

## *The Uptown Melville Black and White Blues Collage*

Laurie Robertson-Lorant  
St. Mark's School, Mass.

*Unique personne de race blanche à se trouver dans la rame conduisant de midtown Manhattan à Harlem, l'auteur, biographe de Melville, se sent incapable, malgré le plaisir qu'elle prend au spectacle de la diversité ethnique new-yorkaise représentée par les passagers qui l'entourent, de chasser la peur engendrée par certaines images médiatiques de violence raciale. Hantée par le spectre d'Amasa Delano, le naïf et bien intentionné raciste blanc si finement dépeint par Melville, elle entremêle les observations et les réflexions que lui inspire son voyage à Harlem avec divers passages de « Benito Cereno » – pour aboutir à un texte où récit personnel, critique littéraire et interprétation culturelle s'entremêlent à leur tour.*

**N**ew York City, September 25, 1991. I'm on my way to the Melville Society's centennial session on "Melville & Race" at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. On the subway from Penn Station to a friend's apartment at 84th Street and Central Park West, I notice that few whites take the subway anymore, even in midtown Manhattan. In fact, white people seem to be the minority in New York. There's more color and vibrancy on the gray streets of the city these days, and the people of color I meet seem friendlier and a lot less uptight than whites.

---

Laurie Robertson-Lorant, the author of *Melville: A Biography* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1996), received her Ph. D. from New York University. Holder of a 1992-93 Fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies, she teaches English at St. Mark's School in Southborough, Massachusetts and this year, at School Year Abroad in Rennes, France. Her poetry has appeared in *Sandscript*, *The Radcliffe Quarterly*, *The American Voice*, *The Birmingham Poetry Review*, *The Worcester Review*, and similar magazines.

---

As I hike up Columbus Avenue then crosstown to my friend's apartment, I'm feeling very good about New York. The weather is gorgeous: Indian summer sunshine, blue sky, and clean, fresh air. I like walking. I enjoy seeing so many different kinds of people and hearing a full chorus of accents and languages, and despite all the nasty rumors about the city, my theory that if I smile at people they will smile back seems to be holding so far. Is it such a bad thing to have "a good blithe heart" like the Yankee captain in "Benito Cereno," Melville's 1855 adaptation of Amasa Delano's narrative of a mutiny aboard a Spanish slaver.

I've been doing workshops on approaches to teaching Melville's "Benito Cereno" as a multicultural text, so the story is on the surface of my mind. This complex and ambiguous story plunges the reader deep into the "heart of darkness" that beats in the jungles of America, exposing the moral blindness of the whites, not the bloody rebellion by the blacks, as the most insidious form of violence, the primal New World evil. Melville likens the well-meaning Delano to an albatross, or "*white noddy, a strange fowl, so called from its lethargic, somnambulistic character, being frequently caught by hand at sea.*" Is the urban jungle really turning into a garden in 1992? Am I a fool to let down my guard this way?

My friends are at work, so I stow my backpack in their apartment, but then, I start having second thoughts about taking the subway to Harlem. I've never been to Harlem in my life, never mind by subway, and story after story of atrocities committed on the underground train flashes through my memory: ugly confrontations with resentful, honky-hating blacks, muggings, purse-snatchings, knifepoint gang rapes, and brutal murders. Although I feel foolish and hypocritical letting a handful of sensationalistic newspaper stories intimidate me, I can't turn off my anxiety. When I check my watch, I see there isn't time to take the bus, and I'm not about to go bankrupt on a taxi. Figuring male company might be good insurance, I phone two friends who might be going to the session, but neither can leave his office, so I'm on my own.

Maybe I'd be safer taking a taxi, but I never take taxis in New York. I consider them a needless extravagance in a city with such fine public transportation, and besides, I like to walk. I remember a Radcliffe classmate who got off the train at 125th Street and hailed a cab for LaGuardia, only to have the driver try to abduct her. She managed to jump out at a red light, abandoning her luggage and Christmas presents in order to save her life. I don't remember hearing anyone mention the race or ethnic origin of the would-be kidnapper/rapist, but that was in 1960-61—in many ways, a kinder, gentler era.

An embarrassingly self-conscious "innocent abroad" about to enter territory at once unknown and incestuously familiar, I walk to the nearest underground stairway muttering to myself like Ishmael just before he

overturns the ash-box on the porch of the African church in New Bedford and gets a face full of soot. Despite my “best intentions,” racist stereotypes attack like killer bees, injecting their venom into my bloodstream. Racism is toxic, but I should be immune. After all, I’m a liberal scholar who wrote a doctoral dissertation on racial themes and imagery in Melville’s writings, a teacher who champions multicultural education at an elite prep school that was once all white and all male, and a citizen who agrees with Ralph Ellison when he writes, “I believe in diversity, and I think that the real death of the United States will come when everyone is just alike” (“That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure,” 1961).

But I’m toting a lot of invisible baggage along with my shoulder bag. Stories, real and fictional, flash garishly across the white screen of my mind: businessmen beaten, robbed and stabbed to death on the IRT and women sexually harassed or raped by gangs of teenagers on the BMT. I have a vivid, even melodramatic imagination at times, so it’s not only in situations involving race that my imagination tends to run wild, but what strikes and chagrins me about these vagaries is how unoriginal, how self-centered, and how racist they all are. Racism seems to be in white genes, and although I have faith that “we shall overcome” it, I doubt we can ever completely burn it out. Although it seems impossible not to be racist in America, white guilt is not the answer. It’s tedious, boring, counter-productive, and beside the point. Still, as myriad tabloid horrors metastasize in my brain, I feel queasy.

Angry at being victimized by the cancer of racism, I commit to the uptown subway ride to Harlem. The car is crowded and all the seats are full, so I stand holding the metal pole to brace myself, swaying to the motion of the train like the clapper of the flawed bell aboard *San Dominick*, the Spanish slaver Melville calls a “slumbering volcano.” I look around me. The other people riding in the car all seem to have better things to do than hassle me. In fact, they don’t seem to notice me at all. Most of the other passengers are reading newspapers or magazines; a black student, knapsack on his knees, is studying chemistry from a textbook. A young couple sits close together on the orange plastic seat, the man holding the 2-year old on his lap, the woman pushing a baby stroller gently back and forth while they talk quietly and intently in Spanish. Where, I wonder, is the distrust and hostility I imagine these people must feel toward a white woman riding their train? Where, indeed, if not in my own mind, the collective white primeval ooze which engenders all our “it came from the black lagoon” ideas about race.

Intellectually, I know we’re all one human race. The three-races-of-mankind concept I was taught is obsolete, but its ghost lives on. I’m a haunted honky cursed with a self-consciousness about race that makes it impossible for me to relax and enjoy a simple subway ride. Is it because

black people are around white people all the time and are so used to seeing me that I've become invisible? Or are the lurid reports of violence actually white supremacist propaganda, designed to widen the gulf between whites and blacks? Maybe white violence isn't reported? Maybe white violence is called "law and order." Maybe white violence is a *double entendre* called "just war."

The man standing closest to me on the crowded train is very black, with a mountain of dreadlocks for hair and a face that bears scars from a knife-blade. Dressed in dark slacks and a white shirt, sleeves rolled up and open at the collar, he looks like a cross between the bogeyman and Walt Whitman in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, except that he's not wearing a hat and he has several scruffy bundles between his feet. When our eyes meet, I'm not sure how friendly I ought to be, so I give him a tight-lipped urban smile and look away. The "unasked question" W. E. B. Du Bois talked about hovers between this world and mine.

My parents wouldn't have considered themselves bigots, but when I was five, they moved from Manhattan and bought a house in an all-white, nearly all Protestant suburb in Connecticut. Somehow when grownups talked about the "bogeyman," I knew he lived in the city, he was jet black, and he hated me. I pronounced it "boogieman" which, at best, conjured visions of black musicians in juke joints wreathed in reefer smoke that undulated to a rhythm far more seductive than the mechanical white smoke ring pulsing from the Philip Morris billboard just above Times Square, and at worst, visions of a brutish black man breaking through the window of my house with a knife in his pointed teeth, intent on raping and murdering me. This terrifying brute coexisted in my mind with the lovable, shuffling Sambos portrayed by Amos and Andy and Stepin Fetchit. I learned about race as from Hollywood, and later I realized that, as a child growing up in white suburban Connecticut, I was culturally deprived.

Across the aisle, a white man dressed in a business suit is reading a newspaper. He's the only other white person in the car, and even though for all I know he's a preppy psycho-killer, I instinctively consider him an ally. "[W]ho ever heard of a white so far renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguing in against it with negroes?" muses Delano. The white businessman puts down the paper and turns to the person beside him, a woman with straight black glossy hair and almond eyes. Is she Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, or Malaysian? It makes me uncomfortable that I can't distinguish one Asian national from another. Is she Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Thai? Why do these names all make me think of wars?

A few minutes later, I feel a gentle tap on my arm and the Rastafarian asks me, "Hey, what's that sound? Is that a radio?"

I listen. It's the white businessman's voice, which has a harsh, metallic sound. "It's the man over there," I tell him. "It's his voice."

"Oh," he responds with a genial drawl, "I thought maybe they's puttin' radios on the trains these days."

At the next stop, several people including the white man and his companion leave the train. I am now the only white person in the car, and the only woman. I walk to the empty seat, and "*like one running the gauntlet*," I feel the "*apprehensive twitch in the calves of [my] legs*" that Captain Delano felt as he walked by the hatchet-polishers. Thus, even as I am gaining confidence in the geniality of my fellow passengers, the thought comes, nasty and unbidden, that perhaps they are only waiting until the train crosses some invisible line known only to black men after which we will enter a dark tunnel immune to the normal rules of civilized conduct and that there, at an inaudible signal, they will all rise up against me in an orgy of rape and murder. "*The idea flashed across him, that possibly master and man, for some unknown purpose, were acting out, both in word and deed, nay, to the very tremor of Don Benito's limbs, some juggling play before him.*"

The fancy that I am that "Massachusetts man" Amasa Delano in a woman's body gives me the creeps. Someone I consider a racist fool has insinuated himself into my soul, and for an instant, I feel confused. Was Delano the racist, or Melville himself? Was I wrong when I argued in my dissertation that Melville wanted to expose the "benign" racism of northern liberals in an attempt to exorcise the demon that was sucking the lifeblood from the heart of America? Was Melville a closet racist after all, or was he using Delano to show how paranoia is projection of the oppressor's shadow? I believe the latter. With his revision of Delano's narrative, he exorcised whatever demons of racism haunted him.

Melville's Yankee captain personifies the moral blindness of well-meaning whites whose unspoken belief in white supremacy is a more subtle and corrosive form of racism than overt bigotry. "*Foreshadowing deeper shadows to come*," Melville's "Benito Cereno" expresses Melville's sense that the Negro's view of history is the long view and that white America's moral blindness will bring about a social Armageddon. This complex and unsettling story is about revising history, about giving voice to the untold stories of oppressed peoples, about dealing with what Ralph Ellison calls "the moral implications of the Negro." It's about asking new questions of the American experience; for example, is there any difference between a revolt by kidnapped Africans determined to secure their own liberty by rerouting the slaver to free Senegal and the American Revolution? John Quincy Adams didn't think so; he got the *Amistad* mutineers acquitted by appealing to the Declaration of Independence, as Melville does in the subtext of the story.

“Benito Cereno” is a tough-minded tale, with Melville refusing to sentimentalize either whites or blacks. In a desperate attempt to gain their freedom, the Africans kill their owner, Don Alexandro Aranda, and most of the Spanish crew. The women, whom Delano later fancies are as docile and sweet as does with their fawns, flay Aranda alive and pick his bones clean, after which they eat his flesh and hang his skeleton on the bowsprit with the legend “*Sequid vuestro jefe (follow your leader)*.” When the slaver meets an American vessel, the ingenious Babo orchestrates an elaborate pageant of dominance and bondage so the Yankee captain will not realize the blacks are actually in command of the Spanish vessel.

Melville modeled Babo, the leader of the revolt, after Haitian patriot Toussaint Louverture, whose polished manners made a favorable impression on his French colonial master. Delano, who feels comfortable with blacks as long as they behave like stereotypical slaves, is so impressed by Babo’s doglike devotion to his Spanish master that he pays him the highest compliment he knows how to pay a slave; he offers to buy him for fifty doubloons. It crosses my mind that whites who met Toussaint Louverture while he was still a slave may also have thought “*there is something in the negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one’s person. Most negroes are natural valets and hair-dressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castanets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction.*” Melville, who had experienced oppression at home and aboard whalers and a naval frigate, instinctively understood the role-playing of slaves.

“Unquestionably one of the greatest and best men of his age,” according to Lydia Maria Child’s *Anti-Slavery Catechism* (Newburyport, 1839), Toussaint drove the French out of Haiti and established the first Black Republic in the Americas, thwarting Napoleon’s dreams of a New World empire and making it possible for Thomas Jefferson to purchase the Louisiana Territory. Today, U. S. immigration police seize boatloads of Haitian refugees and ship them back to prison and almost certain death, a policy which supersedes the policy of interning them at Guantanamo, whose concentration pens were filled soon after the INS abandoned its initial practice of bludgeoning Haitian refugees to death like baby seals when they managed to reach the beaches of Florida.

Melville strips away the bias of historical narratives composed by colonizers whose victims experience their “discovery” as an obscene invasion. “[T]he negro Babo showed him a skeleton, which had been substituted for the ship’s proper figure-head, the image of Christopher Colon, the discoverer of the New World [...] ‘Keep faith with the blacks from here to Senegal, or you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader’.” In the end, the revolt fails and the Spaniards decapitate the ingenious Babo, “*whose head, that hive of subtlety [...] met unabashed, the gaze of the*

*whites*” and stick his head on a pole in the Plaza. Melville seems to be saying that black leaders, like Babo, will have to be “in our face” until America lives up to the promises of the Declaration of Independence.

The subway screeches to a halt and I’m safe and sound in Harlem, that “nigger place” with its “alleyways of dreams,” to quote Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. “*You are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?*,” Delano tells Don Benito once the mutiny has been put down. My nightmares have not come true, my idealism, albeit wavering, has been vindicated. Even so, I’m totally unprepared for what I see as I emerge into bright sunlight and a wide blue sky. Instead of a “ghetto,” I see green trees and low red brick buildings that remind me of buildings on Boston’s Beacon Hill. How different this streetcorner is from the concrete canyons of Park Avenue! “*See yon bright sun [...] and blue sky; these have turned over new leaves.*” How much more human the scale, how much more relaxed the people seem than the uniformed brief-case-toting businessmen of Madison Avenue, how much more like an old-fashioned neighborhood, this is! This is Lucille Clifton’s “inner city / or / like we call it / home,” yet, how much shabbier, how much more run-down this block is than it needs to be. Is it because this black “Athens of America” has been bought up by absentee landlords who are white?

The signs tell me I’m at 135th Street and Malcolm X Boulevard. I’d forgotten until just now that the old Lenox Avenue I’d read about in books on the Harlem Renaissance had been renamed for my generation’s Babo. As I stand in front of Harlem Hospital waiting for the light to change, I think of an interview I heard on WBAI last June as I was driving back to Massachusetts from an anti-racism workshop in Pennsylvania. A male nurse from Harlem Hospital was talking about the effect of budget cuts on human services, he pointed out that one week after the city spent 12 million dollars on a parade for troops from Desert Storm, applications for welfare benefits from veterans of the Gulf War had increased dramatically, health care workers were being laid off, services in city hospitals were being eliminated, and mental health centers were being forced to turn patients out into the streets. “The city is hemorrhaging from these budget cuts,” he said bitterly, accusing the city of targeting neighborhoods selectively. “*‘You are saved,’ cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; ‘you are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?’*” When the light changes, I cross over to the Schomburg Center, and at 2 p. m., I enter the Langston Hughes Auditorium and take a seat beside Melville friends who’ve come down from Vermont. The panelists, David Bradley, Bruce Franklin, Skip Gates, and Arnold Rampersad, are intent on the worthy enterprise of rescuing Melville from burial in a common grave with “dead white males.” Even so, during the question period, a tall black man rises from his seat in the balcony and asks somewhat truculently what

the Melville Society can do for Harlem. I imagine a chorus of black voices chanting, “Eggheads! Tweedy eggheads! There goes the neighborhood!” There goes the neighborhood, indeed. It’s no coincidence the university is called the “ivory tower.” Ivory makes me think of Kurtz, his skull white and shiny as a billiard ball, slaughtering elephants and Africans with equal relish, guerdoning the compound with human heads stuck on poles, scrawling “exterminate the brutes!” at the bottom of his report.

During the past few decades, the gulf between scholarly studies and classroom teaching has widened dangerously. How can academic scholarship improve the quality of teaching and learning in our schools if scholars merely talk to each other and to tenure committees? We denizens of the “ivory tower” need to follow up our foray into Harlem with a battery of questions: How can academic scholarship better serve the broad educational needs of a sprawling, brawling, pluralistic democracy? How can we balance affirmation of western culture with affirmation of diverse global voices? How can we create new generations of voracious readers when the ever more precise and refined critical theories alienate people away from literary studies? How can schools and colleges—in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson—“set the hearts of youth aflame”?

My students find Melville’s language nearly as foreign as Shakespeare’s. The finely-honed descriptions and subtle indirections of “Benito Cereno” are exasperating and boring to them until we spend time exploring the story from different angles, like the gold doubloon Ahab nails to the mast of the *Pequod*. My well-meaning students think racism ended long before they were born; yet, private schools like mine with their well-equipped classrooms and science laboratories, their acres and acres of grassy playing fields, their expensive athletic facilities contrast sharply with public schools such as the one I saw on the avenue named for Christopher Columbus. This urban playground was a 50 x 50 foot concrete courtyard enclosed by a chain-link fence, with two rusted basketball hoops opposite each other at the far end, and clumps of teenagers laughing and talking at the other end. A couple of white teachers were leaning against the fence, smoking and chatting, looking very bored. Melville saw segregated elementary schools in Honolulu in 1843, and in *Omoo*, he remarked sarcastically that, “*to preserve white culture from moral contamination, a play-ground for the children of the missionaries was enclosed with a fence many feet high, the more effectually to exclude the wicked little Hawaiians.*”

Ironically enough, as I stroll to the door of the Schomburg Center, someone hands me an invitation to a reception for Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The sidewalk outside is teeming with police, who’ve set up black and white crowd-control barriers warning “Police Line Do Not Cross.” At the corner, two blacks teenagers ask me what’s going on, and I

reply, "Aristide is coming." They give me looks as blank as the looks my own students would give me at the unfamiliar name. Clearly, Aristide doesn't have the same recognition factor as Michael Jackson. "He's the president of Haiti. A great leader," I hear myself say in trite, teacherly tones. "He's in New York to address the United Nations." They exchange looks and bounce off down the street, no more interested in global politics than most American teenagers seem to be.

I stand there for a few minutes, hoping Aristide will arrive before I absolutely have to leave for a dinner date downtown. One minute I'm thinking I don't want to miss a historic event like this; the next minute, I'm wondering what difference it makes if I see Aristide or not. I approach a huge white cop with a walkie-talkie and ask when Aristide will arrive. "He's supposed to be here now," he grumps back at me. If I were black, would I dare ask this fellow anything? I know from black friends how often the words "Nigger bitch" spray like sour jets of tobacco juice from white lips. I know from black students at my well-manicured suburban school that passing motorists yell, "Go back to Africa!" at them as they cross the road between the classrooms and the dorms. I wonder how much courage it takes to be a black woman in America? How much courage to be Anita Hill?

After an early dinner with a friend who lives near Lincoln Center, I stroll back to my other friend's apartment. Her place has the cozy ambiance of a country home and a spectacular view of Central Park. When I wake up there in the early morning, I will be able to see the skyline of 5th Avenue over the tops of the trees. There will be no "*imputation of malign evil in man*" from my friend's window, no hint of the horrors of being raped and beaten by a gang of rampaging teenagers who may attack you because you are white, or may not even notice your color because they're so high on crack. You are there, you are female, you are wearing jogging shorts, and that's all it takes to be raped in America today. In fact, that's more than it takes to be raped at a fraternity party by a gang of whites, though at the average frat party you probably wouldn't be beaten half to death with bricks and baseball bats and left for dead. The difference between the two crimes, Melville might say, is the difference between savagery and civilization: a few bruises, contusions, and maybe a little brain damage.

My friend, who is of Swedish extraction and very blonde, makes tea and asks about my day. Her husband is in the next room watching a prospective presidential candidate being interviewed on public television. When I tell her I went to Harlem on the subway, she says I must be crazy. I'm feeling good about my day in multicultural New York (now that I know I'm not a statistic), so I say smugly, "Frankly, I think it's silly that so few white people ride the subway anymore even in broad daylight. I had a

perfectly peaceful ride. More people wearing colorful dashikis and turbans would make this gray city a more human place.”

“Listen,” she says, striking sparks with her blue eyes. “I’m sorry, but I’m sick and tired of black people. I don’t wish them harm; I just wish they would disappear. My purse has been stolen six times in six months, and every time, it was a black person. The other day I was sitting at an outdoor cafe right near Lincoln Center and a black man wearing a business suit snatched my bag right off my lap and ran away before I even knew it was gone.” I remember seeing a pushcart full of Hermes bags on Columbus Avenue, and wonder if one of them was hers.

“Look,” I say, “of course it happens, but that doesn’t mean we should treat all black strangers like potential thieves, does it?” My friend rolls her eyes, and I have to admit to myself that I’ve been conditioned to do just that.

I remember my mother explaining benignly that our cleaning woman wasn’t like “those other colored people” because she didn’t steal. When Lurlene found coins under sofa cushions while vacuuming, she brought them right to us. “*Not until I visited Honolulu, was I aware of the fact that the small remnant of the natives had been civilized into draught horses, and evangelized into beasts of burden,*” Melville’s narrator comments in *Typee*. To prove that she wasn’t prejudiced, my mother referred to Lurlene as a “friend,” not a maid, but Lurlene never called her “Elinor.” My little brothers and I called her Lurlene, too. Every once in a while, we gave her some cast-off clothes to take home to her family in Stamford, and it made us feel good about white people. In *Omoo*, Melville decries the ludicrous appearance of South Sea islanders forced to wear ugly, ill-fitting clothes donated by missionaries; to him, charity was a poor substitute for justice.

Suddenly, her eyes boring into me like power drills, my friend says, “You’re not PC, are you?” making “PC” sound like “HIV positive.” From her point of view, “PC people” are a dangerous tribe of intellectual savages who practice “*heathenish rites and human sacrifices*” in the fetid jungles of the Academy.

I respond with a spirited defense of multicultural education, explaining among other things, how my commitment to diversity dovetails with my work on Melville. She’s always shown great interest in Melville, but when I talk about Melville’s “multiculturalism,” she loses interest fast.

“It’s fine for you to talk. You don’t live here. You wouldn’t last long walking around aimlessly smiling at people who’d just as soon cut your throat.”

“What’s the answer?” I ask. “To give up smiling and avoid the subway?” She doesn’t answer me. A voice in my head croons, “*B. B., honey, am I living my life all wrong?*”

We live in parallel universes, I'm thinking, and both of these realities are true. It isn't an issue of which one of us is "right," but rather, of how to live together peacefully amidst infinite possibilities in a universe whose randomness forces us to invent concepts like cause and effect to create the illusion that we're in control. We all want guarantees that bad things only happen to other people, not to us: maybe if I don't wear shorts, jog alone, or walk through Central Park, I'll never be raped or mugged. Unfortunately, there are no guarantees, only statistical probabilities. I could jog through Central Park wearing fluorescent gym shorts and a tank-top on a hot, humid night and come out fine, or I could be strolling just off Fifth Avenue in a conservative jacket, mid-calf skirt, and smart pumps when a blond, blue-eyed white man wearing a Rolex watch and Gucci shoes would pull a handgun from a leather attaché case and force me into the bushes to rape or kill me. If one, or both, or neither happens, does it prove a thing? Is there a lesson here?

My friend is right, but so am I. Like the sperm whale whose eyes are on opposite sides of his head, both views represent a truth, but not the Truth. Melville had the ability to acknowledge two or more different points of view at once. His iconoclasm, his irony, his fascination with ambiguity, his writing "the other way" were all responses to the gap between the official story of America and the Truth as he knew it in his heart. Sometimes truthseekers dive and come up empty-handed; sometimes they fetch up treasures from the deep. He had that sperm-whale vision. Sometimes whales bump into a ship and sink them on their way to open water, but that doesn't stop them. (*"He bumped me, he insulted me. Shouldn't he, for his own personal safety, have recognized my hysteria, my 'danger potential'?"* asks Ralph Ellison's invisible man. Couldn't this be Moby Dick speaking as well?). I guess what matters is to keep swimming. Swimming for our individual and collective lives. Swimming against the undertow.

\*\*\*

One sunny spring day while I was working on my biography of Melville, I was strolling along the waterfront near South Street Seaport trying to imagine how it must have looked, smelled, and sounded in Melville's day. It wasn't an easy task with cars and buses whizzing by and carbon monoxide choking the sea air, so I closed my eyes. As I was ambling along, the edge of my sandal caught a cobblestone, toppling me onto the sidewalk smack in front of a black man about my age. Wearing black pants, a white shirt, and a black bow tie, he looked like a Pullman porter from the 1940's minus the red bellhop jacket and silly hat. "I'm so sorry," he said over and over again in gracious tones, his eyes a mixture of

genuine concern and real terror. He didn't dare get near or touch me. Scraping my bruised dignity up off the pavement, I said, "Don't worry, it's not your fault. I lost my balance and fell down. Really, it's not your fault." Would it have helped if I'd explained that I was pretending it was 1820 because I'm writing a biography of Herman Melville? Somehow I doubt it.

This black stranger and I seem to be a primal American couple: a white woman, walking blind, losing her balance and falling to the pavement and a black man watching, horrified and humiliated that he has to repress his naturally chivalrous instincts. Like Adam and Eve in a New World Garden poisoned by racism so venomous that to reach out one's hand is to risk being either bitten by the snake or, worse yet, being the snake that bites a fellow human being's hand, we are both diminished and dehumanized by racism. He can't extend a helping hand to me without the specter of lynch mobs and castration rising in his mind, and I can't do much besides dust myself off, mumble a few words to set his mind at ease, and get on with my scholarly somnambulism so he can concentrate on his much more practical and useful occupation: parking cars.

Race in America: it's the intricate knot an old sailor on that "slumbering volcano" the *San Dominick* weaves for Amasa Delano in a vain attempt to alert him to the Truth, "a combination double-bowline-knot, treble-crown-knot, back-handed well-knot, knot-in-and-out-knot, and jamming knot." Like the old sailor, I want to scream, "Undo it, cut it, quick."