Dislocation and Repossession in *O Navio dos Negros*, Jorge Silva Melo’s Theatrical Reading of *Benito Cereno*

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**Abstract.** Comparing *Navio dos Negros*, Jorge Silva Melo’s adaptation of *Benito Cereno* in 2000 (Lisbon, Culturgest) to Melville’s narrative, several plots of dislocation and repossession emerge. In Melville, the core tale of the Atlantic slave trade initiated by the Iberian diasporic experience sustains the plot of the slaveholder’s ambiguous claim to oppression and protection and interferes with the American narrator’s exegetic endeavors. Social identity mapping becomes problematic in a comedy of errors that multiplies possible readings and foregrounds the trappings of authority and authorship. In fact, though the “Spaniards” may be taken as a synecdoche for the colonizer, the Portuguese are relegated to the social and linguistic margins, namely in the passage of the text where a revelation of (some) mystery is hinted at but remains encrypted in a foreign language.

The play by Silva Melo expands and disrupts the semantics of diaspora by creating a contemporary parallel narrative in which the Portuguese are consigned to the role of oppressors of modern-day immigrants from Eastern European countries and from the former Portuguese colonies. However, the political message of guilt and victimization is upset by the deceptive layers of storytelling that the stage director takes from Melville, thus foregrounding the narrative’s textual fabric. With a minimalistic set-design, where the few props are constantly being reassembled as the storytellers interweave the narrative, the actors (Silva Melo’s Artistas Unidos) are both readers and narrators, who invite the audience to question authoritative interpretations.

**Keywords:** Artistas Unidos, diaspora, Melville, postcolonialism, storytelling, textual diaspora

In this paper we will analyze the play *O Navio dos Negros* [The Negroes’ Ship],¹ which was written and directed by one of the most innovative and polemic contemporary Portuguese playwrights, Jorge Silva Melo, and staged by his
company, Artistas Unidos [United Artists], in 2000 and 2001. Based on Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855–56), the play’s text and its performance expand and disrupt the semantics of diaspora, extending this concept to contemporary politics and to new territories. This strategy creates a parallel narrative in which the Portuguese are consigned to the role of oppressors of modern-day immigrants from the former Portuguese colonies, and from Eastern European countries. Nonetheless, since colonialism is reconstituted as an endless chain of overlapping discourses, Silva Melo’s rewriting enhances self-reflexivity and questions univocal relations of authority and authorship.

The concepts formulated by Robin Cohen (1997) of “victim diaspora” and “diaspora of active colonization” are relevant to our argument. According to Cohen, “victim diaspora” refers to an imposed dislocation and might be applied, first, to the African diaspora, represented both in Melville’s preexistent *novella* and in its subsequent adaptation and, second, to the contemporary Eastern immigration represented in Silva Melo’s play. “Diaspora of active colonization” is represented by the European (especially the British, Spanish, and Portuguese) imperial and colonial settlements, and corresponds to the Spaniards’, in particular to Cereno’s, endeavor. Additionally, it may also signal the position of the American Amasa Delano, who perhaps manipulates the narrative, patronizing the Spaniard in a mirror relation of colonial oppression. Furthermore, to denote the specific type of intertextuality that arises from rewritings through time and space, and that embraces different cultures and potentially different languages, we have coined the term “textual diaspora.” This concept may provide a framework for the broader sociological and historical negotiations that take place when texts are re- or trans-localized to produce other texts, as we hope to demonstrate in this essay.

In Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, the diasporas of the victim and the colonizer are already intertwined and potentially interchangeable, as symbolized by the inscription “Seguid vuestro jefe” [follow your leader] at the prow of the Negro merchant ship *St. Dominick* (49). Moreover, Silva Melo’s use of *Benito Cereno* and his later production of a version of *Bartleby*—Francisco Luís Parreira (2003)—spring from his interest in questioning the exercise of power. Artistas Unidos is a collective whose motto is “Sem Deus nem Chefe” [Without God nor Leader], which expresses the intention to foster a democratic creative community where roles can be shifted—the actors are also encouraged to work as directors and producers, and, while on stage, they sometimes perform several characters, as in the play under study.
The journey that takes us from Melville’s novella—where characters are constantly described as performers,³—to Silva Melo’s play—where actors narrate the words rather than represent the deeds—can be broadly interpreted as a “textual diaspora.” The strategy of textual superimposition involves different narrative registers (fictional and documental), focalizations, and modes of telling, and can also be traced to Melville and to his use of *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres*, written in 1817 by captain Amasa Delano. In chapter 18, the first-person narrator recounts the story of a mutiny in a slave ship and legitimizes his story through additional testimonies, using “official” documents and the naval log kept in the American ship under his command. Delano’s sea journal and the travelogue are indeed striking materializations of what we define as “textual diaspora.”

The movement of textual displacement involves the conflation of history and fiction, of poetic diction and real-life texts, and its dynamics are both diachronic and geographical since they elicit a dialogue between representatives of the New and the Old World, as they face what Melville originally terms the “black-letter text” of the Negro’s usurpation: “In short, to the Spaniard’s black-letter text, it was best, for awhile [sic], to leave open margin” (65). The “margin,” which Delano considers important to leave “open” for further interpretation, widens in Silva Melo’s play, amplifying the intertextual dialogue that includes both nonfictional (excerpts from the press that relate contemporary stories of illegal immigrants in Portugal) and fictional texts—Robert Lowell’s dramatic adaptation of *Benito Cereno* in the trilogy *The Old Glory* (1965), and Gastón Salvatore’s 1992 play entitled *Benito Cereno*, whose direct sources include as well the “Actas del Proceso” [Trial Proceedings] in Talcahuano, Chile, 1805.

In the introduction to both the catalogue and the book edition of the play, Silva Melo underscores the literary appeal of Melville’s text, which he meant to preserve. He privileges narration over what he calls “dramatizing,” in line with the Brechtian epic theatre to which he is indebted.⁴ In a minimalist set-design, *O Navio dos Negros* opens with a narrator that reproduces Melville’s text verbatim. As the performance develops, contemporary characters are introduced and the location changes to 21st century Portugal. Throughout the play, all the actors “tell” much more than they “show” (to use Booth’s classical distinction in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*), and become narrators who fictionalize their experience, thus elevating the text and its retold version(s) to the role of character(s). Furthermore, the literary fabric is foregrounded in the published play, where
the characters’ lines are broken, situating the actors’ performative diction under the sway of poetic density; a device that was also used in Robert Lowell’s *The Old Glory* (1965), the one-act play trilogy dramatizing texts by Melville and Hawthorne.

The option to foreground the reading process is a literary homage to several of the authors to whom Silva Melo refers in his play, and it also replicates what we deem to be the central theme in Melville’s *novella*—the compulsive examination of the exegetic task. The interpretative process is displayed in different ways, but the most obvious is the choice of Amasa Delano as the focalizing consciousness of the majority of the narrative. Seemingly in line with the heroic tradition of the valorous seaman, the narrator resorts to several laudatory epithets to describe the character—“the good captain” (47), “the good sailor” (63), “the stout mariner” (68), “charitable man” (72), and the “honest seaman” (86), to quote a few examples. Even so, the progression of the narrative unmask Delano’s obtuse guilelessness, which has been taken as a commentary on American Idealism and on the moral authority of the New England liberal (Philips 111–15; Glicksberg 116–20).

Presented as “a man of such native simplicity as to be incapable of satire or irony” (63), this character exemplifies a restrictive sort of reading, merely framed by commonsensical expectations and familiar narratives, filtered through rational speculation. Especially at a second look, Delano’s blindness to signs that point towards the usurpation of power (such as the slave’s use of the Spanish flag as a towel when he shaves his master, for instance) mark his unreliability as a narrator. His inept exegetic approach is burdened by a recurrent sense of guilt, since the exigencies of interpretation seem to contradict the imperative to trust Divine Providence.

In fact, just before the revelatory climax, Delano considers that his questions are an affront to the providential order: “Once again he smiled at the phantoms which had mocked him, and felt something like a tinge of remorse, that, by harboring them even for a moment, he should, by implication, have betrayed an almost atheist doubt of the ever-watchful Providence above” (97). This excerpt highlights the circularity of the narrator’s reasoning, which resists the intuitions that seem to get him closer to the truth. In this tautological game, contradictory conclusions overlap, but they all seem to provisionally gratify the American captain’s good conscience, as conveyed by the following passage:
Thus, the same conduct, which, in this instance, had raised the alarm, served to dispel it. In short, scarce any suspicion or uneasiness, however apparently reasonable at the time, which was not now, with equal apparent reason, dismissed. (69)

The Artistas Unidos’ composition of the character Amasa Delano highlights, perhaps a little too obviously, the dim-wittedness and the patronizing provincialism of the New Englander, or Yankee: Paulo Claro, the actor who played the part, used a very strong accent from Trás-os-Montes (the north-eastern region of Portugal), and was instructed to deliver his speech in a didactic, slow, but unfeeling way. The underlining of Delano’s lack of sophistication, contrasting with Benito Cereno’s world-weary moroseness, may be, following Robert Magowan’s insight (163), a veiled critique of the American’s shortsightedness when he deems himself innocent in face of the cultural intricacies of international politics. However, the critique of the construction of American democracy, to which Silva Melo alludes in the play’s introduction, will not be developed as in both Robert Lowell’s and Gastón Salvatore’s plays. Rather, O Navio dos Negros proposes a diasporic dislocation to the context of reception, effacing the preceding historical mediation, in what we consider to be an attempt to directly impute responsibility upon the audience.

Furthermore, the Artistas Unidos’ adaptation overlaps the legal version of the events in Cereno’s deposition with factual accounts testified by two new characters: Um Negro Verdadeiro [A Real Negro] and Alexandre Pumpura, an immigrant from Kalmykia who was involved in a labor accident where five Eastern European illegal workers perished, in 2000. The denomination “A Real Negro” appears to contradict the fiction of the Negro, as emphasized by the Artistas Unidos’s choice of a white actor with a black latex attire to play Babo. This option hints at the possibility of role-reversal in domination and may also allude to the historic conditions of theatre production that imposed gender and racial bans on stage, as in the tradition of the blackface minstrel performers in the U.S. Nevertheless, the misnomer “A Real Negro” is also prone to reification since, in fact, this character epitomizes all those oppressed under the Portuguese imperialistic rule in the African colonies. Silva Melo extends this political reference to the contemporary context through fragmentary references to the workers who were exploited in the construction of Expo [19]98, an international exposition organized in Lisbon that celebrated the Portuguese maritime expansion in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.
The Real Negro’s speech exhibits the endless repetition of the cycle of oppression and victimization, as it evokes a common incident in the Portuguese Colonial War—the head on a pike, a situation that parallels the punishment inflicted to Babo at the end of Melville’s text. Unquestionably, the historical conflation of the slave-master issue is already present in Melville’s narrative, through the ambivalent transferences of authority between the characters and what they represent: Don Benito Cereno or the Old World; Amasa Delano or the New World; and Babo, apparently subjugated by both, but directing the plot. The swift shifting of patterns of authority, not only among the characters but also in the narrative, is textualized at the revelatory climax moment, when Cereno jumps into Delano’s boat: “All this, with what preceded, and what followed, occurred with such involutions of rapidity, that past, present, and future seemed one” (98)

In O Navio dos Negros, the Eastern European immigrant is the second character that helps to extend the narrative in order for it to challenge the contemporary politics of diaspora. In contrast with his black counterpart who represents a general category, he is called by the name of someone whose story made the news. This testimonial practice can be interpreted as mimicking Melville’s strategy of historical reliance, but it also adds a layer of simultaneity, quoting current information technology, as textual diaspora takes the leap of “intersemiotic translation,” according to Jakobson’s well-known formulation for the displacement of meaning across different codes. “Imported” from a media text—the character’s speech replicates phrases of a life story found in a Web page of the Lusophone press (“Escravos”)—this exile threatens the audience to use television as a weapon to show down Western modern-day slavery, only to conclude that the spread of information does not affect the structures of power in global society:

Alexandre Pumpura

eu

vou esta noite à televisão e conto e conto e conto e conto e conto

como tudo se passou

…

as pessoas vêem

mudam de canal

e daqui a dias são as férias (98)

[I / Alexandre Pumpura / will go to television tonight and tell and tell and tell and tell and tell / how everything happened / … people watch / change the channel / and in a few days holidays start]
The fact that in Silva Melo’s play the African and the Eastern European immigrants’ accounts frame the court scene of Babo’s trial enhances the audience’s guilt complex, more so because the deponents are speaking in the first person and directly address a “you”: “eu sou o negro / nas mãos o machado / retido no teu aeroporto” [I am the negro / in my hands a hatchet / retained at your airport] (80). Here the source of evil seems easier to pinpoint than in Melville’s text: it comes from the white slaveholders and their direct descendants that commodify the underprivileged, putting them to the service of the capitalist enterprise. Thus, “A Real Negro” calls for direct retribution:

I have this axe / and I’m going to pull your eyes out / … and hang your cadaver/skinned / on the ship’s mast-top / just as my older brother’s head / my brother’s head was hung to dry / at the garrison gates in Malange / by you or by your master in 1962 / by you, white men / who have forced me to learn hail marias and historical materialism.

Since these characters speak in the first person—contrary to Melville’s strategy of limiting the voice of the oppressed—they are asserting their identity from the beginning. In “Repression and Self in Benito Cereno,” Stuart Justman has rightly pointed out that Babo, staging before Delano his insignificance as a subject of speech, and describing himself in the third person, “[suggests] that he has no right to an ‘I’ of his own, a gesture, which reinforces Delano’s own ‘I’” (303). Enunciations such as “Ah, master … don’t speak of me; Babo is nothing; what Babo has done was but duty” (57) flatter the whites’ claims of authority, and at the same time mimic the discourse that infantilizes the Negro. Adding to this the episode where Atufal, a former African king, plays Cereno’s silent scapegoat, as well as Babo’s final option of a defiant muteness (“since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words” 116), it seems that Melville uses a
scheme where transference of authority finds echo in shifting narrative voices and focalizations. Consequently, he intends to make a statement about the reification of speech when applied to the Other, the colonized. This pattern is not recurrent in Silva Melo’s play: though Babo’s few utterances remain overall faithful to Melville’s text (“Babo nada é” 37 [Babo is nothing]), the speaking privilege of white supremacy is diluted with the scenic option of making all actors both characters of the narrative and narrators of their actions. The Jovem Marinheiro Espanhol [Young Spanish Sailor] will thus speak of himself: “Com um cabo enrolado na mão, / um marinheiro espanhol, / rapaz ainda novo / subiu nesse momento / da ponte” (43) [With a coil of rope in his hand, / a Spanish sailor, / yet a young man / climbed up just then / from the deck]. Moreover, the four grizzled oakum-pickers, the “six other blacks” polishing their hatchets on the quarter-deck, and the breastfeeding “negress” are all endowed with self-descriptions, in a tone that recurs in repetitive snippets remindful of an ominous tragic chorus, which creates yet another layer of reading and exegesis—“Somos os quatro pretos grisalhos / … e cantamos / um canto seguindo, monótono e baixo, / uma marcha / fúnebre” (28, 30, 42) [We are the four grizzled negroes / … and we sing / a continuous, low, monotonous / chant / a funeral march].

Silva Melo’s idea of foregrounding the act of reading—merging narration with the performance of interpretation—may have sprung from Eric J. Sundquist’s cogent analysis of deferred authority and point of view in “Suspense and Tautology in Benito Cereno,” a text that the director encouraged his actors to read while working on the play. The choice to introduce the figure of the Reader, and to open the play with his words, perhaps embodies the notion that the distance emerging between the narrator and Delano allows for a third voice, which could represent the unconscious, or the interpretative struggle through the enigma. Benito Cereno’s narrator underscores the novella’s enigmatic quality in the self-reflexive comment occurring after the citation of the lengthy court documents:

the Deposition has served as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it …

Hitherto the nature of this narrative, besides rendering the intricacies in the beginning unavoidable, has more or less required that many things, instead of being set down in the order of occurrence, should be retrospectively, or irregularly given. (114)
Evoking the symbolism that heightens the semantics of the text—namely the episode when Cereno is said to have the keys to Atuful’s chains—and the scene when an old sailor offers Delano a strange knot “[f]or someone else to undo” (76), this metaliterary excerpt also plays on the potential misreading arising from the use of several languages. Besides the various unnamed African tongues spoken on board, coupled with other non-verbal and eventually frightening “languages” (such as the cymbals the hatchets replicate, the “solemn” songs accompanying the death rituals, or the “husky” whisperings Delano distrusts), Spanish seems to be used as a lingua franca, though in reality we seldom read anything other than English. Indeed, the question of translation is already crucial in Amasa Delano’s source narrative, and the captain uses it as “a sufficient apology for any thing which may appear to the reader not to be perfectly consistent” (82).

According to Teresa Cid, Melville’s choice of Babo’s name (originally Muri) may point to Babel, highlighting the disruption between language(s) and communication, which causes havoc between different cultures competing for authority. It is worth noticing, nonetheless, that the use of Portuguese emerges in the revelatory moment when the hierarchy of power in the St. Dominick is unmasked and then overturned. Though it remains unclear why Cereno speaks “in husky words, incoherent to all but the Portuguese [oarsman]” (99), who will translate the message to Delano, Rute Beirante suggests that the “Spaniard” may have been of Portuguese origin, and the fact that Melville chose to include this detail (already present in the original narrative) might be taken as a veiled reference to Portugal’s responsibility in the slave trade business. On the other hand, Carlos Azevedo (2001) sustains that this inclusion signals Melville’s understanding, thanks to his reading of Camões, of “a metáfora do ser português” [the metaphor of being Portuguese], which represents marginal possibilities of cross-cultural encounters. Indubitably, Melville thematizes cultural diversity in Benito Cereno, as he displays a particular attention to the different ethnic origins of the St. Dominick’s population, and depicts specific habits of the several Negro tribes present among the “slaves.” However, Delano’s ethnocentric point of view ends up providing stereotypical racial categorizations, which are extended significantly by his repeated descriptions of the Spaniard as “dark.”

Silva Melo does not refer to this linguistic diversity; neither does he include in his adaptation as many references to the different ethnicities, omitting any racist comment towards the Spanish. We must bear in mind that
the theatrical rendering was bound to simplify some of the novella’s complexities, especially since the performance could not be “re-read.” Nevertheless, the decision to exclude specific (and possibly ambiguous) references to the Iberian seafarers may be related to a choice not to deal with the rivalry between the Old and the New World, nor to emphasize the subject of American politics. Instead, the Artistas Unidos reinterpret Melville’s story focusing generically on the contemporary capitalistic displacement of people and goods, and rather specifically on the European Union politics—as well as on the heritage of violence from the recent Portuguese colonial past. One thing leads to, or merges with, another, in a world where global diaspora is tinged with the cyclical backlashes of expansionism and racial politics, immigration, trade and exploitation:

como há em Berlim também mesmo ao lado da Avus,  
a auto-estrada que foi a auto-estrada de Hitler,  
e já há em Milão  
somos húngaros russos croatias ucranianos russos  
vimos da Lituânia ou como eu da Kalmúkia,  
homens que ao longo da estrada de camisola de alças mostramos os músculos os dentes bons  
e a mim trouxeram-me  
que havia trabalho aqui entre Almansil e Mértola  
umas casas uma piscina uma auto-estrada. (95)

[as there is in Berlin also right beside the Avus, / the highway which was Hitler’s highway, / and already in Milan / we are Hungarians Russians Croatians Ukrainians Russians / we come from Lithuania or like myself from Kalmykia, / men who along the road in bare-armed shirts show their muscles their good teeth / and I was brought / because there was work here between Almansil and Mértola / some houses a swimming pool a highway.]

We may conclude that Silva Melo takes the risk of foregrounding the illusion of narrative authority by staging the text as a character controlled by multiple directors—the actors as narrators and readers. However, the potential role reversion of oppressor/victim/judge is underplayed by the univocal accusations addressed to the audience. On the other hand, in Brechtian fashion, the audience is called upon as yet another element of the chain of power transmission, remindful of their authority on the world’s stage. Silva Melo’s textual diaspora thus departs from the St. Dominick’s deck, to the bridges and highways that facilitate the circulation of modern-day slavery and are borne by its labor.
Notes

1 All translations henceforth are our own.
2 All quotations from Benito Cereno refer to the 1987 edition.
3 The spectacular quality of this power masquerade is discussed by Loren Goldner in the context of “theater, painting and blankness in Melville” (200–6).
4 See Jorge Silva Melo, “Ó noite mãe negra na casa dos Átridas,” in O Navio dos Negros (12–13).
5 Personal communication from Ivo Canelas, the actor who played Benito Cereno and whom we wish to thank for relating to us backstage information that was important for our analysis of the play by Artistas Unidos. All particulars about the backstage mentioned throughout the essay come from this source.
6 See note 5.
7 See also “these Spaniards are all an odd set; the very word Spaniard has a curious, conspirator, Guy-Fawkish twang to it” (79).
8 See: “riqueza do mundo sedas da China papel do Japão vídeos da América” [world riches silks from China paper from Japan videos from America] (80).

Works cited


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