloping social matrix as a symbolic surrogate for the domestic envelope which their circumstances in life made it impossible for them to develop satisfactorily.  

Whatever the meaning of the eagles and dates on sailors’ arms, central to the arguments advanced by Newman and Gell is that, for more than two centuries, sailors have used tattooing to express kinship with their fellow seamen. Samuel Seward, a former English professor who became a professional tattooist in the 1950s, writes, “for...the young ‘boots’ who came into my shop from the Great Lakes Naval Training Station...a tattoo officially changed the ‘boot’ from a civilian to an old salt. It allied him with all the old sea-dogs he had ever heard of.” For Seward, the navy tattoo was entirely conformist; it marked the new recruit as a sailor and linked him with his fellow servicemen. At the same time, the tattoo almost certainly marked the sailor’s difference from landed society, just as it would have in the early 1800s.

While sociologist Clinton R. Sanders is attentive to the conformist appeal of tattooing, he notes that the act also has anti-establishment connotations: “the male tattoo is an identity symbol—a more public display of interests, associations, separations from

202 Gell, Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia, 27.
the normative constraints of conventional society, and most generally, masculinity."²⁰⁴

Though tattooed sailors might well demonstrate fellow-feeling by sporting tattoos, they are (and were) signaling a lack of fellow-feeling with “conventional society.” In the crucible of the antebellum world with its emphasis on middle-class conformity, the tattoo was a powerful sign of sailors’ rejection of the middle-class ethic of domesticity. Though their profession may have made the middle class regard sailors with suspicion or sympathy, the tattoo symbolized sailors’ skepticism concerning the merits of the dominant social group in antebellum America. The insider/outsider relationships created by tattooing are especially important to Melville’s maritime work, and a return to the Marquesas will illustrate the power of the tattoo to construct both communities and boundaries.

As many critics have observed, the tattoo is a symbol of difference in Typee. Richard Ruland suggests that if Tommo were to submit to tattooing, his “intellect would be shuttered” in the permanently prelapsarian state that prevails in the Typee valley. Ruland suggests that tattooing is one of the three primary reasons Tommo decides to leave Typee. Both John Evelev and Daneen Wardrop link tattooing to authorship and consider the impact of tattooing on the conception and writing of Typee itself. Evelev notes, “Tommo’s rejection [of tattooing] seems a rejection of writing as a recuperation or re-assertion of identity” in a publishing world that demanded a link between author and narrator. Writing ten years later, Wardrop links the problem of writing to colonialism and asks, “Who are the real aggressors, those who inscribe the flesh or those who write the

²⁰⁴ Sanders, Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing, 50.
Samuel Otter, writing in *Melville’s Anatomies*, links Melville’s depiction of tattooing to antebellum ethnography and the numerous travel narratives Melville himself used to craft his first novel. Otter is deeply concerned with the racial implications of tattooing, and notes the significance of the act in light of American debates over race and identity.

Leonard Cassuto understands Tommo’s fear of tattooing as a response to the “racial freak” on display in antebellum museums and sideshows. Like the islander Omai, American men who had been forcibly tattooed displayed themselves for profit, playing on the simultaneous fascination and repulsion central to the freakshow. Cassuto writes:

> ...tattoos mark their bearer as someone without social mobility. Tattooed people are freaks, and because the tattoos are permanent, so is the class status of the person marked with them. Thus, if an unmarked man can normally live anywhere he likes, facial tattoos would turn him into a tattooed freak with a single vocation and a single location, with the freak show merging the two. Tattooing thereby knocks the rungs out of the American ladder to success...  

As I have been arguing, both the act of tattooing and the fact of being tattooed had class implications in antebellum America, just as they do today. Those implications are not simply tied to notions of freakery or racial othering that causes class-based ostracization. The class immobility that Cassuto describes was a fact of life for most sailors, and

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antebellum writers were already utilizing the overlapping rhetorics of race and class to describe their lifestyle and their prospects. Tommo indeed fears tattooing, but not simply because he is frightened by the prospect of display in a freakshow; more than this, he is frightened that he may be consigned to the life of a sailor and the permanent freakshow of the forecastle.

When the *Dolly* arrives in the Marquesas at the beginning of *Typee*, Tommo describes the visit of the Island Queen to an American warship in the early 1840s:

> The ship's company, crowding into the gangway to view the sight, soon arrested her majesty's attention. She singled out from their number an old salt, whose bare arms and feet, and exposed breast, were covered with as many inscriptions in India ink as the lid of an Egyptian sarcophagus. Notwithstanding all the sly hints and remonstrances of the French officers, she immediately approached the man, and pulling further open the bosom of his duck frock, and rolling up the leg of his wide trousers, she gazed with admiration at the bright blue and vermilion pricking thus disclosed to view. She hung over the fellow, caressing him, and expressing her delight in a variety of wild exclamations and gestures. The embarrassment of the polite Gauls at such an unlooked-for occurrence may be easily imagined, but picture their consternation, when all at once the royal lady, eager to display the hieroglyphics on her own sweet form, bent forward for a moment, and turning sharply round, threw up the skirt of her mantle and revealed a sight from which the aghast Frenchmen retreated precipitately, and tumbling into their boats, fled the scene of so shocking a catastrophe. *(T, 8)*

This anecdote is particularly important to my understanding of Melville’s goals in the South Sea romances, as it highlights the important relationships between common sailors and the “savages” who inhabit the Polynesian isles.

The common sailor in this passage is linked with island royalty by his markings, “India ink” markings that Melville compares to those on an “Egyptian sarcophagus.” The sailor’s appearance is just as exotic as that of the Island Queen, and in a display of fellow-feeling, she exposes herself and her tattoos to the crew and to her French
companions. This action, so shocking to the civilized French who control the Marquesas, suggests the queen’s acknowledgement of her commonality with the sailor as opposed to the political and military leaders on her island. Just as important, the sailor’s tattoos mark him as well; the references to India and Egypt in the description of those tattoos reinforces the exoticism of the sailor’s appearance and suggests his openness to different traditions and customs.\textsuperscript{207} This openness is especially noteworthy when we return to Tommo’s reluctance to be tattooed. The common sailor—not the young dilettante—is open to the experience of tattooing, and it is the common sailor who has the greatest affinity with the island natives in Melville’s south sea romances. The men who mark their bodies or travel upon the sea are, as Tommo’s fears intimate, permanently opting out of American society and choosing to live outside its social constraints. The common sailor, in Melville’s early novels, is not an American abroad (as he is in Cooper’s novels and many of the first person narratives of the 1840s), nor is he an ambitious fortune-seeker (like Cummins’s Willy Sullivan), but a traveler committed to a culture of voluntarism typical of the antebellum working-classes.\textsuperscript{208}

Thus, when Tommo attempts to avoid being tattooed himself, he is literally trying to save his face, so that he can “save face” when he returns to America. Though a wanderer, Tommo does not want to end up a permanent outcast, just as Herman Melville wanted to transgress social and racial boundaries without being permanently marked (as a lower-class author or social radical) by those same forays. Tommo desires the experience

\textsuperscript{207} Among recent critics, only John Carlos Rowe has been attentive to the links between sailors and savages connoted by this passage, noting that Melville “dramatizes a serious recognition between these two actors [sailor and savage] in the drama of colonization.” Rowe, \textit{Melville's Typee: U. S. Imperialism at Home and Abroad}, 274-6.

\textsuperscript{208} See Marr, \textit{Melville's Ethnic Conscriptions}, 5-29.
of life among the Typees, but once tattooed, he knows that he will be a “convert,” forever ostracized from his own society, even if he returned to it. Like Omai, the South Sea islander exhibited by Captain Cook, or like the countless tattooed men who exhibited themselves for profit in antebellum America, Tommo would himself be on display, not as an authority, but as a curiosity. Jennifer Putzi writes that the loss of status concomitant with the being tattooed is Tommo’s chief motivation for leaving the island: “It is this disruption that Tommo ultimately fears—the loss of distanced, objective authority guaranteed him by Western culture on the basis of his racial and gendered (but supposedly unmarked) body.”

After escaping from the Typee valley at the end of *Typee*, the narrator boards the *Julia* and leads readers to Lem Hardy, a tattooed man who was:

> Thrown upon the world a foundling, his paternal origin was as much a mystery to him as the genealogy of Odin, and, scorned by every body, he fled the parish workhouse when a boy and lanched upon the sea. He had followed it for several years, a dog before the mast, and now he had thrown it up forever. And for the most part, it is just this sort of men—so many of whom are found among sailors—uncares for by a single soul, without ties, reckless, and impatient of the restraints of civilization, who are occasionally found quite at home upon the savage islands of the Pacific. And, glancing at their hard lot in their own country, why marvel at their choice? (O, 28)

*Typee* compares Hardy’s broad blue tattoo to Cain’s mark, an instructive comparison, because Hardy voluntarily submitted to the act that rendered him a permanent outcast. By becoming marked as Tommo would not, Hardy reveals the life that Tommo/Typee may have lived had he become an outcast himself. At the same time, Tommo and Hardy have almost nothing in common, because Hardy was an outcast long before he marked himself.

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as such. Hardy is an orphan without connection or prospects, so when he jumps ship in Tahiti and takes up residence on the island, he leaves nothing behind. Hardy does not indulge the fantasy of status in his homeland, and, acknowledging his impossible position within the class hierarchies of European society, Hardy escapes from the structured Western world and becomes a “war-god” on the island of Hannamanoo. Thus, though the tattoo marks his white skin in a way repulsive to Tommo, the blue marks on Hardy’s face have given him membership in a new community. In the same way, sailors became part of a social group when they chose to become tattooed, and, by asserting their membership in the brotherhood of seamen, they celebrated their rejection of social status and the normative pressures of the middle class.²¹⁰

In rejecting Hardy as a “renegade from Christianity and humanity,” perhaps Typee notes the difference between the “hard lot” of working-class (or lower-class) Englishmen and the mobility of Americans like himself. Typee has not submitted to tattooing or the enjoyments of life on a South Sea island because his class position is not fixed, and, in writing his narrative, he sets himself apart from the natives, his fellow sailors, and outcasts like Hardy. In adopting Typee as a moniker, the narrator intimates an affinity with the Marquesan natives, though his obstinate refusal to make common cause

²¹⁰ Christine Braunberger notes the benefits and drawbacks of Hardy’s decision (and Tommo/Typee’s decision) in her Foucauldian reading of tattooing: “The process of rejecting/accepting [a role consigned to one by a tattoo] creates a tautology of power: the criminal rejects the systemization his body is placed in and is tattooed to show his rejections, the tattoo allows him to maintain a semblance of acceptance because of his symbolic rejection, and the tattoo is read as a rejection of larger social strictures which means the tattoo identifies him as a criminal.” Christine Carol Braunberger, "Stories in the Flesh: Reading Cultural Narratives of Tattooing in America" (PhD. Purdue U.), 30.
with either the natives or his fellow sailors indicates that his worldview has remained orthodox despite his travels.\textsuperscript{211}

Given Melville’s own precarious social position and his decision to become a professional author, Typee’s rejection of Hardy is unsurprising. Destitute since his father’s death in 1832 and without money to support himself, the Melville of 1845 must have wondered if he too were “uncared for by a single soul” and “without ties.” His persistent fear concerning his own social status may have motivated him to dedicate the book to the well-to-do Massachusetts judge Lemuel Shaw (who was also his future father-in-law), and to write his narratives from a perspective not unlike that of his fellow author—and well-to-do Brahmin—Richard Henry Dana. In other words, class was not simply a theme that Melville probed in his first two novels; it was the primary animating force that led him to compose the works themselves, and economic gain led him to expurgate controversial passages from Typee in order to ensure its salability in America. This is not to castigate Melville for failing to take a heterodox position in his early works; Like Samuel Otter and other recent critics, I dismiss the notion of “Melville as outcast, the ‘isolato’ striving for original expression against the constraints of conventional antebellum America.”\textsuperscript{212} However, Melville’s use of an ‘isolato’ narrator in Moby-Dick reveals a marked shift in class prerogative from Typee and Omoo. Melville may have forecast such a shift in Redburn and White-Jacket, which evince a degree of sympathy with the plight of the working classes, but the tattooed, working-class narrator of Moby-

\textsuperscript{211} Larry D. Griffin suggests that the narrator “prefers not to be initiated into either the primitive or civilized societies. Like Tommo, he is a rover.” Griffin, Melville and Tattoos I think this argument ignores the narrator’s consistent position throughout Typee and Omoo, which is that of a superior. Though the narrator is no friend of “civilization,” per se, he is far from sympathetic with the working-class sailors or the benighted natives, and, in each work, his central motivation is leaving the islands to return home.

\textsuperscript{212} Otter, Melville's Anatomies, 4.
Dick is the first to express kinship with Lem Hardy and other outcasts. By 1850, perhaps Melville could see what this lonely British outcast may have gained even as he lost touch with civilization and its concomitant obsession with status.

IV. Herman Melville as Sailor-Savage

Drawn into the vortex created by the wrath of Moby Dick and the rapidly sinking Pequod, the narrator finds himself alone in the Pacific Ocean. He emerges from the water and climbs to safety aboard a coffin-lifebuoy marked with the indecipherable “theory of the heavens and the earth” that once covered Queequeg’s body (M-D 480). This tattooed sarcophagus resonates with Tommo’s description of the tattooed sailor in Typee “whose bare arms and feet, and exposed breast, were covered with as many inscriptions in India ink as the lid of an Egyptian sarcophagus.” Rebaptized as Ishmael in the waters of the ocean, the “orphan” is rescued by the Rachel and therein begins the other story in Moby-Dick: Ishmael’s life at sea and in port following his journey on the Pequod. One would assume that his experience with Ahab aboard the star-crossed ship would have soured him on life at sea, but no. The glib, wise, witty, and self-effacing Ishmael we meet on the first page of the novel is a product of many years’ life at sea following his first whaling voyage. The narrator is a far different man from the younger sailor who lived the experiences aboard the Pequod, and more than his age and experience has changed him. Ishmael, since his voyage, has been tattooed, just like his bosom-friend Queequeg. Thus, Moby-Dick is not only a masterful tale of friendship, vengeance, cetology, and metaphysics, it is also the story of how Ishmael (and perhaps Melville himself) came to embrace the ethic of voluntarism embodied in the tattoos of sailors and savages.
As Geoffrey Sanborn suggests, the merits of Queequeg’s savage worldview become obvious when compared to the other men aboard the *Pequod*, while Typee and Tommo cannot make such an immediate comparison. The space of the ship and the material reality of a life lived at close quarters on the ocean convinces Ishmael of the virtues of savagery (particularly in relation to the dominance of a master like Ahab) and precipitates his subsequent conversion. Furthermore, civilization has been no friend to the narrator of *Moby-Dick*, and he (unlike the youthful Tommo) has clearly given up any hope of class ascension. In rejecting this hope and the program of living it implies, Ishmael searches for a new way to confront and experience the world. He finds that way by mining his experience and his encounters with Queequeg in the fearful crucible of the *Pequod*’s final voyage.

Queequeg’s myriad tattoos, much like those of the Marquesan natives in the Typee valley, mark him as a member of a particular tribe, and likely distinguish his high birth and membership in the ruling class of Kokovoko; not knowing any of this upon first seeing the tattoos, Ishmael reacts with a horror reminiscent of Tommo:

> Such a face! It was of a dark, purplish, yellow colour, here and there stuck over with large blackish looking squares…They were stains of some sort or other. At first I knew not what to make of this; but soon an inkling of the truth occurred to me. I remembered a story of a white man—a whaleman too—who, falling among the cannibals, had been tattooed by them. I concluded that this harpooneer, in the course of his distant voyages, must have met with a similar adventure. (*M-D*, 21)

Here, Melville toys with his readers, since Ishmael’s initial reaction is to the tattooed otherness of Queequeg, as opposed to his racial otherness. He assumes that his bedfellow is a white man who had been marooned in the South Seas, essentially, that he is a more unfortunate (or less obstinate) version of Tommo himself, marked for life by his
encounter with the savages. Ishmael’s exclamation, “Such a face!” reminds us of Tommo’s intense focus on his own face, and his fear of involuntary expatriation. But Ishmael immediately reconsiders, “and what is it, thought I, after all! It's only his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin” (M-D, 21). Though I do not intend to suggest that Ishmael, Tommo, and Melville are one and the same, Ishmael’s reaction signals a significant change in the narrator’s worldview from Typee to Moby-Dick. This narrator, unlike Tommo or Typee, has left behind the provincial outlook that those characters shared with Willie Sullivan and those of his ilk. The narrator of Moby-Dick is, in this respect, a citizen of the world, a cosmopolitan.

And yet, the Ishmael we meet in the Spouter-Inn is not the fully-developed man who narrates the tale; as Queequeg continues to undress, we see that Ishmael’s racial imagination is not completely evolved:

But then, what to make of his unearthly complexion, that part of it, I mean, lying round about, and completely independent of the squares of tattooing...It was now quite plain that he must be some abominable savage or other shipped aboard a whaleman in the South Seas and so landed in this Christian country. I quaked to think of it. (M-D, 21-2)

Suddenly, at the thought of a racial other invading his sleeping chamber, Ishmael retreats into the language of ethnic and racial binarism and classes Queequeg as “savage.” In other words, the grotesque tattooing is far less fearsome than racial difference. Geoffrey Sanborn echoes my reading of Ishmael’s racialism in describing the prevalence of head-selling among whites. Thus, when Peter Coffin tells Ishmael that Queequeg is “peddlin’
heads,” Ishmael has no reason to think that Queequeg is anything other than a white man. Ishmael’s fears are born of racialist thinking and of his own inexperience.213

To trace the change in Ishmael’s worldview, his evolution into cosmopolitanism and voluntarism, I have begun this chapter with the Pequod’s end and Ishmael’s symbolic baptism and rebirth. Formerly a Presbyterian, Ishmael steps onto deck of the Rachel as something entirely different: an Ishmaelite, a wanderer. The sinking of the Pequod is prelude to the first line of “Loomings,” when the narrator begs his readers to “Call Me Ishmael” (M-D, 3). The man who shipped with Ahab was on his first whaling voyage—though he had served in the merchant service—and he has been around the world many times since his ill-fated trip. During these years (“never mind how many”) of travel, Ishmael serves as a common seaman and, by all indications, does not progress within the maritime hierarchy:

No, when I go to sea, I go as a simple sailor, right before the mast, plumb down into the forecastle, aloft there to the royal mast-head. True, they rather order me about some, and make me jump from spar to spar, like a grasshopper in a May meadow. And at first, this sort of thing is unpleasant enough. It touches one’s sense of honour, particularly if you come of an old established family in the land, the Van Rensselaers, or Randolphs, or Hardicanutes…But even this wears off in time. (M-D, 6)

Herman Melville was himself a Gansevoort of Albany, and his mother was a Van Rensselaer cousin, so Ishmael’s invocation of such storied names is neither idle nor accidental. Though Ishmael (like Melville himself) needs the money he obtains by going to sea, his motivations seem to be more than simply pecuniary. In choosing to accept the indignity of shipping as a common sailor, Ishmael places himself on the margins of

213 Sanborn, The Sign of the Cannibal :Melville and the Making of A Postcolonial Reader, 127-134 My reading is also indebted to, and resonant of, Carolyn Karcher’s reading of Moby-Dick. see Carolyn L. Karcher, Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville’s America (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1979), 62-91.
American society and thereby rejects dominant ideas of social and economic status and mobility that serve as the driving force of the economy.214

Myra Jehlen contemplates this idea in her recent essay, “Melville and Class,” in which she argues that despite his low position on board ship,

[Ishmael] is no simple sailor, quite the contrary. By choosing to ship out before the mast, he actually places himself, by dint of refusing his rightful elevated position, above even the captain. The one in a hierarchical society who chooses not to climb the ladder when he could reach the top is special and superior…Ishmael is no low-class sailor, but, literally, déclassé, unclassed; he transcends class altogether, which is the highest status of all.215

Jehlen’s reading is exciting because it begins to explore Ishmael’s class position as a driving force in the novel, and it contemplates the importance of the narrator before the mast who was so common in antebellum literature. At the same time, Jehlen makes some assumptions that seem out of place for a critic who is sensitive to the workings of class. For example, by claiming that “Ishmael is no simple sailor,” and later insisting that he is “no low-class sailor,” Jehlen seems to suggest that Ishmael’s high birth does set him apart from his fellow crewmen, as if he could choose to ship before the mast while many of them cannot. After all, Ishmael tells readers he does not go to sea as a passenger because “to go as a passenger you must needs have a purse, and a purse is but a rag unless you have something in it” (M-D 5). While the narrator doubtlessly possesses a striking intellect, Ishmael carefully points out the economic necessity underlying his career as a sailor. By going to sea, he not only embraces the ethic of the wanderer, but he also gains

214 Writing about Typee, Mitchell Breitwieser argues that Tommo is unable to resolve the American promise of mobility with his hard-won knowledge about the limits of that mobility. In Breitwieser’s reading, since Tommo rejects tattooing because it represents the end of mobility, one must conclude that he was unwilling to completely reject foundational American myths à la Ishmael. Breitwieser, False Sympathy in Melville’s Typee, 396-417.

215 Jehlen, Melville and Class, 89.
room, board, and a meager wage. Indeed, I find nothing in *Moby-Dick* that indicates Ishmael could claim “rightful[ly] elevated position,” nor does such a claim jibe with the facts of nineteenth-century maritime culture.\textsuperscript{216}

My concerns with Jehlen’s characterization of Ishmael as willingly “unclassed” also stem from the fact that he has no desire to distance himself from the sailors with whom he chooses to serve. Even if he were able to do otherwise, the fact that Ishmael continually ships before the mast hints at his camaraderie with the “simple sailors” in the forecastle and indicates that he must appreciate both the companionship and conditions there. Ishmael wants to be among the simple sailors, and he happily leagues himself with the working-class men who typified antebellum whaling crews. The narrator of *Moby-Dick* is not “unclassed,” but working-class.\textsuperscript{217} What is different about Ishmael, and what Jehlen drives at in her essay, is that Ishmael has decided not to “climb the ladder” as it were, within the supposedly classless society into which he was born. Thus, his decisions to ship before the mast and not to advance through the ranks aboard ship speak to Ishmael’s own rejection of class labels and their many meanings, though he is happy to receive the meager compensation he earns. Because of his paltry pay, and because of his allegiance with other forecastle sailors (voluntary or otherwise), Ishmael would most definitely have been classed with the working toughs in nineteenth-century America. His decision to live his life at sea does not allow him to “transcend class,” but rather—much like Lem Hardy—to live outside a society that has already rejected him.

\textsuperscript{216} On this point, see especially Vickers and Walsh, *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail*.

\textsuperscript{217} In *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Cisis* Casarino writes, “I would like to warn against overemphasizing Ishmael’s purportedly educated and upper-middle lass provenance to the point of turning him into an entity completely separate from the crew” (120). Obviously, my reading of Ishmael’s position takes note of Casarino’s warning.
In this respect, he is not unlike the short-lived Bulkington who cannot bear to be on land for more than a day or two, for “the land seemed scorching to his feet” (M-D, 106). Ishmael evinces a definite affinity for the questing Bulkington when he memorializes him in “The Lee-Shore,“

Know ye now, Bulkington? Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore? But as in landlessness alone resides highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! (M-D, 107)

The sea is a metaphor for the uncharted and free-floating thought of the independent mind, a metaphor so powerful that both Bulkington and Ishmael can only realize the vision of independence in the material space of the maritime world. Not simply a space connecting wealthy merchants, nor a field on which to achieve the conquest of nature, nor even a site for maturation or convalescence, the sea is Ishmael’s home. The life of a wanderer—he spends his time on ships, in ports, and among the cannibals and savages of various South Sea Islands—grants Ishmael the opportunity to escape the hierarchies of the capitalist state. In doing so, he frees himself from the economic pressures that would interfere with his attempts to “keep the open independence” of his own soul. Be the avatar money, or be it the white whale, the lesson of Moby-Dick is that open independence can keep the self from the obsessive pursuits that deaden it to the pleasures of life. Ishmael, like Bulkington, roams the earth to keep that independence. And the extent of those roamings is incredible, especially when one considers how many of Ishmael’s journeys have taken place since the disaster aboard the Pequod.
One particular journey that speaks to Ishmael’s cosmopolitanism and reveals something of his motivation for giving us the tale that is *Moby-Dick* can be found in “The Town-Ho’s Story” which was published in advance of the novel itself. Because it preceded the novel, I believe that we can read “The Town-Ho’s Story” as something of a plea for sympathetic readership modeled on Ishmael’s piazza audience. Ishmael declares, “I shall preserve the style in which I once narrated it at Lima, to a lounging circle of Spanish friends, one saint’s eve, smoking upon the thick-gilt tiled piazza of the Golden Inn.” The “young dons” lie about in hammocks while they goad, marvel, interject, and ply the teller with wine. Storytelling, in this setting, is a social act reminiscent of the whaling’s gams or William Leggett’s old salt who narrates “Merry Terry.” Ishmael (and Melville himself) begs his readers to accept his story in the spirit in which it is told, to replicate the community of goodfellows in Lima who, “in this dull, warm, most lazy, and hereditary land…know but little of your vigorous North.” Ishmael is speaking with the aristocrats in the “hereditary land,” and they honor him with the title “sir sailor,” making him part of their well-to-do community and treating Ishmael as a peer. Though Ishmael cannot claim to be the social peer of his prospective readers in America, Melville may have used “The Town-Ho’s Story” to characterize the ideal audience for his new novel.

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218 “The Town-Ho’s Story” was published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* (as an excerpt from *The Whale*) in the October of 1851, before Harper’s had published the novel but after the novel had been published in London. For more information on the publishing history of both “The Town-Ho’s Story” and *Moby-Dick*, see Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker and G. Thomas Tanselle, "Historical Note" in *Moby-Dick: Or the Whale*; (Evanston Ill; Chicago: Northwestern University Press; Newberry Library, 1988), 671 ff.


220 ibid., 660.
Melville’s plea for sympathetic and engaged readers was necessary for a novel like *Moby-Dick* since Ishmael makes no effort to league himself with the polite classes among whom Tommo and Wellingborough Redburn feel most comfortable. Describing the cast of characters who roam the streets of New Bedford and “make a stranger stare,” Ishmael intimates that he may be just such a character:

> In thoroughfares nigh the docks, any considerable seaport will frequently offer to view the queerest looking nondescripts from foreign parts. Even in Broadway and Chestnut streets, Mediterranean mariners will sometimes jostle the affrighted ladies. Regent Street is not unknown to Lascars and Malays; and at Bombay, in the Apollo Green, live Yankees have often scared the natives. But New Bedford beats all Water Street and Wapping. (*M-D*, 31)

As mariners from the Mediterranean frighten New Yorkers, so too do Americans frighten Indian natives. Ishmael, like the Lascars, Malays and Mediterraneans, is a “nondescript from foreign parts” who has come to accept the relativism that Queequeg narrates in “Wheelbarrow.”

Just as interesting in this brief passage is the wide geographic experience it reveals. London, Liverpool, New York, Bombay, New Bedford, and other great sailortowns of the world have all been home to Ishmael at one time or another. In passing, Ishmael also mentions his sojourns in Tranquo, Algiers, and Patagonia. Touching five continents and countless cities, Ishmael’s career has transformed him into a man of the world and, significantly, into a “white sailor-savage” (*M-D*, 270).221 This characterization is particularly interesting, because it indicates that Ishmael has become quite different from the man who lay in bed at the Spouter-Inn, quaking at the sight of the

221 For a more complete analysis of Ishmael’s relativism, see Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America*, 68-9.
savage Queequeg. Sanborn suggests that Ishmael’s thinking changes (literally) overnight, as evidenced by Ishmael’s description of the country bumpkins as the most outlandish characters inhabiting the streets of New Bedford. I would suggest, however, that the change that we read in Ishmael’s attitude develops over the time he has spent among the sailors and savages of all nations. After a decade wandering the fiddler’s greens of the world, Ishmael finds these “green Vermonters” more “curious” and “comical” than the “cannibals” and “savages” among whom he now counts himself.

Reborn in the coffin of a savage, Ishmael is now a composite of his former self and his bosom friend; indeed, he suggests that all true whale-hunters arrive at such a state:

> Long exile from Christendom and civilization inevitably restores a man to that condition in which God placed him, *i.e.* what is called savagery. Your true whale-hunter is as much a savage as an Iroquois. I myself am a savage, owning no allegiance but to the King of the Cannibals; and ready at any moment to rebel against him. (*M-D* 270)

Ishmael makes several attempts to align himself with Queequeg in this brief passage. He describes his “exile from Christendom,” which certainly describes the harpooneer’s religious position, and he notes his allegiance to the King of the Cannibals, who, in this case would most likely be Queequeg himself. Ishmael (like Tommo) has come to understand savagery as a relative term, defined by separation from Western religion and customs. Unlike Tommo, however, Ishmael believes that savagery is a *restoration* of man’s original vitality and position under God. The savage is the man who can keep the “open independence of his sea” despite the pressures of the land—pressures of money, caste, and religion. Though Ishmael declares his allegiance to the King of the Cannibals, he is free to rebel against that king, just as Queequeg does when he leaves his home and
the hierarchy into which he is born so that he may become a citizen of world. Of course, self-exile has its costs, and Ishmael is willing to bear them. He becomes a “savage” to an America obsessed with civilization; he swears allegiance to the King of the Cannibals in a land of Christians; and, to make his exile permanent, he marks his body before a nation demanding racial purity. I do not believe, like Jehlen, that Ishmael is “outside of class;” rather, he chooses the lower-class and its freedoms while willingly accepting its burdens. The tattoo is the ultimate figuration of that acceptance, and it becomes the symbol of the ethic of voluntarism that Ishmael embraces following his journey on the Pequod.

In his 1962 essay “Ishmael’s Tattoos,” H.C. Brashers argues, “Queequeg teaches Ishmael the lesson in the tattoos, though both of them are unconscious of the lesson and the act of teaching. Ishmael’s experiences with Queequeg figuratively tattoo his soul with the forgotten meaning of the tattoos.” To some extent, this argument prefigures my argument, but Brashers concerns himself with “man’s relation to the entire universe” much more than do I, and he oddly neglects the physical fact of Ishmael’s tattooing. For Brashers, “Ishmael’s Tattoos” are spiritual and philosophical only, while I will contend that the physical act of tattooing is crucial evidence of the spiritual and philosophical growth that I have celebrated in the narrator’s worldview. Larry D. Griffin does engage with the physical fact of Ishmael’s tattoos, but his Jungian reading of the tattooing as an initiation rite elides the more crucial meanings that inhere in Ishmael’s tattoos (and in his very decision to become tattooed), especially in the context of antebellum maritime culture.

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223 See Griffin, Melville and Tattoos, 42-62.
Two important passages from *Moby-Dick* highlight the meaning of Ishmael’s tattoos, and I will deal with them in chronological, rather than narrative, order. The first extensive examination of Queequeg’s tattooing following his introduction at the Spouter-Inn comes when he has recovered from his mysterious illness and turns his coffin into a sea chest:

> With a wild whimsiness, he now used his coffin for a sea-chest; and emptying into it his canvas bag of clothes, set them in order there. Many spare hours he spent, in carving the lid with all manner of grotesque figures and drawings; and it seemed that hereby he was striving, in his rude way, to copy parts of the twisted tattooing on his body. And this tattooing had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last. And this thought it must have been which suggested to Ahab that wild exclamation of his, when one morning turning away from surveying poor Queequeg—“Oh, devilish tantalization of the gods!” (*M-D*, 480-1)

The coffin is inscribed with Queequeg’s rendering of his tattoos, though “his rude way” and certain physical limitations (Queequeg cannot see his own back, for example) render the coffin something different from the original tattoos upon his body. This change is crucial because Queequeg becomes the tattooist, rather than simply the bearer of a “complete theory of the heavens and the earth” devised by a “departed prophet.” Though the “wondrous work in one volume” on Queequeg’s body is indeed destined to perish, his version of that work lives on in the coffin. As he recovers from his illness, the coffin is converted into a sea-chest, and, after it is marked, it becomes a life-buoy. In other words, the process of marking the coffin is inextricably linked to its transformation into something new.
When Ahab observes Queequeg’s body with its inscrutable treatise, he is
dismayed because he cannot read the myriad symbols on his body. But Ahab, as is his
wont, misses the point. Searching for absolute meaning in the tattoos, he wishes to
decipher the lessons contained therein. The lesson of the tattooism however, is without, it
is the marks themselves that are the lesson, the marks themselves that hint at the wisdom
of mutability and self-transformation that Ahab rejects throughout Moby-Dick. It is this
very lesson that Ishmael does learn, and he realizes that in order to preserve the lesson in
the tattoos, he must himself mark his body.

The extent of Ishmael’s tattooing is difficult to ascertain, though I am inclined to
believe that he has been extensively marked. In the prelude to his description of the size
of the sperm whale, he states:

The skeleton dimensions I shall now proceed to set down are copied
verbatim from my right arm, where I had them tattooed; as in my wild
wanderings at that period, there was no other secure way of preserving
such valuable statistics. But as I was crowded for space, and wished the
other parts of my body to remain a blank page for a poem I was then
composing—at least, what un-tattooed parts might remain—I did not
trouble myself with the odd inches; nor, indeed, should inches at all enter
into a congenial admeasurement of the whale. (M-D, 451)

Obviously, then, Ishmael has had his right arm tattooed, as he avers, almost as a matter of
practicality. The tattoos are appropriately linked to his “wild wanderings,” and, as
Samuel Otter notes, are really the only evidence we have that Ishmael actually has a
body. However, I disagree with those critics (Otter and Griffin among others) who

224 Samuel Otter writes, “By fixing the meaning of Moby Dick or of Queequeg, Ahab hopes to secure his
own identity.” As with the doubloon and the whale itself, Ahab’s readings are almost entirely narcissistic,
so it should come as no surprise that he should interpret the tattoos in the same way. Otter, Melville’s
Anatomies, 164.
225 ibid., 165.
suggest that Ishmael has but one tattoo. When he claims that he “was crowded for space,” and wishes to use “what untattooed parts might remain” for the poem he was composing (likely, as Griffin mentions, this poem is *Moby-Dick* itself), Ishmael seemingly has several tattoos. At the very least, he is planning to obtain more tattoos, since he is already resigned himself to having few “untattooed parts” on which to transcribe his poem.

If indeed the poem that will cover the rest of Ishmael’s body is the novel that we have received, that suggests that we should read *Moby-Dick* as a great tattoo with the symbolic functionality of the “sailor’s mark.”

Discussing the work of French anthropologist J.T. Maertens, Alfred Gell writes that “non-reproducing groups—prisoners, soldiers and sailors, prostitutes—tattoo themselves with designs which seek to compensate for a rootless existence and simultaneously express fatalistic acceptance of social exclusion.” He also notes that for the tattooed subject, the skin can serve “as a kind of external biographical memory...for reconstructing the person as a locus of remembered events.”226 These two rationales for tattooing are crucial to understanding Ishmael’s tattoos and the function they serve in his development. Ishmael is indeed a non-reproducing character; a sailor and a wanderer, he is disconnected from even the vaguest intimations of domesticity following his symbolic marriage to Queequeg. Though I am loath to characterize Ishmael’s acceptance of social exclusion as fatalistic, no evidence suggests that his wanderings have slowed or stopped since the tragedy of the *Pequod*, and he is happy to place himself outside the boundaries of the obsessively hierarchical American society. Ishmael, who pronounces the whale-ship his “Yale College and...Harvard,” is another of Melville’s “Professor[s] of Moral

Philosophy...apart from the walks of restless ambition” (M-D 112). His tattoos confirm his rejection of class mobility and league him permanently with the career sailors who sport sailors’ marks that indicate their avoidance of the “slavish” shore and their enduring commitment to preserving the “open independence” of the soul’s sea.

Beyond confirming his social position and group identity, the tattoos remind Ishmael of the defining time in his life—the year he spent aboard the Pequod. Tattoos tell the story of his journey on that ship, remind him of his friendship with Queequeg, and memorialize Ishmael’s rebirth on the tattooed life-buoy of his bosom friend. The measurements of the sperm whale preserved on his arm remind Ishmael of the whale’s importance to his life as well as the whale’s ultimate inscrutability. Ishmael’s decision to ignore the “odd inches” in recording the measures reflects his decision to accept uncertainty, to heed his own advice regarding the whale’s fountain, that “the wisest thing the investigator can do then, it seems to me, is to let the deadly spout alone” (M-D, 373).

The “lesson in the tattoos” for Ishmael is what the departed seer intended it to be, that is, a “complete theory of the heavens and the earth.” Ishmael’s theory draws on his many experiences, and his tattooed body serves as a memorial to those experiences. In commemorating Queequeg, he reminds himself of his friend and the lessons of tolerance and relativism; in commemorating the whale, he reminds himself of mystery and the

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227 Larry Griffin suggests that Ishmael chooses to have a whale tattooed on his arm because the whale is his totem, and his tattoo is his “totem badge.” Griffin’s reading grants Ishmael a knowledge of the whale (“Ishmael is connected to his totem by his protection of it, his knowledge of its powers, and the whale’s symbolic affiliations with his dreams and reveries.”) that I find a bit far-fetched. I believe the tattoos signal the whale’s mystery as the height of its significance. Griffin, Melville and Tattoos, 58

228 The cetological chapters of Moby-Dick (alongside Ahab’s monomania) emphasize the dangers of the search for absolute knowledge, and Ishmael’s tattoos signal his quest for understanding of the whale, and, at the same time, his acceptance of its impossibility.
dangers of monomania; in commemorating his travels around the globe, he celebrates his escape from the slavish shore and his membership in a group of working-class wanderers. In other words, the “lesson in the tattoos” is the tattoos themselves. They express identity, they commemorate subjectivity, and, most importantly, they mark Ishmael as a citizen of the world and a white savage before the mast.

Later in his life, Melville would return to the idea of the tattooed sailor-savage in his elegiac poem, “John Marr.” Alone on a windswept prairie, far from the excitement and camaraderie that defined his seafaring life, John Marr calls out to his own sea-brothers:

Twined we were, entwined, then riven,
Ever to new embracements driven,
Shifting gulf-weed of the main!
And how if one here shift no more,
Lodged by the flinging surge ashore?
Nor less, as now, in eve's decline,
Your shadowy fellowship is mine.
Ye float around me, form and feature:—
Tattooings, ear-rings, love-locks curled;
Barbarians of man's simpler nature,
Unworldly servers of the world.
Yea, present all, and dear to me,
Through shades, or scouring China’s sea. (JM 268)

The tattooed barbarians of Marr’s memory recall the tattooed sailor-savage whom Ishmael admires and becomes, and, like Ishmael, Marr basks in their good-humored fellowship. Marr does not dwell on particular sailors, but on the collect of sea-brothers whose companionship sustained and enlivened him, at least in part because of their “simpler nature” and existence outside their domestic society. “Twined” and “riven,” Marr remembers the constant meetings and partings that defined his sailor existence and created a fellowship rooted in occupation and experience. In the sea world of Marr’s
memory, sailors signal their allegiance to one another and to a barbarian lifestyle through their “tattooings, ear-rings, love-locks curled.” Marked and arrayed like savages, the sailors live for one another in a community apart.

The distance between the maritime world and Marr’s landlocked existence becomes clear as Marr attempts to regale his fellow pioneers with tales from his seagoing past. “Upon one such occasion an elderly man—a blacksmith, and at Sunday gatherings an earnest exhorter—honestly said to him, ‘Friend, we know nothing of that here’” (JM 264-5). Unlike Ishmael’s engaged audience on the piazza in Lima, the community of western pioneers has no interest in Marr’s stories, and it is telling that the religious blacksmith is the one to reject Marr. Irreligious, unmoored, genial, and adaptable, the sailors of Marr’s memory are the exact opposite of the “staid…ascetic…and unresponsive” people among whom he lives. And so, Marr retreats into his memory, as Melville himself does when his own stories failed to attract sympathetic listeners or generate commercial success.

John Marr is too old to return to sea despite his sense of displacement in his prairie home, but his retreat into the remembered maritime world reminds us of Ishmael’s reaction to the country bumpkins who come to New Bedford to try their hand at seafaring. The country lads who go to sea are not yet sailors, they, like the ascetic blacksmith, “know nothing of that.” At the same time, Ishmael—just like the tattooed men in the antebellum period who displayed themselves for profit—is an object of curiosity to the New England bumpkins. Ishmael’s tattoos are not something on his body to be used for monetary gain; more than skin deep, the tattoos signify his affiliation with the working class and his resistance to the exploitation of the body, part of the middle-
class ethos that dominated museum and sideshow culture. In Barnum’s America, Melville creates a sideshow that speaks for itself and celebrates the liberatory power of a working-class existence. Ishmael and the tattooed sailors of John Marr’s memory embody a seafaring ethos rooted in fellowship and savage (or barbaric) simplicity. By embracing that ethos in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael communicates an alternative to the unwavering ambition that undergirds both the domestic materialism of Willie Sullivan and the consuming narcissism of Ahab’s violent quest. That same alternative held great appeal for another group of laborers held in far lower regard than sailors: African slaves.
Chapter Five

Sailors and Slaves

Seamen know that they are born free, and freemen will never submit to the lash of slavery.

—William McNally, Evils and Abuses of the Naval and Merchant Service, Exposed

You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! O, that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing!

—Frederick Douglass, Narrative of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave

I: The American Eagle at Sea

In March, 1830, white sailor Edward Smith shipped as a steward aboard the brig 

_Columbo_ and sailed a passage from Boston to Charleston, South Carolina. According to Smith, the day before he left, “a colored man of decent appearance & very genteely [sic] dressed called on board the vessel and asked [Smith] if he would do a favor for him…The man then said that he wished [Smith] to bring a package of pamphlets to Charleston for him and to give them to any negroes he had a mind to, or that he met, that he must do it
privately and not let any white person know anything about it.”229 After being arrested and tried in Charleston for his actions, Smith was sentenced to one year in prison and a $1,000 fine for distributing three copies of David Walker’s incendiary *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. Though Smith claimed that he never would have handed out the pamphlet had he known its contents, his willingness to distribute the book without letting “any white person know anything about it” betrays his complicity. Whatever Edward Smith’s personal investment in the abolition movement, he was willing to trust the black man in Boston who gave him the pamphlets and was willing to risk his own safety by distributing them to blacks in Charleston.

David Walker, who owned a used clothing store in Boston, solicited seamen to distribute his *Appeal*, and he may have even sewn copies into the clothes that he sold to sailors heading south.230 Walker needed to enlist the help of white sailors because free black seamen—thought to be spreading what Jeffrey Bolster names “the contagion of liberty”—were usually imprisoned (or, at the very least, required to remain on board ship) in Charleston and other Southern ports.231 The role of white seamen in circulating

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229 Record of Edward Smith’s testimony and confession quoted in William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, "Walker's Appeal Comes to Charleston: A Note and Documents," *Journal of Negro History* 59, no. 3 (1974), 289.


231 According to Jeffrey Bolster, port imprisonment policies were first imposed in 1822 and remained in place in many southern ports throughout the antebellum period. Clearly, whites acknowledged the possibility of black resistance or rebellion developing in the watery world apart from landed laws, and, following the distribution of Walker’s *Appeal*, Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina passed laws restricting free black access to their states. Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*, 190. 198 Bolster’s is the definitive work on African-American maritime culture in the age of sail. His well-researched book provides the historical grounding for many of the assumptions—both written and unwritten—in this chapter. Other works to treat (some briefly, some at length) the African-American experience at sea and in port include Hapke, *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction*; Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the*
the *Appeal* speaks to the uniqueness of the maritime world as a site of interracial interaction of the sort that we see in *Moby-Dick*; indeed, it suggests that some white seamen were both friends with their black peers and advocates for enslaved laborers.232 Though Walker died in 1830, many whites blamed his *Appeal* as a motivating force for Nat Turner’s 1831 Rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia. The influence imagined for Walker’s pamphlet and the Southern quarantine laws for black sailors reveal white assumptions about the antebellum maritime world as a radical, multiracial community outside the conservative boundaries of a rigidly hierarchical society. Though the watery world was by no means more idyllic for the black sailor than it was for the white, the sea allowed many blacks a measure of freedom that was rare in either the North or the South.

Despite the freedom of movement and identity that the sea allowed, however, few free blacks attained positions of responsibility on board ship, and even fewer attained economic independence through their work in the maritime world. The exceptions—men like the Massachusetts merchant Paul Cuffe and the Philadelphia sail maker James Forten—do in fact prove the rule. Furthermore, as Jeffrey Bolster argues, “though many an enterprising black man shipped out in the early and mid-nineteenth century, seafaring never attained the status of barbering or other dignified professions in the black community ashore.”233 Black men who went to sea, besides failing to make significant

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economic progress, also failed to achieve social mobility within their own communities. A major reason for this, as Bolster intimates and as white sailors also found, was that seafaring necessitated prolonged absence that both disrupted the domestic space and made consistent civic participation impossible. In the 1850s, fewer than ten percent of black sailors listing Baltimore or Philadelphia as their place of residence actually maintained a home there. Going to sea meant leaving home—both figuratively and literally. And, beyond the economic and social disadvantages inherent in sailing, free black sailors of the antebellum period confronted the same challenges that dogged whites on board ship: unfair labor practices, violent and mean-spirited masters, disease-ridden ships, and constant physical danger.

These drawbacks, as I have argued previously, were attended by some advantages, and these advantages may have been especially meaningful for blacks at sea. First, because class and status hierarchies dominated on most ships, racial hierarchies lost some (though not all) of their significance on the open seas. Blacks often worked in service-oriented positions aboard ship (cook, steward, servant), but when they shipped as able seamen, they followed the same rules and earned the same wages as their white counterparts. Additionally, the cosmopolitanism of seafarers that drew Ishmael and his historical counterparts toward life at sea allowed for freedom of movement and communication that may have been gratifying for antebellum blacks. The maritime world provided a space for Olaudah Equiano to progress within a capitalist hierarchy, and it allowed Melville’s fictional Daggoo to assume a position above so many of the white crewmen on the Pequod. Traversing the sea lanes of the Atlantic world, black sailors were connected with black communities in England, the continent, Africa, the Caribbean,
and South America. These communities, which composed what Paul Gilroy has dubbed the “Black Atlantic,” were a source of transnational racial affiliation, revolutionary thought, and black power.  

Especially noteworthy in this context was Haiti, which, following the rebellion led by T’oussant L’Overture in 1798, was imagined as a center of black radicalism by white Americans and a land of freedom by fugitive slaves seeking to escape America. In Haiti, blacks’ natural rights trumped admiralty law and the codified law of the United States, and the Haitian government gave asylum to both escaped slaves as well as free black sailors who claimed mistreatment at the hands of a ship’s master. Pleas by white American shipping agents and captains seeking to reclaim slaves and sailors alike fell on deaf ears because they cited United States laws that recognized blacks as either property or contractually obliged free agents. In Haiti, as Bolster writes, “race conferred more privileges than did nationality;” indeed, race was almost synonymous with Hatian citizenship, which was “as much an affirmation of pan-Atlantic black freedom as an extension of specific national privileges or responsibilities.” Further, Haitian citizenship was understood in fluid terms and did not preclude continued citizenship in the United States—it was one affiliation among many and could be cast off (or taken on) at will. Like water-bound Haiti, ships traversing the globe were home to varied peoples with uncertain affiliations, and the ships’ remoteness from landed laws made them ideal sites to stage a rebellion against the dictatorial figure of a ship’s captain or a slave.

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235 Bolster, Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail, 150, 152. On Haiti in the context of the maritime world, see ibid., 148-153.
master—to demand black freedom on the open sea. In the antebellum era, slave revolts occurred aboard the slave ships *Amistad* and *Creole* in 1838 and 1841, respectively. These rebellions revealed the inability of whites to enforce property rights on the unbounded space of the sea and forcefully denied the suggestion that blacks were somehow naturally inferior to whites.

At the height of the debate over slavery, Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville, and Martin Delany used these incidents as motivation or historical basis for sea tales about slave rebellions: “The Heroic Slave,” (1853) “Benito Cereno,” (1855) and *Blake* (1859-62). Though I have sketched the social and geographical factors that paved the way for slave revolt at sea, I want to shift my focus to the literary world in order to explore how the genre of the sea narrative allowed these antebellum authors to imagine the deconstruction of racial hierarchies. In *Conspiracy and Romance*, Robert S. Levine writes that debates over slavery and reform in the sea narrative “served as a laboratory for testing the desires and concerns inherent in the idealization of institutions” in both the North and the South because each region dreaded “conspiratorial irruptions from below” that could “precipitate social collapse.” As I have argued previously, the lower orders—workers, sailors, and slaves—were consistently merged in the antebellum imagination, and Levine’s analysis points toward the relationships between these groups as objects of reform and as sources of deep anxiety. Even though mutiny was rare, intimating the prospect of violent rebellion of the lower orders was frightening indeed for antebellum readers in both the North and South. Accepting Levine’s analysis of “Benito

Cereno” as a reflection of anxieties over slave and worker uprisings on land, I want to assess the importance of the maritime setting in stories of slave rebellion, beginning with an examination of the trope of white slavery so frequently invoked in stories of white antebellum seafarers.

In his excellent book, *Melville’s Anatomies*, Samuel Otter argues convincingly that Melville’s *White-Jacket* engages the issue of slavery (and its attendant violence in flogging) by depicting the sailors who become “white slaves” on board a vessel of the United States navy. Otter writes, “*White-Jacket* teaches that the analogy between black and white slaves is treacherous.” In antebellum America, “white slavery” was an oxymoron, a rhetorical creation that “furnish[ed] a ‘white’ choice for moral and political attention;” in other words, giving time, money, and attention to “white slaves” was more important that working toward the liberation of black chattel slaves.237 Slavery was a particularly potent image to conjure in debates over class and labor since its existence denied ideals of independence and mobility supposedly at the heart of American identity. Certainly, arguments decrying slavery in this context viewed it, in general, as a moral outrage, though the authors’ willingness to conflate the subjects of mercantilist capitalism with the subjects of the peculiar institution is troubling. Such a move is reminiscent of arguments criticizing the wage slavery of Great Britain or the northern US that were often advanced by authors sympathetic to the proslavery position.238 Frederick Douglass and


other ardent abolitionists rejected the rhetoric of “white slavery” and “wage slavery” because it minimized the atrocity of chattel slavery and deflected attention from the abolition movement.

In antebellum sea narratives, the rhetorical slippage between the white sailor and the black slave is most famously evident in Dana’s *Two Years Before the Mast* when Captain Thompson of the *Pilgrim* whips a white sailor and announces to the crew, "You've got a driver over you! Yes, a *slave driver*—a *nigger driver*! I'll see who'll tell me he isn't a nigger slave!" (TY 92). Thompson’s enraged denigration of the sailors performs the same work as his whip by rendering his sailors “slaves” aboard ship, presumably ensuring control and unquestioning servitude. In the decade before Dana’s book was published, naval reformers William Leggett and William McNally questioned the unmitigated power of the captain to remake white sailors into cowering slaves. Their strident attacks suggest their strong belief in the ideals of natural rights and personal liberty that were not always honored by captains of the white sailors serving aboard America’s merchant, whaling, and naval vessels.

The powerful position of the ship’s captain was a source of great distress for William Leggett, who penned numerous columns in the *New York Evening Post* on the abuse of power in the US Navy, almost all of which directly attacked naval officers, including his former captain, John Orne Creighton, who had Leggett court-martialed in 1825.²³⁹ Writing in April, 1835, concerning the court-martial of naval surgeon John S.

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²³⁹ The text of the court-martial itself is fascinating. Leggett’s opening statement runs on for over ten pages in the court records, and he takes every opportunity to classify Creighton as a “tyrant.” One of the seven charges against Leggett was that, while in the brig, he threatened his captain by quoting passages from the US Constitution pertaining to free speech. Though Leggett was doubtless something of a bombastic showoff, his concern with the personal liberties attending American citizen speaks nicely to the sailor’s fear
Wily, Leggett avers, “[Readers] shall see what kind of despotism exists in the navy of a country that boasts it is the freest under heaven.”240 Later in the same month, Leggett would bemoan the words of former Secretary of the Navy Samuel Southard who told an aggrieved midshipman that the “Navy Department could not recognize the principle that a junior officer should set himself up as the champion of the wrongs of the whole service.”241 For Leggett, the issue of a captain’s power never aligned with a free and democratic United States, and his objections to despotic power are always couched in terms of personal rights and freedom. Though he accepted the necessity of certain hierarchies in naval service, he could not bear to see those same hierarchies hold sway over men’s natural and legal rights.

William McNally, who authored *Evils and Abuses in the Naval and Merchant Service* in 1839, sailed in the US Navy in the 1820s and 1830s before leaving with the intention of fighting alongside dispossessed American Indians. Like Leggett, he was court-martialed and wrote about his former captain with great animus, although, as the title of his work suggests, he ranged widely over the abuses of power he located within maritime hierarchies. Insistently linking sailors and slaves, McNally wrote to arouse Northern activists: “Those who exclaim loudest against slavery, had better turn their attention to objects of suffering and benevolence at home, before they look for them abroad, hundreds of whom will stand as much in need of their assistance, and emancipation from the yoke of tyranny of oppression, as the swarthy sons and daughters of “white slavery” at the hands of a despotic captain. See Navy Department, United States, *Records of General Courts Martial and Courts of Inquiry of the Navy Department, 1799-1867* (Washington DC: National Archives and Records Service, 1959).


of Africa.” Indeed, in McNally’s comparison, sailors were not “as much in need” but more in need of assistance, as “masters of merchant vessels are vested with greater authority than the magistrates or judges, and with the same power as the negro driver, or slaveholder, who has so often been stigmatized with the epithets of tyrants and brutes, by a society whose object is declared to be equal rights and privileges to all.”

For McNally, the stakes were clear: sailors needed to be “emancipated” from a system that allowed incursions against their rights as free-born citizens. Arguing that sailors elected to serve only out of ignorance of conditions prevailing aboard ship, McNally claimed that “Seamen know that they are born free, and freemen will never submit to the lash of slavery.” Though it is easy (and appropriate) to dismiss the equivalency of sailor and slave, it is worthwhile to note the terms on which that equivalency is posited. The essence of slavery is found neither in degradation nor in labor but in the abrogation of supposedly universal rights, including the right to a trial by a judge. Similarly, slavery on board ship as understood by Leggett and McNally is not rooted in the violence of a Captain Thompson but in the system of laws that protect his right to abuse and to demean common sailors with neither cause nor evidence. Like the revolutionary-era colonists who feared the “prerogative” of a despotic monarch, antebellum naval reformers feared the unlimited power of a ruthless captain; of course, such a republican definition of slavery supposes that the elimination of basic political rights—as enumerated in the Constitution—actually defines enslavement. Such a premise is perfectly logical, as the subjects of naval reform, sailors, were most often citizens, men

243 ibid., 130.
who enjoyed the protection of freemen on land and felt keenly the absence of such protection when they went to sea. At the same time, abolitionists and advocates of racial equality argued that the root of slavery was in fact the denial of natural rights as enumerated in the Declaration of Independence. As with naval reformers, this quite different line of argument was entirely sensible because, for blacks to become citizens, they first had to become people.

The division between Constitution and Declaration, between political and natural rights, points toward the significant differences between “white slaves” and chattel slaves. Samuel Otter insists that in sea narratives invoking the idea of white slavery (or sailor slavery) “energy is drained from the term ‘slave’ and channeled to the term ‘sailor.’”244 In this chapter, I revise Otter’s script by examining the confluence of the roles of “sailor” and “slave” in a series of sea narratives from the 1850s. Though numerous authors imagined life at sea for whites in terms of enslavement, authors imagined life at sea for blacks (even black slaves) in quite different terms. Whereas in White-Jacket and Two Years Before the Mast, revolt is stymied though the use of physical and rhetorical violence that turns whites into slaves, in “The Heroic Slave” “Benito Cereno,” and Blake revolt is enabled by black sea freedom. In rising against white masters at sea, former slaves stake a claim for both natural rights and full political citizenship. The authors whom I evaluate in this chapter, then, used the sea narrative and the united identities of sailor and slave to imagine the merger of natural and political rights for American blacks. At the same time, as each author dramatizes the possibilities

244 Otter, Melville's Anatomies, 72.
for black freedom, each also notes the significant and enduring distinctions between black and white, sailor and slave.

Frederick Douglass used his literacy to make a claim for black humanity (at least his own), a claim preceded by a surreptitious education and escape from slavery that were both enabled—in part—by the fluid identities available to blacks laboring in ports and on board ships. Indeed, from the time that Douglass first began working in a Baltimore shipyard to 1838, when he made his escape from slavery dressed as a sailor, and later, to 1853, when he dramatized the successful rebellion aboard the slave ship Creole in “The Heroic Slave,” Douglass understood the revolutionary possibilities always present in the maritime world. In his Narrative, upon being sent to live with the “nigger-breaker” Mr. Covey (every inch a villain in the mode of Captain Thompson), Douglass ponders his consuming dream of freedom:

Our house stood within a few rods of the Chesapeake Bay, whose broad bosom was ever white with sails from every quarter of the habitable globe. Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer's Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully. My thoughts would compel utterance; and there, with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships:—

"You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! O, that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing!" 245

When Douglass published “The Heroic Slave” in 1853 and his *Life and Times* nearly thirty years after that, he reminded readers of the centrality of the maritime world to African-American freedom. In the *Narrative*, it seems that Douglass’s elegant plea is as much a sly rhetorical game—there is nothing “rude” about his complaint—as it is a comment on the liberty of the sailor. The very proximity of the free-floating ships to the enslaved Douglass is noteworthy in this respect. Only a “few rods” from where he stands drifts the “protecting wing” of “freedom’s swift-winged angels” bound for the sea.

In discussing the maritime works of Douglass, Melville, and Delany, I am following Eric Sundquist, who first examined these authors alongside one another in *To Wake the Nations*. I am indebted to Sundquist’s magisterial work, as will be evident throughout this chapter. At the same time, I want to expand his argument concerning Douglass’s “revolutionary” and “American” authorial personae to include Melville and Delany as well. Indeed, this split between the revolution and the nation it engendered, between the Declaration and the Constitution, influenced many of the authors in this book, since conflicts over race and class in the sea narrative were not simply about the question of citizenship but the nature of that citizenship as well.246

As Douglass could not fail to recognize given his status, American citizenship under the Constitution, along with its attendant protections and privileges, necessitated acquiescence to what were un-American principles. In rejecting the Garrisonians and arguing that the Constitution was not, in fact, a proslavery document, Douglass was

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trying to merge “revolution” and “American;” he was urging Americans to reclaim their revolutionary heritage and, concomitantly, their revolutionary notions of equality. As Susan Weiner writes, “slave rebellion could be seen by abolitionists as well as by slaves as a re-enactment or extension of the American Revolution. If such a rebellion was doomed to failure, so also might the idea of America be fatally flawed.”

In The Slumbering Volcano, Maggie Sale moved Weiner’s argument away from rebellion and towards a new conception of the Union itself:

By claiming the authorizing ideology of the Union, [abolitionists] sought not simply the same rights as those supposedly enjoyed by white U.S. Americans, but a reconfiguration of the political, economic and social structures of the United States.

Douglass’s work, much like the artful soliloquy delivered on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, pleads with his readers to recognize the universality of natural abilities and the importance of political citizenship under the Constitution that would recognize its natural rights as delineated in the Declaration of Independence. By pairing the legal protections of the sailor with the natural abilities of rebellious slaves, Douglass could mitigate rigid dichotomies between Declaration and Constitution, between natural and legal rights, between black and white. In so doing, he could conceive of a nation that would honor the rebellion of the downtrodden slave as a powerful claim for both natural and political rights. At the same time, Douglass acknowledged the persistent tension between freedom and slavery through his literary imaginings of the American eagle as a

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symbol of sailor liberty, American citizenship, and legally authorized violence in the antebellum United States.

The American eagle was a popular symbol for American sailors and scrimshanders (see Figures 1-2) during the age of sail. It appeared on countless whale tooth engravings of the period, often spreading its protective wings above Jack Tar himself. Sailors, perhaps anxious to reaffirm their landed citizenship in the fluid spaces of the maritime world, frequently tattooed the American eagle on their arms and shoulders.249 When Frederick Douglass first invokes the American eagle in “The Heroic Slave,” however, he does so with quite different intent. Upon escaping to Canada, the

249 See Dye, Early American Merchant Seafarers, 331-360; Dye, The Tattoos of Early American Seafarers, 1796-1818, 520-554 Dye’s evidence indicates that “patriotic symbols” such as the eagle were the third most popular tattoo design among sailors in the early national period.
protagonist Madison Washington writes to Mr. Listwell, a white man who aided him in his escape from slavery: “Madison is out of the woods at last; I nestle in the mane of the British lion, protected by the mighty paw from the talons and beak of the American eagle. I AM FREE, and breathe an atmosphere too pure for slaves, slave-hunters, or slaveholders” (HS 147). Washington’s eagle is voracious and malevolent, an agent of the government that legalizes slavery and aids the slave-hunters in their attempts to bring slaves back to the south. Far from a symbol of liberty, the American eagle protects not the weak, but rather those who would violate personal liberty in favor of inhumane property rights.

Over thirty years later, writing his Life and Times, Douglass at last revealed the means of his escape from slavery. In so doing, he revived the symbol of the American eagle in a very different context. Intending to use a friend’s sailor protection certificate in order to leave the South unimpeded, Douglass was sanguine regarding his chances for success because, “The instrument [the certificate] had at its head the American eagle, which at once gave it the appearance of an authorized document.”250 His confidence was increased by the fact that “One element in my favor was the kind feeling which prevailed in Baltimore and other seaports at the time, towards ‘those who go down to the sea in ships.’ ‘Free trade and sailors’ rights’ expressed the sentiment of the country just then. In my clothing I was rigged out in sailor style.”251 Douglass’s preparation served him well, as did his belief in the signifying power of American eagle, for, when Douglass is asked for his free papers, he responds confidently:

251 ibid., 229.
“I never carry my free papers to sea with me.” “But you have something to show that you are a free man, have you not?” “Yes, sir,” I answered; “I have a paper with the American eagle on it, that will carry me round the world.” With this I drew from my deep sailor’s pocket my seaman’s protection, as before described. The merest glance at the paper satisfied him, and he took my fare and went about his business.  

Douglass reaches the North safely, and begins there his life as a laborer, speaker, writer, and representative African-American. Describing his escape, Douglass affirms the potency of the American eagle as a symbol of liberty, especially for seamen. A runaway slave heading north, Douglass needed to produce only a paper verifying his occupation and his nationality in order to continue his journey unmolested. Far from the violent symbol of proslavery aggression imagined by Madison Washington, Douglass’s American eagle—like the protecting wing of the ships on the Chesapeake Bay—shielded him from the proslavery forces that would see him captured and returned south.  

Of course, the irony of these passages is that there really is no difference in the American eagles Douglass describes: Both define citizenship rigidly and definitively. Any being outside the citizenry (such as a slave) is in great danger, while the eagle zealously defends any being who can lay claim to its protection. In defending American sailors and their claims to bodily liberty, America was announcing its commitment to equality for all its peoples. When Douglass dons the garb of the sailor and presents his certificate, he demonstrates that he too can make a claim for protection that will be honored. Posing as a seafarer, Douglass demonstrates convincingly that antebellum sailors—whatever their real disadvantages and hardships—were hardly slaves; any attempt to suggest otherwise was fatuous. Though Douglass the slave and Douglass the
sailor are not essentially different, the law created a profound difference. Douglass’s American eagle protects legal status, rather than simple humanity.

The nexus of slavery and freedom embodied in the American eagle was also a subject of some consideration for antebellum sailors, as evidenced by the whale tooth engraving pictured in Figure 3 below. Unlike the engravings above, this tooth depicts an eagle with an ambiguous relation to its nation and to the objects of national oppression. The eagle perches atop a black slave, herself lying prostrate before the nation’s capital. The slave appears to carry a small child in her arms and her position is vulnerable—the eagle may have surprised her. She looks back with alarm toward the bird, set in a dominant position in the scene. The intent of the eagle is unclear: has it come to rescue the slave, lifting her from the ground and carrying her to freedom? Is it attacking the slave in front of the symbolic home of American freedom, the United States capitol? The artist’s intent, and years of wear, have rendered the image difficult to comprehend; however, this American eagle, like those described in Frederick Douglass’s different texts, can be understood as the embodiment of either American liberty or of American might, the protector of humanity or the enforcer of laws.
This ambiguous relationship between American might and American freedom remains unresolved in this scrimshaw engraving, but the final section of “The Heroic Slave,” set in a Richmond coffee house following the revolt on the slave ship Creole, may represent Douglass’s attempt to merge the American eagle that threatened Madison Washington with the one that he described years later in Life and Times. The rebel slaves on board ship take on the identity of sailors, just as Douglass had, in order to claim “sailor’s rights,” dignity, and equal regard—to claim, in effect, their own humanity. Rather than being imprinted on a protection certificate, Madison Washington’s American eagle is revealed in his words and evident in his intelligence and bearing—his natural qualities reveal him as a citizen deserving of the protection Washington that he can find
only under the paw of the British lion. Aboard ship and on the open sea, Madison Washington and his fellow rebels obtain the freedom that allows them to prove their worthiness for citizenship and its legal protections. With such freedom, Madison Washington also calls forth an American eagle that would not only rescue the slave and install him in freedom, but would also zealously defend his right to be free.

II: “The Heroic Slave”

Madison Washington, just like Douglass himself, acts with the assumption of such a natural equality, and he earns the belated respect of one of his former captors. As Tom Grant, the first mate of the *Creole*, tells his fellow sailors of Madison Washington’s slave revolt aboard that ship, he claims, “I deny that the Negro is, naturally, a coward, or that your theory of managing slaves will stand the test of salt water... It is one thing to manage a company of slaves on a Virginia plantation, and quite another thing to quell an insurrection on the lonely billows of the Atlantic, where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty” (HS 158). When he leads the rebellion, Washington acts without malice or hatred to achieve dominance. As Tom Grant’s description of him reveals, even in rebellion Washington is an ideal master of both ship and men:

He was not indifferent to the dreadful hurricane; yet he met it with the equanimity of an old sailor. He was silent but not agitated. The first words he uttered after the storm had slightly subsided, were characteristic of the man. “Mr. Mate, you cannot write the bloody laws of slavery on those restless billows. The ocean, if not the land, is free.” I confess, gentlemen, I felt myself in the presence of a superior man; one who, had he been a white man, I would have followed willingly and gladly in any honorable enterprise. Our difference of color was the only ground for difference of action. It was not that his principles were wrong in the abstract; for they are the principles of 1776. (HS 162-3)

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253 See also Ivy Glenn Wilson, "'I Give the Sign of Democracy': Race, Labor, and the Aesthetics of Nationalism" (PhD, Yale U), 228-30.
Madison Washington triumphs through violence (though as several critics have noted, Douglass carefully avoids linking Washington to the violence aboard the ship), but he announces both his ability as well as the justice of his cause with words and his adherence to American principles.\textsuperscript{254} When confronted with an unruly crew of white hostages, led by Tom Grant, Washington does not continue the violence nor let his men kill Tom Grant; instead, he preserves the remaining sailors. Neither slave nor driver, he desires not to demonstrate dominance through violence, but to demonstrate moral superiority and thereby to ensure dominance.

In \textit{To Wake the Nations}, Eric Sundquist argues that Frederick Douglass’s identification with the hero of his story is evidence of Douglass’s desire for an important role as a public leader for black Americans. Indeed, by linking a slave to the founding fathers and by giving him voice and intellect to announce his superiority to whites, “The Heroic Slave” does just that.\textsuperscript{255} Central to Douglass’s push for a leadership role, according to Sundquist, is his belief in natural rights that would allow for a natural aristocracy. Douglass, like Madison Washington, was certain that any natural aristocracy would include him at the top. What makes the natural aristocracy possible in “The Heroic Slave” as Tom Grant intimates, is the sea itself. Washington’s recapture and reenslavement in Virginia demonstrate the power of laws and institutions to circumscribe


personal liberty ashore; however, the geographic space of the sea, outside landed boundaries and (at least temporarily) landed law, gives Washington the freedom to rise up with his fellow slaves and to seize control over his own destiny. At the same time, “The Heroic Slave” is not simply an example of the dichotomy between sea and land reinstated in the dichotomy between natural rights and state power. Using the logic of this sea/land division—wherein the sea was the proving ground for natural rights—white seamen who were made rhetorical slaves would have consistently risen up against unjust masters like Captain Thompson in order to assert their inherent dignity and natural rights. How, then, is Madison Washington different from the beleaguered forecastle sailors of antebellum sea narratives? Put another way, how does Washington overcome the shipboard slavery that restricted white sailors?256

The question has two answers, and the first is simply that Madison Washington is exceptional. Tom Grant explains: “The leader of the mutiny…was just as shrewd a fellow as ever I met in my life, and was as well fitted to lead in a dangerous enterprise as any one white man in ten thousand” (HS 160). In Grant’s description, Washington, (whose very name is “ominous of greatness”) is not simply a talented black man, but part of the talented ten-thousandth, a remarkable example of human ability. His native skills are even more impressive when compared to the “terror-stricken sailors” who refuse to descend from the rigging to quell the mutiny. The political and social messages that Douglass conveys via the novella leave little room for ambiguity in his characterization of the heroic Washington. More than simply the leader of the slave revolt, Washington is

256 In a similar vein Michael Rogin notes that the slave uprising in “Benito Cereno” is the “only successful mutiny in all of Melville’s fiction. There is near-mutiny on the Neversink, comic mutiny on the Julia, failed mutiny on the Town-Ho, alleged mutiny on the Bellipotent, and desertion from the Dolly.” Michael Paul Rogin, Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville (New York: Knopf, 1983), 209.
the superior figure on the *Creole*; he demands his “rightful freedom” over the “bloody laws of slavery” and has the means to achieve it for himself and his fellow mutineers.²⁵⁷

A more intriguing reason for Washington’s triumph over the white crew who attempt to enforce the property rights that disregard natural abilities it is what I will call *emancipating blackness*. Many ship masters sought to replicate a form of slavery on their ships in order to counteract the breezes of liberty that might inspire their crews. Captain Claret in *White-Jacket* and the vicious Captain Thompson on Dana’s *Pilgrim* derive power by creating fear and using violence; they imagine their men as slaves in the hopes that the men will imagine themselves the same way. The rebels aboard the *Creole*, however, are neither imagined slaves, rhetorical slaves, but slaves *in fact*. This very marginality allows Washington’s successful action as opposed to the unsuccessful or absent uprisings in the numerous antebellum sea narratives that portrayed vicious masters. Black skin liberates the men aboard the *Creole* (especially Washington) because it removes from the slaves obligations of citizenship even as it denies them its protections.

To illustrate the difference between rhetorical and actual slaves, I return once more to the flogging scene in *Two Years Before the Mast*. The sailors aboard Dana’s *Pilgrim* are humiliated by Captain Thompson’s denigration of them, in large part because it casts them in the role of slaves and denies them the liberty that they claim as American citizens. As Dana writes, though, sailors had few avenues through which to reverse this rhetorical slavery:

²⁵⁷ See Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity*, 173-197. Sale argues that Tom Grant and Mr. Listwell, the two white characters who vouch for Washington’s unparalleled impressiveness, are struggling to comprehend an expanded “authorized community of the United States” (189).
If [sailors] resist, it is mutiny; and if they succeed, and take the vessel, it is piracy. If they ever yield again, their punishment must come; and if they do not yield, they are pirates for life. If a sailor resist his commander, he resists the law, and piracy or submission are his only alternatives. Bad as it was, it must be borne. It is what a sailor ships for. *(TY 90)*

Dana’s assumptions in this paragraph reveal his privileging of legal writ over natural rights, but more significant is his sense of resignation; it permeates the passage and forecloses a response on the part of oppressed sailors. Though Dana did not condemn the practice of flogging in general, he imbues the flogging scene in *Two Years Before the Mast* with considerable moral outrage and describes his own sickened reaction. Despite acknowledging this instance of flogging as an injustice, however, Dana does not immediately leap to supporting the forecastle sailor in concrete or abstract terms.

In “The Heroic Slave” Washington and his comrades do not suffer under a fear of flogging or violence at the hands of their masters. When Tom Grant attempts to reassert control over the ship and to navigate it to a slave port, Washington reveals the lengths to which he will go to preserve his newfound freedom: “[B]efore this brig shall touch a slave-cursed shore while I am on board, I will myself put a match to the magazine, and blow her, and be blown with her, into a thousand fragments” *(HS 162)*. Madison Washington and his fellow rebels, who are slaves *in fact*, respond to the threat of re-enslavement with a game of brinksmanship that leaves them firmly in control of the *Creole*. The rebels follow William McNally’s sentiments that, “Seamen know that they are born free, and freemen will never submit to the lash of slavery,” and refuse to be cowed; in effect, the very act of resistance confirms their freedom. Their blackness and extra-legal status are the very things that set them free—though the power of the ship’s master was to turn a man into a slave, he could not turn a slave into a slave. Of course, as
Frederick Douglass writes in his *Narrative*, a slave may certainly turn himself into a man.\(^{258}\)

In Douglass’s story, it is not just one slave who turns himself into a man. Nineteen rebels whose combined efforts bring freedom to all and become men as well. Though Washington is their leader, the rebels, “not one of whom had ever been to sea before,” prove themselves to be far more capable than the sailors who quake in fear during the revolt (HS 160). They steer through a squall, and, under Washington’s direction, lead the ship to Nassau. Seamanship is not learned in Douglass’s tale. It is innate and the embodiment of motives and principles in accordance with a natural aristocracy. Self-liberated, Madison Washington, whom Douglass describes as a “natural sailor,” demonstrates his inherent abilities and his status in a natural hierarchy. James Fenimore Cooper and his fellow maritime authors used the superior seamanship of upright, moral, and talented captains to demonstrate a particular vision of the natural aristocracy. Douglass accepts Cooper’s logic—that is, the logic of the maritime world—but retools the nautical hierarchy to include Madison Washington as the ideal master.\(^{259}\)

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\(^{258}\) I refer to the confrontation with Mr. Covey, the narrative of which Douglass prefaces thusly: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.” Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 65. As I will suggest in section four of this chapter, Douglass’s model of resistance at sea elides certain material realities that made resistance far less practical on land. At the same time, Douglass is aware of those realities, as evidenced by Tom Grant’s discussion with Jack Williams.

\(^{259}\) For a different view, see Krista Walter, "Trappings of Nationalism in Frederick Douglass's *the Heroic Slave*," *African American Review* 34, no. 2 (2000), 233-247. Walter makes the strongest argument for a specifically American nationalism underlying the idealization of Madison Washington in *The Heroic Slave*, writing that “[Douglass] accepts without criticism a host of nationalistic suppositions underpinning the ideology of American slavery: the primacy of Eurocentric historical and cultural perspectives, the belief in America’s glorious origins, the projection of a kind of manifest destiny based on such origins, and the necessary adherence to patriarchal values” (237). There are two problems with Walter’s argument (one of which she notes). First, as Walter observes, Douglass’s overarching political mission (abolition) forced him to accept certain assumptions in order to challenge others (namely, the humanity, heroism, and natural ability of a black character). Accepting these assumptions causes its own problems, as Andrews, Walter, and Yarborough aver. Second, Walter completely ignores the ending of *The Heroic Slave*, in which
Though the historical Madison Washington’s personal qualities may have indeed set him apart, in truth, he was no natural sailor. According to Senate testimony regarding the Creole uprising, Washington and the other slaves aboard the ship did not navigate the vessel and enlisted William Merritt, a white man, to help them steer the ship toward the Bahamas; the rebels agreed to spare Merritt’s life in return for his assistance.260 In a deposition, Merritt said that he was “in charge of the brig, under the direction of Madison Washington, Doctor Ruffin, and Ben Johnstone,” a story corroborated by other men on the ship. These men also vouched for Washington’s humane treatment of the whites on board, suggesting that the leader of the rebellion had in fact behaved much as Douglass represents him.261 Douglass—by accident, ignorance, or choice—obscures the historical record and places Madison Washington at the helm of both the rebellion and the ship itself, turning him into something more than the master of the Creole. Washington is, in every sense, the finest sailor aboard.

Douglass may have revised history in “The Heroic Slave” to demonstrate the absolute self-sufficiency of his hero or to posit a link between slaves and sailors. This intriguing possibility aligns with Krista Walter’s assertion that Douglass narrates the final Madison Washington is parading through the streets of Nassau, safe once more under the paw of the British lion. Thus, though Douglass may have indeed accepted certain nationalistic assumptions, he divorces those assumptions from the United States itself. The only place that American virtues, such as they are, can be celebrated and acknowledged is outside America. This seems to me a potent criticism of American nationalism and a pointed acknowledgment of the distance between the actual and the ideal. See also William L. Andrews, "The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative," PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America 105, no. 1 (1990), 23-34; Yarborough, Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass's 'the Heroic Slave', 166-188.


261 United States, Senate Documents 51, 27th Congress, 2d Session, 29.
portion of “The Heroic Slave” from the point of view of Tom Grant because “Grant allows Douglass to accommodate a more aggressively patriotic, working-class, and racist reader. Although he witnesses the rebellion firsthand, Grant does not become a devoted abolitionist, but feels he must honor the heroic achievements of Washington nonetheless.”

Walter links Douglass’s story to working-class sailors who may have indeed been racists despite having social and economic ostracization in common with the American slave. Helen Lock suggests, “Grant never reaches the point of recognition that as Americans driven to pursue liberty and self-determination, motivated by the principles of 1776, he and Washington are each other, and their fates are intertwined.” Following Walter and Lock, I believe that Grant admires Washington’s resistance and may envy it—Washington embodies the finest qualities of the manly sailor and acts on his love of liberty without fear of retribution or death. Washington, unlike many of the fictional and factual seamen who occupy this study, realizes that he has nothing to lose and has the courage to strike back against the powers that aim to control him.

Reading “The Heroic Slave” in the context of other sea narratives helps to demonstrate the important material and rhetorical differences between the “slaves” of the forecastle and the slaves of the plantation, and it also speaks to the very different sort of liberty to which enslaved rebels may have aspired. White and free black sailors may have wanted to assert their liberty to preserve feelings of equality central to their American identity, to obtain proper remuneration, or to ensure proper treatment. For the black rebels aboard the Creole, however, liberty was not rhetorical or economic, but physical.

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Walter, *Trappings of Nationalism in Frederick Douglass's the Heroic Slave*, 241.

At the same time, Douglass’s story ends with the rebels parading through the streets of Nassau: liberty was achieved, but deracinated homelessness was its price. Though the historical record of Madison Washington’s rebellion limited Douglass’s authorial options, the fact that Douglass’s representative black American could not be an American citizen is certainly significant. Washington’s forced expatriation suggests that perhaps the United States was not meant to be a natural aristocracy after all—that there was no place for the heroic sailor or the liberty-loving slave.264

Douglass himself had left America shortly after the publication of his *Narrative* and found in England the reception he had desired in the United States, but he was ambivalent about realizing the principles of 1776 under the very flag that Americans had fought to escape. Douglass’s obsession with those principles would define his work for the next decade, through his speech (“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”) on July 5, 1852, to his authoring of “The Heroic Slave” to his personal declaration of independence from Garrison and the American Antislavery Society and subsequent reworking of his autobiography in *My Bondage and My Freedom*.265 Douglass seemingly kept searching for a voice that could arrest his listeners and force them to reconsider the

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264 Robert B. Stepto focuses not on the ending of the novel but on the white voices (Listwell and Grant) both North and South who are convinced of the justice of Washington’s cause; however, Tom Grant who rejects the slave trade but disclaims the badge “abolitionist” is a troubling representative of Southern abolitionism. See Robert B. Stepto, "Storytelling in Early Afro-American Fiction: Frederick Douglass 'the Heroic Slave'" in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1984), 175-186.

tenuous foundations on which their inherited hierarchies were constructed and to understand the promise of a new natural aristocracy based on manly resistance to tyranny. In doing so, Frederick Douglass explored the political possibilities of the sea narrative, and though he perceived the emancipating power of blackness through his use of the genre, the freedom that he locates is ultimately confined to the extra-national space of the maritime world and its island communities.

Writing two years later, Herman Melville used the facts of an earlier slave rebellion as the basis for his haunting tale, “Benito Cereno.” Like Douglass, Melville understood the racialist assumptions underlying slavery, but his work was not shaped by a clearly defined political agenda as was Douglass’s, and Melville was working with a vastly different historical script. Babo, the wily and daring rebel whose mission matches that of Madison Washington, overcomes white mastery only to lose in his final battle with the instruments of that mastery: white violence and the power of legal writ. “Benito Cereno,” rather than celebrating black agency and announcing natural equality, impresses the reader with the stark distinctions between sea and land and sketches the limits of emancipating blackness.

III: “Benito Cereno”

Having left the Bachelor’s Delight and arrived aboard the San Dominick, Amasa Delano muses about the laxity of discipline aboard Don Benito Cereno’s ship and the particular listlessness of its ostensible commander: “[T]o 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.”  Of course, Cereño’s haggard appearance and dilapidated ship reflect his true position aboard the *San Dominick*, though Delano, as is his wont throughout Melville’s tale, remains unaware. Amasa Delano, who considers himself a benevolent dictator aboard his own vessel, imagines that Benito Cereño still maintains a captain’s power, a power unimaginable on land except by those bound in the master-slave relationship. “Benito Cereño” is a negative version of that relationship: blacks take on white roles and whites take on black roles, but the picture remains the same. Irreconcilably joined, master and slave cannot escape the hierarchical structures that define interracial relationships and so remain permanent captives. While Frederick Douglass imagines the emancipation of Mr. Listwell, Tom Grant, and Madison Washington, who escape, respectively, the shackles of bourgeois apathy, racism and slavery, Herman Melville suggests that emancipating blackness has its limits. Though the open sea may allow for momentary reversals of racial hierarchies, landed power structures ultimately prove stronger than either a ship’s master or a heroic slave.  

What protects Captain Delano in “Benito Cereño,” ironically, is a naïve racism that renders him oblivious to the ongoing rebellion aboard the *San Dominick* and

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267 Recent criticism on “Benito Cereno” is legion and quite engaging. Two works that proved invaluable in guiding my thinking about “Benito Cereño” are Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville*, 165-203; Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, 135-224. Also crucial was the biographical and bibliographical information in Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography*, 2 v.. I also benefited from reading in Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville’s America*; Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*; Wilson, *I Give the Sign of Democracy: Race, Labor, and the Aesthetics of Nationalism*. 
(presumably) keeps him from taking action to suppress it. As he watches Babo hold a razor high above a quaking Cereno, Delano muses, “most negroes are natural valets and hairdressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castanets, and…there is…about them a certain easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune” (BC 83). The American captain reads the world in light of his assumptions, leading him to misread the revolt taking place aboard Cereno’s ship. Modern critics have made much of Delano’s obliviousness, which is especially noteworthy because it is so commonplace—Babo is able to orchestrate the situation aboard the San Dominick because he assumes (correctly) that whoever would board the ship would do so with the same assumptions that Delano evinces. As Christopher Castiglia and Ross Castronovo put it, “Babo stages a play for Delano’s consumption in order to manipulate the aesthetic practices that he predicts, rightly, Delano will bring to the spectacle of racial suffering.” Tom Grant reveals a similar outlook when he tells his fellow sailors that he could not recognize the “principles of 1776” in “one whom I deemed my inferior” (HS 163).

Not only does an assumption of inferiority protect the unwitting Delano, it also provides the freedom that allows for mutiny aboard the San Dominick in the first place. In his deposition in Lima, Cereno testifies that “the Negroes slept upon deck, as is customary in this navigation, and none wore fetters because the owner, his friend Aranda, told him they were all tractable” (BC 104). As in the case of Madison Washington, who

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268 Robert Levine argues that Delano’s obliviousness is a “willed blindness” that serves its purpose of protecting him aboard the San Dominick. See Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville*, 207.

gained the trust of his white captors to put them at ease, Babo and his fellow slaves use white assumptions to emancipate themselves at sea. Those same assumptions preserve the well-meaning Delano while he is aboard the San Dominick, and Benito Cereno’s leap onto Delano’s whaleboat averts the slaves’ takeover of the Bachelor’s Delight. When he realizes that he has been deceived, Delano does not—as Tom Grant ultimately does—reconsider his assumptions; instead, he chooses to arm himself and to fight the rebellious blacks; only the warnings of Cereno and his men change his mind.

The parallels between the white characters in both “The Heroic Slave” and “Benito Cereno” are important to note, because the tales do not simply reveal the racism that infects white America but consider possible solutions as well. Douglass locates his solution in the manly eloquence and worthy seamanship of Madison Washington that converts the working-class racist Tom Grant. Douglass’s solution to racism is not a widespread acknowledgment of commonality, but one man’s acknowledgment of another man’s superiority. Melville’s Babo, however, is not an uncomplicated hero in the mold of Madison Washington; his claim is more broad, and his methods more severe. Babo and his fellow rebels aboard the San Dominick do not win a rhetorical battle over cowed white sailors, and they do not assume command of the ship by taking only one life. Their revolt is far more grisly than that aboard the Creole, and the violence does not stop once the slaves take control of the ship. According to Cereno’s deposition, the rebels killed 18 of the 36 crewman aboard the ship during the initial uprising and took the lives of 13 more (including Aranda) as the voyage continued; some of these men “made no resistance nor begged for anything else but mercy” but were killed anyway (BC 107). The reasons for the continued violence are not hard to fathom—having set themselves
free and killed their master Aranda, the rebels find themselves still enslaved. They cannot navigate the ship, and Cereno will not take them to Senegal because provisions are scant and the vessel is decimated. Thus, though the men have overcome white power and claimed their freedom, they cannot effect it outside the San Dominick. Once Amasa Delano arrives aboard the ship, Babo and his fellow rebels must become slaves once again.

In “The Heroic Slave” Madison Washington assumes the helm of the Creole and announces to all, “Do not flatter yourselves that I am ignorant of chart or compass. I know both” (HS 161). Douglass’s historical fiction helps him write a tale of non-violent self-reliance and position his hero within the pantheon of great Americans—Washington’s superior seamanship allows him to take the captaincy of the Creole and to navigate toward his freedom, albeit outside the United States. Melville, unwilling to obscure the impediments to freedom for rebellious slaves, reminds readers that a just cause imparts to no man the skills of seamanship. Captain Delano notes the general disorder prevailing aboard the San Dominick:

Wonted to the quiet orderliness of the sealer’s comfortable family of a crew, the noisy confusion of the San Dominick’s suffering host repeatedly challenged his eye. Some prominent breaches not only of discipline but of decency were observed. These Captain Delano could not but ascribe, in the main, to the absence of those subordinate deck-officers to whom, along with higher duties, is entrusted what may be styled the police department of a populous ship. (BC 54)

Though junior officers are missing aboard the San Dominick, Delano comes to believe that the problem is with Cereno himself: “Without communicating the opinion, of course, the American could not but impute at least part of the detentions both to clumsy seamanship and faulty navigation” (BC 58). Delano ascribes the lapses in discipline and
the flawed seamanship Cereno’s inability to command, but the true cause is the slave revolt: there is no captain aboard the San Dominick.

Despite the fact that he is neither captain nor talented seaman, Babo is definitely in charge. As Cereno notes in his deposition, Babo forces the ostensible captain to garner information on the power and condition of the Bachelor’s Delight and then “The negro Babo again drew [Cereno] aside, telling him that that very night he (the deponent) would be captain of two ships, instead of one” (BC 110). This doubly ironic sentence reveals that Babo is giving orders to the captain and that he is aiming to augment Cereno’s power by taking another ship for him to command. But Babo does not suggest to Cereno that he, the rebellious slave, will be the captain of two ships. Perhaps he is being wry, or perhaps he grasps the impossibility of his attaining the captaincy of his ship as Madison Washington becomes captain of the Creole.

In “The Heroic Slave,” Madison Washington uses his voice to announce his fitness for freedom. Always heard through a white ear and reproduced for readers, Washington’s words—like those in Douglass’s soliloquy by the Chesapeake Bay—mark him as a slave whose pleas for freedom resonate with white listeners. Washington uses words that match his goals to gain and secure power. The strength of his voice and the logic of his cause help him direct the men aboard the Creole to make port and win the grudging respect of Tom Grant.270

Babo’s voice, though eloquent and powerful it must be, is never on display in “Benito Cereno.” Babo “gives commands, asks questions, speculates, is seen conversing

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with his co-rebels” and “speaks not only his own language but Spanish as well,” but his voice is limited by the drama that he has created aboard ship. Babo must read his lines, just as surely as Cereno and Delano. When Delano takes command of Babo’s ship in order to bring it toward the Bachelor’s Delight, Babo can only become what Delano thinks him to be:

While giving some directions about setting a lower stu’n’-sail, suddenly Captain Delano heard a voice faithfully repeating his orders. Turning, he saw Babo, now for the time acting, under the pilot, his original part of captain of the slaves. This assistance proved valuable. Tattered sails and warped yards were soon brought into some trim. And no brace or halyard was pulled but to the blithe songs of the inspired negroes. (BC 92)

More than captain of the slaves, Babo is the leader of the entire ship, but he must parrot the speech of Delano, dramatizing his hollow captaincy. Moreover, his speech both confirms his subservient position and inaugurates the “blithe songs” of the men, both of which gratify Delano’s racist assumptions. In “Benito Cereno,” the only place where black freedom—both of speech and action—exists is at sea and out of sight; the moment a white man lays eyes upon the San Dominick, that freedom evaporates as the blacks must act in a drama that they know all too well. Even though the sea provides the material space in which blacks can claim their natural rights, that claim is meaningless unless a landed authority (such as the Bahamian government or the mildly reformed Tom Grant) accepts it. Though Babo’s voice has confirmed his humanity for Don Benito much as Washington’s does for Tom Grant, the transformed Cereno is simply broken, not

271 Jehlen, Melville and Class, 97.

272 Michael Rogin writes, “Natural rights theories promised individual freedom; there are no free individuals on the San Dominick.” Rogin, Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville, 213.
reformed. The truth of black humanity is too damning to be overcome, and the political force that such a truth could engender eludes Delano and dies with Don Benito.273

Babo’s pointed claim for his own humanity (and that of his fellow slave rebels) evaporates in the days following his recapture by Delano and his crew. After the revolt is quashed, “upon reaching the sealer, calling for ropes, Captain Delano bound the negro, who made no resistance, and had him hoisted to the deck” (BC 100). As Babo is brought to land, and to court, his power fades, and he is once again consigned to a fixed position within the white world; thereafter, Babo remains silent:

As for the black—whose brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt, with the plot—his slight frame, inadequate to that which it held, had at once yielded to the superior muscular strength of his captor, in the boat. Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words. (BC 116)

This wonderful passage suggests that Melville was skeptical—far more skeptical than Douglass—concerning the power of speech as a tool for racial liberation or even political action.274 Babo does not resist upon being captured, and he refuses to speak before the tribunal in Lima because his words cannot sound louder than his actions in overcoming slavery and attaining freedom. What could Babo say more eloquently than that which he already demonstrated in his clever and determined effort aboard the San Dominick? What could attest more to his abilities or his own humanity than plotting and leading the revolt? Babo’s silence is his only escape from the hierarchies that have defined his life as a slave.

273 Maggie Sale writes that “Benito Cereno” “does not grant the rebels a position from which to speak or a sympathetic character to represent them.” Sale, The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity, 194.

In refusing to speak, he demands that slaveholders’ actions be brought to the bar; rhetorics of justification must be dismissed in favor of an accounting of the facts. But even the facts are uncertain, as Melville’s heavily edited deposition makes clear.

The land proves fatal to Babo as legal writ accomplishes what the crew of the San Dominick could not. So too does a return to the landed world mark the end for Don Benito Cereno:

…midway on the passage, the ill-fated Spaniard, relaxed from constraint, showed some signs of regaining health with free-will; yet, agreeably to his own foreboding, shortly before arriving at Lima, he relapsed, finally becoming so reduced as to be carried ashore in arms. (BC 103)

Cereno is haunted by the return to land because he knows that he must give his deposition, go to court, and stand before a body that will demand Babo’s execution. On the voyage to Lima, before his decline, Cereno tries to explain his troubled soul, to which Delano replies:

“You generalize, Don Benito; and mournfully enough. But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves.”

“Because they have no memory,” he dejectedly replied; “because they are not human.”

“But these mild trades that now fan your cheek, do they not come with a human-like healing to you? Warm friends, steadfast friends are the trades.”

“With their steadfastness they but waft me to my tomb, señor,” was the foreboding response.

“You are saved,” cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; “you are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?”

275 Myra Jehlen argues, “While [Babo] is free, this interior life expresses itself in speech…The token that this interior life survives after he is returned to captivity is his refusal to ever speak again,” and Eric Sundquist writes, “Babo will not speak within the language of a law that does not apply to him.” Jehlen, Melville and Class, 97; Sundquist, To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature, 182. Also see Lee, Melville Subversive Political Philosophy: ‘Benito Cereno’ and the Fate of Speech, 495-519

276 On Melville’s use and editing of legal transcripts in “Benito Cereno,” seeWeiner, ‘Benito Cereno’ and the Failure of Law, 1-28
Cereno knows that the script is already written—that the result of the trial is predetermined because Babo is black and Cereno is not. Having lived for a time as the powerless slave, Cereno knows the imposition of power and its ability to separate right from wrong, legal from illegal, sailor from slave, and black from white. The shadow of the negro—Babo’s shadow—renders binary distinctions impossible and reminds Cereno of the easy slippage from sailor, to slave, and back again.

The tenuous sense of freedom to which Cereno clings at sea evaporates like Babo’s when Cereno returns to land and is brought before the bar. Though he journeys to Lima with Babo and is asked to testify against him in court, Cereno will neither look at Babo nor identify him: “During the passage Don Benito did not visit him. Nor then, nor at any time after, would he look at him. Before the tribunal he refused. When pressed by the judges he fainted” (BC 116). At the moment when his physical salvation is confirmed and Babo is put to death, Cereno is most aggrieved because he understands that writ, as opposed to right, will condemn Babo’s crimes while saying nothing of Cereno’s. Self-indictment consigns the latter to death. Conversely, Susan Weiner argues, “[Cereno’s] failure to face Babo indicates his inability to recognize himself and the symbiotic relationship between victim and victimizer. It is this lack of recognition that leads to his demise” ibid., 13. This reading fails to account for Cereno’s haunting description of the “shadow” that Babo hast cast and the complete mental and physical breakdown resulting thereby. Furthermore, such a reading equates Cereno with Delano; however, the two men have responded to the crisis aboard the San Dominick in markedly different ways.
In “Benito Cereno” the power of emancipating blackness is bounded by the sea. Though the watery world allows for the slaves’ rebellion and assertion of humanity, Melville cannot fathom a scenario in which such an assertion can be transferred to land. Whereas in “The Heroic Slave,” Tom Grant admits Madison Washington’s humanity and decides to renounce the slave trade forevermore, saying “I’m resolved to never endanger my life again in a cause which my conscience does not approve” (HS 159), the sea-based rebellion aboard the San Dominick effects no transformation on land. Captain Delano, the only character in the story whose transformation would have meaningful consequences, is as unaware ashore as he was aboard Cereno’s ship. Delano’s imperviousness hints at a new definition of white slavery—it is Delano and whites like him who are enslaved by narrow horizons and static conceptions of humanity. Unable to consider himself as anything but a master, or a black as anything but a slave or a killer, Delano is locked in the binary that defines all black-white relations. Tom Grant escapes that binary by finding a new ground on which to value black humanity, but there is no new ground for Delano. Douglass, writing with the belief that the American system was not beyond repair, cannot imagine emancipated blackness in the geographical United States. Melville, far less sanguine than Douglass, wonders if even the rebellious black sailor could indeed transform slavery into freedom. Writing four years after Melville, Martin Delany would continue to probe the possibilities for black freedom, not in the form of a slave rebellion at sea, but in a widespread revolution led by a black former sailor: Blake.
IV: Blake

Seamanship was essential to the success of the slave revolt at sea, as the fictions of Douglass and Melville insist. Knowledge of navigation and ship handling allow Madison Washington to ascend the Creole hierarchy without resorting to the violence that typifies Babo’s reign on the San Dominick. In Martin Delany’s Blake, however, seamanship not only allows the title character to assume a position of leadership in the general rebellion of his fellow slaves, it also promises the possibility of freedom for all slaves. In Delany’s novel, navigation and seamanship enable the self-reliant rebelliousness that Frederick Douglass demonstrates in his autobiographical and fictional writings. Blake, who imparts his knowledge of navigation to his fellow blacks, reveals that sea-knowledge and “headwork” will allow rebellious slaves to plot their own course for freedom, either on land or at sea. Moreover, the imminent rebellion at the center of Blake takes place within the same radical maritime world where Touissant L’Overture and David Walker located a space for the assertion of black power.278

Delany’s novel begins with a group of wealthy merchants meeting in Baltimore to discuss the refitting of *The Merchantman* for the slave trade. This opening scene notes the complicity of men from both the North and South in funding and driving the international slave trade, which had been outlawed in the United States since 1808. Blake, who grew up in Cuba as a free black named Henry Blaucus, first shipped at age seventeen, serving before the mast on a slave ship that he believed was a trading vessel. However, the master is actually engaged in the slave trade, and upon reaching Key West with his cargo, he sells the slaves—the young Blake among them. Though the now-enslaved Blake continued to work on the ship for three more voyages, he was eventually taken to the plantation of Colonel Franks, who is his master in Mississippi when the novel opens. Blake does not take to sea again until his escape to Cuba, after which he signs on as sailing master aboard the refit *Merchantman*, now a slave ship named the *Vulture*. He ships “with the intention of taking her in mid-ocean as a prize for ourselves, as we must have a vessel at our command before we make a strike” (*B* 198).

Significantly, Blake not only wishes to stage a rebellion at sea, he wishes to do so in order to enable rebellion on land; taking the *Vulture* is an act of appropriation, not of rebellion for its own sake, or even the sake of the black crew and slaves on board.

After boarding the *Vulture* to seek the position as sailing-master, Blake produces a “certificate of his marine qualifications obtained when he left the slaver in Florida, and which he always had managed to keep from Franks, who had lost sight entirely of it” (*B*, 200). The certificate is different from the one that Frederick Douglass used to escape from slavery. That document, emblazoned with an American eagle, was a seaman’s protection certificate confirming the sailor’s citizenship; Douglass used the certificate to
pose as an American sailor as he attempts to claim his own legal position within the
United States. Blake’s document, however, certifies his skills and qualifications—it
confirms his seamanship rather than his identity. This seamanship, besides allowing for
Blake’s employment aboard the *Vulture*, allows him to instruct his fellow slaves as they
plan a general rebellion that will help blacks aggressively assert the fact of their own
existence and inclusion within antebellum America. In so doing, Blake rejects the sea
freedom emblematized by the American eagle on Douglass’s protection certificate and
pursues a broader, more capacious freedom that can include all blacks. Blake’s actions,
though they prove his native abilities as do Madison Washington’s, are directed toward a
redefinition of American citizenship. Delany exposes the need for such a new definition
by imagining the American eagle as both a symbol of a corrupt nation and a tool for
liberation from the legalized oppression of slavery.

In Part One of Delany’s novel, Blake roams the United States after he has escaped
from the Franks’ plantation and encourages slaves to rebel against their masters and
inaugurate the widespread insurrection that will end slavery forever. He also returns to
his former home to liberate his family, and, in leading them northward from Mississippi,
Blake illuminates the true power of the American eagle:

"Have you a pass?" demanded the boatman as a ruse, lest he might be watched by a concealed party. "Let me see it!"
"Here, sir," said Henry, presenting to him by the light of a match which he held in his hand for the purpose, the face of a half eagle.
"Here is seven of you, an' I can't do it for that!" in an humble undertone supplicating manner, said the man. "I axes that for one!"
The weight of seven half eagles dropped into his hand, caused him eagerly to seize the oars, making the quickest possible time to the opposite side of the river. (*B* 130)
The interaction between the escaping slave and the boatman here presciently mimics Douglass’s description from *Life and Times*, but Delany’s white character is less interested in the patriotic stirrings of American freedom than in the material reality of American cash. Delany makes the hollow patriotism aroused by the American eagle more explicit in describing the next river crossing:

"I want none of yer nigger passes!" angrily said he. "They ain't none uv 'em good 'or nothin', no how! It's no use to show it to me, ye's can't git over!"

First looking meaningly and determinedly at Charles and Andy—biting his lips—then addressing himself to the man, [Blake] said:

"Then I have one that will pass us!" presenting the unmistaking evidence of a shining gold eagle, at the sight of which emblem of his country's liberty, the skiffman's patriotism was at once awakened, and their right to pass as American freemen indisputable…

Dropping into his hand the ten-dollar gold piece, the man bowed earnestly, uttering—

"I hope ye's good luck, gent'men! Ye'll al'as fine me ready when ye's come 'long this way!" (B 135)

By making the emblem of national “liberty” nothing but mammon, Delany dismisses idealized notions of an inherently freedom-loving American identity. In doing so, Delany insists that—just as money stands for freedom—money keeps blacks in slavery. If Americans are for sale to the highest bidder, the man who can produce the most eagles, then the task for enslaved Africans is to acquire enough cash to bid themselves free.279 Of course, such acquisition was mightily difficult for the majority of American slaves, but Blake’s “marine qualifications” give him the practical tools for self-liberation and allow him to show his family “the slave's great Guide to Freedom” (B 132).

279 Jo Ann Marx writes, “Delany uses metaphors and puns to reveal money as a tool that will puncture the wall of law and loyalty of whites, making a ‘white gap’ through which blacks can move to freedom.” Marx, *The Language of Liberation in Martin R. Delany's Blake, Or the Huts of America*, 22. See also Clymer, *Martin Delany's Blake and the Transnational Politics of Property*, 719.
Upon stopping with his family following the first river crossing, Blake plans a lesson in landed navigation that will allow his fellow slaves to continue northward without him:

“You see these seven stars which I've drawn on this piece of paper -- numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7? From the peculiarity of the shape of their relative position to each other, the group is called the 'Dipper,' because to look at them they look like a dipper or a vessel with a long handle...The star numbered 8, above the pointer, a little to the left, is a dim, small star, which at first sight would seem to be in a direct line with it; but by drawing a line through 7 to 8, leaves a space as you see between the star 6 and lower part of the line; or forms an angle (as the 'book men' call it, Andy) of ten degrees. The star number 9 in the distance, and a little to the right, would also seem to be directly opposite the pointers; but by drawing a line through 7 to 9, there is still a space left between the lower end of the line and 6. Now trace the dotted line from 6 through the center of 7, and it leads directly to 10. This is the North Star, the slave's great Guide to Freedom! Do you all now understand it?” (B 131-2).

Sea skills serve Blake well, as he has previously navigated his own course through the United States; now, he shares that knowledge in an effort to give his friends the means for their own escape. As the lesson continues with another navigational aid, Blake’s educated voice separates itself from the untutored slave dialect around him:

“One more explanation and then we'll go. Do you see this little round metallic box? This is called a -- --"  
"Wat dat you call 'talic, Henry? Sho, boy! yeh head so full ob gramma an' sich like dat yeh don' know how to talk!" interrupted Mammy Judy.  
"That only means iron or brass, or some hard thing like that, mammy," explained he. "The little box of which I was speaking has in it what is called a compass. It has a face almost like a clock or watch, with one straight hand which reaches entirely across the face, and turns or shakes whenever you move the box. This hand or finger is a piece of metal called 'loadstone' or 'magnet,' and termed the needle of the compass; and this end with the little cross on it, always points in one direction, and that is to the north. See; it makes no difference which way it is moved, this point of the needle turns back and points that way" (B 133).
Blake is here the lord of the level loadstone, but rather than mystifying his companions as Ahab does when he builds a compass aboard the *Pequod*, he explains the power and proper use of the navigational aid. Dismissing conjuring, religion, and hope in the unseen, Blake demands that concrete skills and hard money form the basis of the coming rebellion against the slave power.

Following the lesson in navigation, Blake emphasizes the importance of “headwork” to the slaves gathered around him: “I've told you all that's necessary to guide you from a land of slavery and long suffering, to a land of liberty and future happiness. Are you now all satisfied with what you have learned?” (*B* 134). The sea, for Blake, is not a proving ground for natural rights, nor is it simply a liminal space in which a measure of freedom can be achieved by black sailors. Rather, it is a place where blacks can learn transferable skills that will aid them in their quest for freedom. In “The Heroic Slave” and “Benito Cereno,” nautical rebellion serves as an example, a metaphor for the possibilities of black liberation and integration in the antebellum United States. Douglass and Melville probe theories of natural rights and abilities to posit freedom and equality. Delany, however, is interested in concrete results. Sea freedom, for Blake, represents the freedom to educate oneself, to obtain skills and knowledge unique within the Southern black community. Unlike Madison Washington and Babo, Blake plans to use his sea freedom and the intelligence he has acquired to educate other slaves in the tools for escape and rebellion. Though readers of Delany’s novel cannot locate a successful slave rebellion in its pages, Blake—not content with limited successes—imagines a widespread
revolution beginning in the nautical knowledge and revolutionary space unique to the maritime world.  

With this goal in mind, Delany focuses Part Two of his novel on the rebellion of free and enslaved blacks in Cuba. Supposedly instrumental to this rebellion is Blake’s journey aboard the Vulture, during which he intends to lead a shipboard rebellion, seize the vessel, and capture the ordnance on board. Not a slave himself, Blake plans to lead the slaves in the hold in an insurrection that will leave him in charge of the ship; however, the whites running the ship have taken precautions:

The most active preparations were being made, and besides the officers already named, there were thirty other whites, many of whom were Americans, all shipped as common seamen, but in reality were supernumeraries retained to meet a contingency and check an emergency such as might ensue, as the real working hands of the vessel were blacks. (B 202)

Shipboard labor is performed by the black sailors, which, as Henry shows, can be advantageous as it confers “marine qualifications” useful in a variety of settings. Furthermore, the large numbers of talented blacks sailing the Vulture render that ship (like Douglass’s Creole and Melville’s San Dominick) a likely space for a slave rebellion.

As they work on board a slave ship, the black sailors join in singing sailor songs with pointed lyrics: “Farewell to the land of the blood-hound and chain/My path is away o’er the fetterless main!” (B 207). Though their singing threatens the white masters, Blake defends the men as sailors enjoying their right to sing as they labored, “[m]y people are merry when they work, especially at sea; and they must not be denied the right

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280 Sundquist suggests that Blake is an unique black hero because he “spreads among the slave population of the South the simple belief that revolution is possible, that slave culture can nurture an African American identity invisible to the masters, and that organized insurrection is not unthinkable.” Sundquist, To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature, 199.
to sing, a privilege allowed seamen the world over” (B 208). In his provocative reading of Blake in the context of the 1854 Dred Scott decision, Gregg Crane suggests that Delany understands the legalistic foundations underlying natural rights philosophy and therefore suggests that natural rights actually emanate from majority will as opposed to innate ability or Lockean philosophy.\textsuperscript{281} This would make the Vulture, with its non-white majority, the ideal site to initiate a revolution that could overturn the supposedly natural hierarchies that informed legal precedents. The black sailors and slaves have power—both physical and moral—while on board ship. The white sailors understand this power, evidenced by the sailor cautioning a crewmate who has insulted Blake, “‘You better treat him well; he’s no common Negro, I assure you.’ The other sailor claims that “‘But we’re going where he will be common, where every Negro is made to know his place…Home in the United States’ (B 222). Until the ship reaches America, the blacks on board, and Blake in particular, have the power to reimagine natural difference, to reshape racial hierarchies, and to redefine power relationships. The basis of that power is the occupation of the black men; they are sailors, men with “rights” and “privileges” that include the freedom of movement and expression that are crucial to the conception and execution of a successful rebellion against the master of a ship or even a plantation. These rights, “sailor’s rights” not legally codified, enable Frederick Douglass’s escape and are the same rights that Blake himself demands both on land and at sea. Taking on the identity of sailors enabled blacks to claim mobility and status outside racially-defined structures.

\textsuperscript{281} Crane, \textit{The Lexicon of Rights, Power, and Community in Blake: Martin R. Delany's Dissent from Dred Scott}, 527-553.
Indeed, throughout his novel, Delany evinces an understanding of the revolutionary potential of sailors at sea, especially vis-à-vis the American mainland where rigid statutes codify the status of black slaves. The white sailors aboard the *Vulture* successfully quash the incipient rebellion of slaves and black sailors, allowing the master of the vessel to complete a remunerative slave-trading voyage. Despite hushed warnings from white sailors that the ship might never reach the protection of American laws that would confirm the whites’ majority status and their position atop the legal and economic hierarchy, Blake does not take the vessel for his Cuban army, and the blacks do not obtain either ordnance or any other aid to the general rebellion at hand. During the inchoate rebellion Blake “was strangely passive to occurring events below, strictly attending to the duties of his office in silence” (B 236). Jeffory Clymer notes that this passivity has “largely puzzled the novel’s critics,” but reading *Blake* in the context of other sailor/slave narratives points toward a plausible rationale for Blake’s recession into the background.282 The ship, a site of temporary role reversals and black assertions of power is politically significant to be sure, but only as a model or a forecast, not as a metaphor. For Blake, a sea rebellion is ultimately ineffective as the true revolution must take place on land. This revolution must redefine the statutes that hold sway when the *Vulture* docks in Key West and returns to Cuba.

The journey to Africa and back that might have initiated the grand rebellion instead allows Delany to meditate on the mendacity of slave traders and to remind readers of the centrality of the sea in the continued existence of slavery. Unlike Douglass, however, Delany dismisses the sea rebellion as a useful option for black liberation and

self-assertion, because sea rebellion is not enough. Delany has learned the lessons of “The Heroic Slave” and “Benito Cereno;” that is, that if the likes of Madison Washington and Babo were ever to achieve equality, a complete reformation of landed society must be achieved. The sea, a space in which slavery and freedom can compete on sometimes equal footing, is nonetheless a space apart, and the little revolutions occurring therein will do nothing to reshape the social and political structures that continue to define race relations in both Cuba and the United States. Therefore, having shown how such a revolution could be achieved, Delany shifts his focus to land and to the widespread rebellion that would inaugurate a major upheaval in both race relations and legal systems.283

But this larger rebellion never begins. Following his voyage aboard the Vulture, Blake—just as he does during the uprising on the ship—fades from the text as it draws toward its close. Though the rebellion in Cuba, led by a large non-white majority, could indeed lead to the sort of redefinitions of natural rights that would represent a true revolution, Robert Levine hints at the ultimate insufficiency of such action: “As suggested by the series of Blake’s border crossings…the black community has no fixed boundaries, though its ‘political destiny’ would appear to be in ‘America.’”284 Levine is surely correct, as Blake’s story begins in America where the slave question was most pressing, and the specter of American slave power is never far from his mind. Whether aboard the Vulture, in which the slave traders return to America to sell their cargo, or in explicit or implicit conversation with the United States Supreme Court, Delany demands

283 See Sundquist, To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature, 178 for a similar view based on a reading of “Benito Cereno.”
284 Levine, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity, 200.
that slavery be eradicated in his native country. Perhaps the impossibility of such an eradication causes what T. Douglas Doyle has called the “paralyzed resistance” of Delany’s novel—knowing some rebellion was necessary, but unable to conceptualize that same rebellion, the novel devolves into a series of speeches that never motivate action.285

Despite the formal failures of Delany’s novel and the maddeningly incomplete ending, the unrealized rebellion that is Blake is an apt metaphor for the near success of the slave uprising at sea that tantalized Delany’s fellow authors in the turbulent 1850s. Drawing on the revolutionary energies of the Black Atlantic and the maritime world, and attuned to the historical uprisings aboard the Amistad and Creole, Douglass, Melville, and Delany modified the sea narrative by turning slaves into sailors. In doing so, each of these authors reshaped those identities: The sailor (following Ishmael) becomes more racially ambiguous and more attuned to his role as a political agent. The slave found in the maritime world a site for overturning landed hierarchies and asserting natural rights. Nonetheless, the identities of sailors and slaves remained distinct in the literature and law of the 1850s, as no author could imagine a widespread sea freedom in which slaves could stake their own claim for the liberty of seamen born free—the innate sense of freedom that would lead them to defy the lash of slavery. Ultimately, the American eagle that enabled the escape of Frederick Douglass the sailor remained a potent symbol of American might to Madison Washington and to his fellow heroic slaves.

285 Doyle, ‘Standing Still to See the Salvation’: Paralyzed Resistance in Delany's Blake, 89-93.
Epilogue
At Sea On Land

Charles’s Island was proclaimed the asylum of the oppressed of all navies. Each runaway tar was hailed as a martyr in the cause of freedom, and became immediately installed a ragged citizen of this universal nation.

—Herman Melville, “The Encantadas”

Though countless authors of sea narrative have celebrated, to different degrees, the liberatory possibilities of the sailor life, Herman Melville remained aware of the isolation attending that free-floating life. For Ishmael, freedom can be found on the decks of countless ships, in the Arciades, on a piazza in Lima (clearly not a city offering freedom to all, as this is where Babo meets his death), but never at rest and never at home in America. In fact, each of the sea narratives that I have discussed in the last two chapters end outside America, and hardly a coincidental. Melville, Douglass, and Delany, were all unable to fictionalize a present (or a future) for the United States that offers a place for either sailors or slaves. The possibility held forth by sailor identity in Douglass’s early works and in countless slave narratives proved elusive, both for sailors themselves and for their fictional counterparts.

These later authors were searching for was a space for sailor liberty—a place of refuge from ship and society that allowed for complete freedom of movement, thought, and behavior. Describing his first liberty day aboard the Pilgrim, Richard Henry Dana
claims, “A sailor's liberty is but for a day; yet while it lasts it is perfect. He is under no one's eye, and can do whatever, and go wherever, he pleases. This day, for the first time, I may truly say, in my whole life, I felt the meaning of a term which I had often heard—the sweets of liberty” (TY 168). Men used to taking orders became their own captains and enjoyed a day of riotous camaraderie. The fact that a liberty day was but a moment contributed to its powerful appeal as sailors needed to enjoy their freedom energetically and enthusiastically before returning to the trials, labors, and dangers that defined nineteenth-century seafaring.

Herman Melville would use the land as the site for investigations of sailor freedom in two of his later (though chronologically distant) works, “Charles’ Isle and the Dog-King,” the Seventh Sketch of “The Encantadas,” a group of short stories published in Putnam ’s 1854, and “John Marr” from John Marr and Other Sailors, which Melville self-published in 1888. Moving from the end of Melville’s life and career toward the middle, I first return to “John Marr,” the title piece in Melville’s self-published collection. The prose introduction to the volume tells the story of Marr, who went to sea as a youth and now lives among pioneers on a western prairie. The distance between the maritime world and Marr’s landlocked existence becomes clear as Marr attempts to regale his fellow pioneers with tales from his seagoing past. The pioneers have no interest in his stories, and the narrator suggests that what is missing from the pioneers, men “to whom a holiday never came,” lack “geniality,” typical of “free-and-easy tavern clubs affording cheap recreation” (JM 264). The pioneers are landed in every sense; they know neither the riotous pleasures of a liberty day ashore nor the “companionship afloat” of seamen across the globe. Indeed, a sense of the globe itself is lacking for the pioneers, to
whom the ocean becomes nothing but an idea, a tale. Marr stays on this land because it is
home to his deceased wife and child, but to make it habitable for himself, he begins to
imagine it as a “dried up sea,” and the narrator notes that in Marr’s day (1830s), the
prairie was so vast and so uncharted that travelers navigated it by the sun. The
environment, though far removed from the ocean, becomes to Marr a powerful reminder
of his days at sea and of the community of sailors with whom he lived and worked (JM
265-6).

Marr longs to recreate this community on the prairie, and given his companions
there, it is unsurprising that he retreats into memory. The only place where geniality
obtains is in the stories and incidents of a former and untenable life since Marr’s fellow
settlers seem to take no pleasure in their life or their work. The cycles of labor and liberty
that typified life before the mast are replaced by unrelenting toil, unleavened by humor or
joy. For Marr, and for Melville, this is the curse of life on land: There is no liberty day,
no moment of anticipated relief. Relief comes only in Marr’s recollections and his
transformation of the prairie into a sea. I would argue that Melville is engaged in much
the same business throughout his authorial career, as suggested by an 1859 letter from a
Williams College student who met Melville in Pittsfield: “[he has] the air of one who has
suffered from opposition, both literary and social. With his liberal views he is apparently
considered by the good people of Pittsfield as little better than a cannibal or a ‘beach-
comber.’” 286 Melville was retreating from literary opposition into his sailor past,
imAGining an audience (like John Marr) that would hear and understand his tales in their
proper spirit. It may be significant that a piece like “John Marr” appears late in Melville’s

life and career as it suggests an abiding desire by the author to return to the scenes of his youth, his sea voyages and wild wanderings in the isles of the South Seas.

One of the few places in Melville’s work where John Marr’s memories of genial seamen come to life is in the “Charles’ Isle” sketch of “The Encantadas,” which celebrates the anti-establishmentarianism of seamen that has been noted throughout this study. Set in the same South Seas as Typee and Omoo, the sketch concerns an island in the Galapagos chain granted to a Creole hero of the Peruvian rebellion against Old Spain. Perhaps forgetting the cause of freedom for which he fought, he installs himself as supreme lord of the island and employs “canine janissaries” to defend himself and hunt down his rivals. In an effort to increase the population of the island, the king encourages sailors to desert their ships and join him on the island. This plan backfires, as the sailors, “reckless of everything but victory,” “break out in a terrible mutiny and [defy] their master” (E 124). The mutiny is successful on land, leaving no avenue for appeal; defeated, the former king is exiled from the island and sent to the mainland. That an “enchanted” island would be so different from a state in South America is perhaps unsurprising, but the type of freedom Melville imagines for the mutinous sailors is unique in antebellum fiction.

Alone in Peru, the former leader waits to “hear news of the failure of the republic, the consequent penitence of the rebels, and his own recall to royalty. Doubtless he deemed the republic but a miserable experiment which would soon explode.” But no, the insurgents had confederated themselves into a “democracy neither Grecian, Roman, nor American. Nay, it was no democracy at all, but a permanent Riotocracy, which gloried in having no law but lawlessness” (E 124-5). The island becomes a permanent liberty day, a
“riotocracy,” but, though chaotic, it does not collapse. The island remains a “Republic,” and the sailors have no need for the firm hand of a monarch. Melville’s unwillingness to link the sailor Republic to either classical or contemporary society points toward both the uniqueness of the idealized space as well as the multiracial and multinational inhabitants therein. New sailors who deserted their ships for the island are “hailed as [martyrs] in the cause of freedom” and “ragged citizens of this universal nation” (E 125). Charles’ Isle, a republic and not a monarchy, allows sailors who are often alienated from their own national political scenes to become citizens of an alternate nation, to assert their different identities in a powerful and sustaining way.

Born of a rebellion against monarchy before becoming one, Charles’s Isle becomes “the unassailed lurking place of all sorts of desperadoes, who in the name of liberty did just what they pleased.” Captains of merchant ships refuse to land at the island for water or supplies for fear that their crews will desert for “sailors…in boats at sea anywhere in that vicinity, steered for Charles's Isle as to their sure home of refuge” (E 125). Surrounded by water and peopled with sailors, the island becomes a ship engaged permanently in the Rites of King Neptune or other shipboard carnivals. The sailors on Charles’s Isle—just like the dilettantish Dana—understand liberty better than the men and women living on land in Peru or the United States because they understand what it is to have liberty denied. Though their professional experience may confirm the meaning of liberty for sailors, in “The Encantadas,” being a sailor is about identity rather than occupation, and sailors attend religiously, and successfully, to their own sea freedom.

How does the land of Charles’s Isle differ so greatly from the open prairie where John Marr lives? The prairie, in Marr’s imagination, has far more in common with the
ocean than does the rocky, foreboding island far from the Peruvian coast, and yet the only accessible sea freedom lies in memory. The sailors on Charles’s Isle enjoy a far more vital and engaging type of freedom, a lived experience that excludes non-sailors and preserves the freedom of thought, speech, and movement unique to liberty days ashore. Though Marr’s memories sustain him, while his daily labors and associations deplete him; unrelieved by conversation or geniality and surrounded by staid pioneers, Marr’s life is painfully circumscribed. He is alone in an ocean of land. Conversely, the sailors on Charles’s Isle are surrounded by an ocean of water, and their little ship of an island is peopled by the same “tattooed savages” that populate Marr’s memory. The fellowship that pervades labor and liberty is present on the island, and there is no captain to limit the extent of either that fellowship or that liberty. Sea freedom, then, is not only about setting, but about governance, control, and (perhaps most importantly) community. Marr desires more than anything else another man who “knows of that,” who understands his place in the “checkered globe” and the wide expanses beyond the prairie. The sea has given him a taste for liberty and wanderings, but he has no one to join him. The men on Charles’s Isle are tightly joined, all equal members of a “perfect Riotocracy” that grants them the sea freedom that they so desire.

Returning for a moment to Melville himself, that “Charles’s Isle” was written in 1854 is just as important as that “John Marr” was authored much later in his career. In the two sketches, we can read a declining optimism in Melville’s hope for a sense of “sea freedom” on land as he became further and further removed from his own maritime career. Charles’s Isle posits the possibility of a community based on a sailor ethic of personal rights, geniality, and provisionality typical of a character like Ishmael. “John
Marr” celebrates that same ethic while suggesting that it is rooted entirely in experience and is effectively untranslatable. A unique and riotous republic may be sustainable for sailors, but not for the men and women who “know nothing of that.” Melville’s trips to sea—in both literature and memory—may very well represent his attempt to reanimate the sailor ethic that he left behind in Boston when he returned to the United States in 1845.

Thirty-three years after he returned to Boston on the Alert, Richard Henry Dana wrote that he “was a sailor ashore as well as on board,” much as the young Titus Coan imagined Melville. However, when Dana, whom Melville regarded as a “sea-brother,” acknowledged that sailor identity transcended the space of the sea, he acknowledged the social ostracization that threatened him if he were to become a sailor. By 1859, Melville was accustomed to living as an outcast and may have found a degree of pleasure in an isolato’s freedom, but he knew that being a “sailor ashore” did not give him the same sea freedom he found on ship and in the South Seas. Though they remained hopeful that they could find sea freedom on land—that America could offer the same opportunities as did Charles’s Island—sailors such as Melville instead found themselves moored in a nation that could neither reject nor embrace its salt-water citizens.
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