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“Peering Across the Plaza”: *The Shrouded Women of “Benito Cereno”*

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When the ship that is the site of the ongoing slave revolt is first spotted in Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” the vessel is immediately racialized and feminized. Referencing a style of dress popular among women in the Viceroyalty of Peru during the colonial period, the ship, writes Melville, “show[s] not unlike a Lima intriguing’s one sinister eye peering across the Plaza from the Indian loop-hole of her dusk *saya-y-manta*.” The *saya y manto*, or the *tapada limeña*, is literally a covering—a skirt and veil used to disguise the wearer’s identity. It is an essential emblem of the impossibility of recognition and a signifier of freedoms marshalled under constraint. This essay considers the *saya y manto* as a necessary codex to “Benito Cereno.” When we trace the confounding circulations of the *tapada limeña* in the historical record, the women of this story—both the enslaved women on board the ship and those conjured by allusion to the *tapada*—emerge as more than just an allegorical foil to shipboard masculinity. Instead, the women characters carry out Melville’s challenge to colonial knowledge projects, easy identifications amidst the zeitgeist of Victorian classificatory sciences, and attempts at definitive racialization.

Early in “Benito Cereno,” Herman Melville deploys the freighted image of the “*saya-y-manta*” (47), a concealing style of dress popular with elite women in the Viceroyalty of Peru during the colonial period. This largely unconsidered figure signals a range of meanings and associations that highlight the global referents that adhered to particular bodies, images, and texts in the nineteenth century. With the “*saya-y-manta*” and numerous allusions to its presence, Melville invokes epistemological projects of the Enlightenment that sought to consolidate visualizable categories of race and gender. In citing the highly feminine fashion, Melville also underscores the role of women in the tale. Women, both those present in the story and alluded to by the suggestion of the “*saya-y-manta*,” supplement this tale of slave insurrection with a history of freedoms marshalled under constraint. The presence of

women in “Benito Cereno” is not merely a foil to the construction of shipboard masculinity, but rather an aesthetic strategy that complicates easy recognition and attempts at racialization.¹ By tracing the confounding role of the “saya-y-manta” and its orientalist transmissions in the historical record, this essay demonstrates that travelers from Europe and the United States conspired to create violent equivalencies between discrete colonial outposts through literature and evolving visual technologies. The complex analogy of the “saya-y-manta” suggests an alternate reading of the text and its challenge to colonial regimes of seeing.

When the ship that is the site of an ongoing slave insurrection is first spotted in the novella, the vessel is immediately alienated, feminized, and racialized. The *San Dominick’s* careless navigation as it maneuvers through an ad-hoc sealing outpost off the coast of Chile, “*seemed to prove her a stranger*” (47; italics mine). Even in avowed proof, there is still uncertainty. This prevarication—identity as always already illusory—constitutes the slippery misperception of the narrative illuminated by Melville’s use of the “saya-y-manta.” As Captain Amasa Delano observes the ship’s progress into the harbor from his own vessel, the androcentric *Bachelor’s Delight*, he peers through the single lens of a telescope. Melville writes:

With no small interest, Captain Delano continued to watch her—a proceeding not much facilitated by the vapours partly mantling the hull, through which the far matin light from her cabin streamed equivocally enough; much like the sun—by this time crescented on the rim of the horizon, and apparently, in company with the strange ship, entering the harbor—which, wimpled by the same low, creeping clouds, showed not unlike a Lima intriguante’s one sinister eye peering across the Plaza from the Indian loop-hole of her dusk *saya-y-manta*. (47)

The feminization moves beyond the historical standard, common in Latinate languages, to refer “romantically (ironically?)” to a seafaring vessel as “her” or “she” (Spillers 72). Instead, it is as if the ship is dressed or veiled as a woman. Pitting the alluring mantle against the chastened wimple long associated with religious orders, Melville produces an equivocal portrait of feminine advance—at once titillating and unavailable. With special emphasis on its gendered and raced attributes, Melville invokes the *tapada limeña*. Delano’s scopic gaze is met and mirrored with another monocular technology.

The *saya y manto*, also known as the *tapada limeña*, is an essential emblem of the impossibility of recognition. It is also a signifier of mobility fashioned under restraint. Translated from the Spanish as “covering” or “covered woman,” the *tapada* is comprised of a *saya* and *manto*. The *saya* is a skirt meant to obscure the wearer’s body below a high waistline. The *manto* is a veil

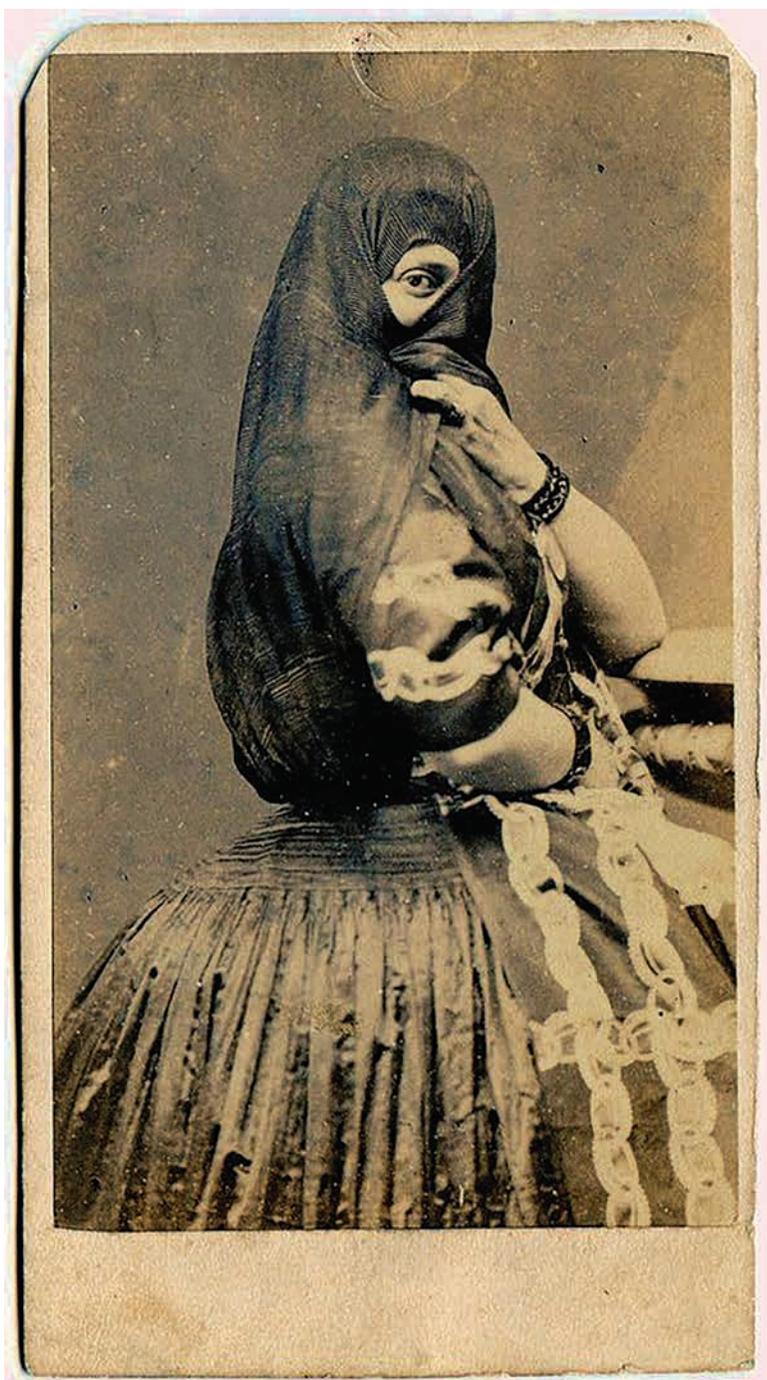


Fig. 1. Photograph of a tapada limeña, ca. 1860.

of nondescript black fabric worn as a hood over the entire head, except for a single eye (Fig. 1). This ensemble, which disguised form and particularity, remained popular for some 300 years—from roughly 1540 to 1840—because it could conceal the wearer’s identity. The costume is associated predominantly with the elite Creole class, those women of Spanish descent born within the colonial bounds of the Americas. While wearing the tapada, women could eschew the constraints of patriarchal domestic life and circulate unrecognized in public. The anxieties produced by these limited freedoms were vast. The potential for women’s mobility, as well as the possibility for women of other races and classes to travel under the guise of this elite costuming, became a flashpoint of colonial discord in Latin America.

The tapada has been taken up in studies of Melville only to indicate a shrouding that stands in metonymically for the story’s primary deceit: the disguised slave revolt. The setting of “Benito Cereno,” writes Robin Magowan, “is a world of masquerade that has been present from the very first page—from the initial description of the . . . *saya y manta*” (349). Such accounts flatten a mobile and interwoven network of possible association. This essay complicates and historicizes the particular dissimulation figured through the tapada. What aggregate meanings were indexed for Melville and his contemporary readership? What significations have been shorthanded and subsequently effaced in our current understanding of the novella? How do these meanings structure our (mis)understandings of race, class, and gender? To uncover women in “Benito Cereno” is to return to Delano’s formulation upon first sighting the *San Dominick*, to work to determine what he cannot discern: “what she wanted or what she was about” (47).

“Benito Cereno” uses the figure of the Lima intriguante as a dense signposting, a metaphorical figurehead. As Stephen Matterson observes, “Melville’s interest in clothing is in its signification, its symbolism” (4). The symbol of the hood-wearing woman that subverts a knowing gaze resists the classificatory observations tendered by the Victorian sciences and physiognomy of the era. The invocation of the tapada highlights Melville’s awareness of the common anxieties produced by the unknowability of the other and the relentless transmission of stereotypes from one colonial geography to an incommensurate other. Foregrounding this simile produces a critical stance on the novella that draws attention to the presences and notable absences of women within the text, bringing the status of women under the imbricated and frail power structures of the nineteenth century’s colonial domination into focus. The efforts and agencies of the enslaved women on board the *San Dominick* to maintain their limited freedoms become clearer. The conjuring of absent feminine figures at critical moments within the text are more notable. The interdependencies of

interpretation foisted upon raced and gendered individuals emerge more precisely. In short, women are drawn to the fore of the story.

The *saya y manto* can be understood to signal Melville's often overlooked preoccupation with women and their situation as both nodes of and participants in the consolidation of dense epistemological networks in three particular areas. In the mid-nineteenth century these meaning-making networks of American and European Enlightenment had particular implications for the structuring of race, class, and gender to support the hegemony of white supremacist and colonial agendas. First, the *tapada* intimates the critical role of women in staging dissent. Second, that *tapada limeña* calls attention to the obfuscating implications of intersectional feminine identities upon racial surveillance and categorization. Finally, this fashion as represented in “Benito Cereno” is situated on the fault lines of interpretative practice. Its deep ties to Orientalist aesthetics carefully sculpted by an elite class of European and American travelers reveal what Edward Said might call a “strategic formation” (20). The accrual of indexes and associations form the mirthful and terrifying backdrop of the nineteenth century colonial world that Melville renders in the text.

The public sphere of the burgeoning Viceroyalty of Peru became participatory grounds for classes of women who would have normally been excluded from such sites precisely because of their identity. The *saya y manto* was at the epicenter of what Mary Louise Pratt has called Lima's “feminotopia” and implicates the critical role of women enacting republican dissent (163). The French traveler Maximilian Radiquet writes that the women of Lima “ruled as veritable sovereign queens” (xii). The French feminist Flora Tristan dedicated an entire section of her 1838 travel narrative, *Peregrinations of a Pariah*, to the *limeñas* who she notes were carving out an extraordinary mobility, a new geography of state and social spaces that occupied the nexus of political and cultural import. When Tristan attended the Congress of the Viceroyalty, for example, she was surprised to find that “all the women present were veiled, reading the newspaper or conversing about politics” (264). In the theater, too, she observes that the mantled *limeñas* were privy to a kind of brazen social equality and smoked just as prodigiously as the men (266). The *tapadas* were able to circulate in public, interact with individuals outside of their immediate families, often outside of their class, and avoid retribution for what would be considered a clear breach of social decency. While these lauded freedoms could be easily circumscribed, and I would argue often were, the value of the *tapada* as a symbol of potential is irrefutable, a presentiment of the

New Woman ideal that would emerge in the U.S. and European imaginary at the end of the nineteenth century.

The tapada limeña endured for some three centuries despite myriad attempts to prohibit it. The perceived menace of the saya y manto's opacity created a steady and schematic stream of fears for those trying to maintain control over the population within the Viceroyalty of Peru. The tapada limeña was unsuccessfully outlawed by the Spanish Crown by order of monarchs Felipe II, Felipe III, Felipe IV, and Carlos III. The Roman Catholic Church, citing an impingement on the city's morals, issued a number of decrees over the years of the tapada's popularity, most notably at the Third Council of Lima in 1583, and again at an ecclesiastical council in 1601 (Poole 88). "Indeed, one of the proposals discussed," writes Fray Reginaldo de Lizárraga in his 1605 *Descripción breve del reino del Perú, Tucumán, Río de la Plata y Chile*, describing the proposed severity of one such measure, ". . . had in view the abolition of the saya y manto under penalty of excommunication" (190). Even the provincial governments became enmeshed in attempts to censure the trend by legal means as in the cases of the governments of Diego López de Zuñiga y Velasco in 1561, Francisco de Toledo in 1571, the Marqués de Montesclaros in 1609, the Marqués de Guadalcazar in 1624, Count Chichón in 1633, and their many viceregal successors (Poole 88). Its persistence became a testament to the republican spirit of Lima's residents and a hallmark of colonial revolt (Whipple). Perhaps it was this potential that Melville recognized in the tapada, and in turn, in the women aboard the slave ship. Each undermined immediate disclosures.

If most characters in "Benito Cereno" are inscrutable to Delano because of an inversion of his anticipated white-supremacist social order, the women are doubly shrouded by intersectional stereotypes leveled at both gender and race identities. Women are hidden from Delano, and in turn from the reader, in plain sight. Delano's inability to recognize autonomous action from the women precludes him from recognizing the rebellion aboard the *San Dominick*. If Delano is to believe that something askance is happening aboard the *San Dominick*, "then every soul on board, down to the youngest negress, was [Cereno's] carefully drilled recruit in the plot: an incredible inference" (69). That black women and girls could be deceitful, duplicitous, and disguised is unthinkable for Delano. Yet, though they take up little space in the novella, the presence of these women and girls fuel the action of the narrative.

The fictionalized deposition included in the story's final pages states decisively that there are "thirty-nine women and children of all ages," on board the *San Dominick* (104). The earlier narration observes these women and girls more generally and in the abstract, saying "there were not a few" (49). For Delano, the women on board the ship are significant only as part of the "multitude

of living freight" (54). In Delano's observations, the women and girls are seldom individuated. The novella refers to them most often as "the Negresses" when they become pertinent to the plot. The presence of the women and girls is often disembodied and registered sonically, as in the moment when Delano first boards the *San Dominick* to be greeted by the communal account of what has transpired, "in which the Negresses exceeded the others in their dolorous vehemence" (54). This calliopean clamor occurs again at the height of the action when Cereno escapes the ship, the revolting men give chase, and "the Negresses raised a wailing chant, whose chorus was the clash of steel" (102). When Delano does regard a single woman, he focuses again on composite parts: "youthful limbs" and the woman's "breasts." She is seen through the "lace-work of some rigging," valanced like the tapada (73). Though this woman is seated apart while nursing a child, Delano moves away from this individual woman and immediately back to a consideration of all the women on board. He is unable to comprehend the individual black woman or girl. Instead, this interaction causes him to "remark the other Negresses more particularly than before" (73). This is one of the few moments that he remarks upon the women at all.

Instead, Delano conjures bygone women in lieu of those who are present before him. The *San Dominick* is sutured to the feminotopia of Lima when Delano summons the women of Peru onto one of the ship's water balconies. Contemplating the former grandeur of the ship as an uncanny breeze brushes his cheek, Delano muses that, "the forms of the Lima viceroy's daughters had perhaps leaned where he stood" (74). It is precisely these daughters who would have donned the tapada's veil.

The transcript of the court proceedings dedicates much more significant attention to the women and girls who are on board the ship. "That the Negresses, of age, were knowing to the revolt, and testified themselves satisfied at the death of their master, Don Alexandro;" the story's final section reads, relating further "that, had the Negroes not restrained them, they would have tortured to death, instead of simply killing, the Spaniards slain by command of the Negro Babo" (112). The deposition continues:

[T]hat the Negresses used their utmost influence to have [Benito Cereno] made away with; that, in various acts of murder, they sang songs and danced—not gaily, but solemnly, and . . . sang melancholy songs to the Negroes, and that this melancholy tone was more inflaming than a different one would have been, and was so intended; that all this is believed, because the Negroes have said it. (112)

The women and girls on board the ship largely avoided the surveillance and scrutiny of the American emissary, Delano, as he relied heavily on archetypes

of raced and sexed bodies to identify what he saw before him. These same persons, these unnamed and now unknowable girls and women, are attributed with the most radical and violent aspirations for the slave insurgency. Ironically, the least considered members of the human cargo, the women and girls to whom not a single line of dialogue has been attributed, speak for themselves in a court of law, soliciting the belief of their male republican adversaries, and revealing the depth of their revolt.

Through its particular geographic ties to Lima, a site of amplifying racial diversity, the tapada limeña threatens the possibility of the visual surveillance of racial identity. “There are few places the inhabitants of which present so great a diversity of complexion and physiognomy as in Lima,” reads an 1851 article in *Harper’s* (to which Melville subscribed):

There is every gradation and intermixture of race, from the faire Creoles of unmixed European descent, who pride themselves upon the purity of their Spanish blood, to the jet black negro of Congo, whose unmitigated ebony hue bears testimony equally unequivocal to his pure African lineage. Between these two extremes is an almost innumerable variety of mixed races, each having its own peculiar designation, indicating the precise proportion of European, Indian, and negro blood in their veins, each marked with its own peculiar physical, intellectual, and moral characteristics. (600)

At the end of the colonial era, a mere 12.6 percent of Lima’s more than one million inhabitants were reported as white. Pardos or multiracial individuals and enslaved persons identified as black (and emancipated in 1854) accounted for roughly 8 percent of the population. The vast majority of Lima’s residents were indigenous persons (Poole 93). The potential of this non-white majority emboldened white Europeans and their descendants in Peru to police the visual presentation of the white body to maintain status, title, and political and social powers. The costume’s location within Lima, a city that Wyn Kelley identifies as a fraught “imperial site” in the context of *Moby-Dick* (275), forms a constitutive backdrop to the tapada’s power.

Though the tapada is meant to delineate racially and socially dominant classes of women within the Viceroyalty, references to the unknowability, the opacity, of the limeña abound. This impenetrable anonymity is often couched in terms of sexual liaison. “In this dress, it is said, a wife will pass her own husband when she may be walking with her lover, and the husband may make love to his wife, without being aware it is she,” wrote Charles Wilkes in an antebellum travel account that Rodrigo Lazo has suggested Melville drew upon directly (238; 227–29). “Women’s use of tapadas to travel has reached

an extreme that has resulted in great offenses against God and done considerable harm to the Republic," reads another nineteenth-century account of one prohibition against the *tapada limeña* issued by the Spanish crown, "because there is no way for father to recognize daughter, husband to recognize wife, nor brother to recognize sister" (Lafuente 186).² The perceived potency of the *tapada's* mobility is not only the implied menace of rape and/or the incest that might occur when men are unable to recognize their women relatives during sexual encounter. Accounts like these also register the fear that penetration, forcible or not, of the unrecognized woman could compromise family ascendencies and racial purity.

Men's mistrust of the shrouded whiteness denoted by the *tapada* appears in many accounts. In an 1865 travel memoir, the U.S. envoy to Peru, Willis Baxley, registers anxiety that the woman covered by the *tapada* will be less white than her "white-gloved arms and whitened eyelids" might suggest (Poole 113). Radiquet comments on the pure whiteness of the presumed *tapada*, describing the particular tone of alabaster skin and cautioning that it is "nothing sickly."³ He writes in his narrative, however:

One is never sure how to overcome the extreme severity with which the shawl is held closed, above all if, contrary to the *Limeña's* custom of going bare armed, a long sleeve goes just up to the glove in such a way that it does not allow [one] to guess the color of the skin. Have no doubt, the treacherous shawl conceals an African, black as the night [and] flat-nosed as death, before whom it would be superfluous to sow the pearls of gallantry. As one can see, the *saya* and *manto* has afforded women only advantages [and] men only with discomforts. (qtd. in Poole 93–94)⁴

The idealized male "one" is discomforted by the gendered body and its physiognomically rendered characteristics concealed beneath the fabric of the *saya y manto*. The potential of discovering racial difference bespeaks treachery executed both by the shrouded individual and the coalition of women from diverse classes and newly forming ethnic communities who have conspired to make possible this dissimulation. For women of this period, to show to advantage is to not show at all.

Melville tellingly populates "Benito Cereno" with a wide stratum of race and class representations that mirror Lima's heterogeneity. There are the formerly (and soon to be again) enslaved persons identified as being from distinct backgrounds, cultural groups, and regions—Guineamen (57), Senegalese (104), Nubian (87), and Ashantee (99). Cereno and his officers hail from Spanish nobility, located on the Spanish Main and its Latin American outposts, and they are accompanied by several classes of crew member from Europe and South America. What is more, Melville fashions the ship's interior to undergird

the transit of global goods and the trappings of diaspora. From Paraguay tea to Canary wine (55, 89), from settees made of Malacca cane to Cereno's "Chile jacket" (83, 57), Ivy Wilson points out that "nearly every image or icon is re-scripted as a sign of sub- or extra-nationality" (128). "Beneath such unseemly traffic there always lies hidden," writes Colin Dayan of the commerce registered as an aside in *Israel Potter* (1855), "waiting to be noticed, peering out from below, the physiognomy of misalliance, the fact of mixture." The paradigm of black and white on board the *San Dominick*, as in Lima, is made diffuse and assailable, submerged in the seemingly inessential detail or peering out from the seemingly offhand simile.

Melville produces narrative slippages within distinct and intersectional groups. Each attempt to classify the perceived crew and their "living cargo" demonstrates the impossible labor of trying to structure a paradigm between white and black. The boat's population is referred to alternately as "Spaniards and blacks," "whites and blacks," or "white-skins" and "coloreds" or "Africans," each indexing a different kind of identitarian logic and categories in historical flux. The black persons on the boat at times seem homogenous and constitutive of Delano's perceived "shadowy tableaux," as when the oakum pickers police "their countrymen, the blacks" (54). At other moments, these same individuals are differentiated. "Those Negroes have always remained upon deck," Cereno claims to Delano, "—not thrust below as in the Guineamen" (57). These raced men in Delano's troubled and oscillating perceptions at once pertain to, but are not of, the rest of the black population of the *San Dominick*. The unfeasibility of racial generalization is also made apparent. Delano observes "some petty underling" who is "either a white, mulatto, or black" (53). A Spanish sailor is compared to "an Indian [creeping] from behind a hemlock" (74); while, later, a North American indigeneity is invoked when the black men are said to be hurling hatchets "Indian like" (101). "Spanish boys" are made interchangeable with "slave boys," and both are described "like pages or pilot fish" (53). Melville, concludes Timothy Marr, both "exposes . . . the ignorance of the ethnological imagination" and "radically dramatizes the boundaries of ethnocentrism by revealing the peripheral possibilities that escape its purview" ("Melville's Ethnic Conscriptations" 27). The imagistic heft of the tapada dwells in these peripheral possibilities.

The narrative produces a will toward bodily knowledge. At one moment Delano observes the "raw aspect of unsophisticated Africans" (50). At another, he observes that, "the complexion of the mulatto was hybrid, his physiognomy was European—classically so" with features "more regular than King George's of England" (89). Samuel Otter has mapped Melville's fascination with corporeal knowledge tied to the raced body generally, and physiognomy

specifically. Yet, Melville does not let these physiognomic generalizations stand alone. When Delano speaks of a Barbados planter's remarks about miscegenation between whites and blacks, Cereno replies that he has heard the same of "Spanish and Indian intermixtures in our provinces" (89). As Kelley notes, "Lima, as a colonial city with a long history of European subjugation of native populations, reminds American readers of their own colonial history . . . Lima associates Incas and Spain, native and colonial empires, infidels and autos-da-fé" (179). There is a decided emphasis on the portability of prejudice, the slippages in easy identifications.

The invocation of the *saya y manto* reveals a willful transmission of stereotype between colonial epistemologies and knowledge projects. "At first glance," wrote the French naturalist, Alcides d'Orbigny, in 1842, "[the tapadas] could be taken for those phantoms of invisible women that travelers to the Orient find in Constantinople and all the Muslim cities" (qtd. in Poole 90). He notes, markedly, the specter of raced and erased bodies that similarly captured the attentions of Western audiences. The dress is popularly suspected of having been imported, in part at least, from the Spanish Moors by way of Sevilla in the 1560s. The *Harper's Monthly* article quoted above promulgated this theory, noting that the costume, "resembles that of the Moors, to whom it owes its origin" (602). Attempts to pinpoint an exact antecedent have been inconclusive.⁵ Yet, the gesture to Arab influence is not as tenuous as the generalized language surrounding the *tapada* would suggest, but is rather a byproduct of carefully constructed citational practice.

A genealogy of interpretation is imperative to the construction and cultural understanding of the *tapada limeña*, Melville's novella, and their concomitant function. Tracing the assemblies of meaning and perception that surround the *tapada* and "Benito Cereno" from Orientalist knowledge projects into the Americas demonstrate the portability of interpretive practice from one colonial geographic and cultural realm to another. This genealogy also historicizes consolidating notions of race that become anchored to physiological "types" during this era. Melville signals this naïve portability with the *saya y manto* and plumbs it with irony in Delano's confused observations.

The *saya y manto* captivated the imaginations of travelers and armchair tourists alike throughout Europe and the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was frequently described in literature and depicted in artwork and the extra-literary etchings of travel narratives in the Anglophone Atlantic world. References appear, for example, in W.B. Stevenson's popular *A Historical and Descriptive Narrative of Twenty Years' Residence in South*

America (1825), Tristan's aforementioned travel diaries, *Peregrinations of a Pariah* (1838), Charles Darwin's *Journals and Remarks* (later, *The Voyage of the Beagle*) (1839), Charles Wilkes's *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expeditions* (1845), and George M. Colvocoresses's travel narrative, *Four Years in a Government Exploring Expedition* (1852). Contemporary artists and illustrators also participated in the zeitgeist surrounding the saya y manto, such as the German painter, Johann Mortiz Rugendas, the French artist and diplomat, Léonce Angrand, and Darwin's cabin boy-cum-scientific illustrator, Syms Covington (Figs. 2 and 3). These texts relied heavily upon Orientalist models to evoke the mystifying appearance of the tapada.

The tapada's depictions in literary and visual culture, as they traveled across the Atlantic, are drawing on earlier and geographically disparate prototypes. Flora Tristan dedicated much of her *Peregrinations* to her observations of the saya y manto in Lima, but did so with what Mary Louise Pratt has called a "decidedly orientalist flavor" (165). "[The saya] is respected as part of the culture of the country," writes Tristan, stating provocatively that it is "just as the Muslim woman's veil is in the Orient" (273). Pratt contends that Tristan finds her literary antecedent in the travel diaries of Lady Mary Montagu who writes about her time in Constantinople while in the company of her husband, Britain's Turkish Ambassador from 1714 to 1718. These letters, published in the 1760's, Pratt tells us, "were widely read in Europe" and "Tristan has surely read them" (167). Montagu's account of Turkish women is neatly conscripted to serve Tristan's observations of and about the tapadas. Both Montagu and Tristan offer a prototype for feminist readings of the Muslim veil and the tapada limeña, noting both veils' will to subvert surveillance and the extension of (still limited) mobilities. Yet, the relay between the two authors marks a reliance upon a racist conflation of identity and amalgamated geography.

Similarly, visual artists found ready models for illustrations of the tapada in the "illustrative 'other'" fashioned by European artists in India, Africa, and the Middle East (Poole 87). These images, circulated in travel books and popular periodicals, maintain what art historian Deborah Poole calls a "disturbing resemblance" to European representations of Arab women. Poole cites the highly stylized depictions of the veil that link these dissimilar subjects. The artist's tendency to depict tapadas in pairs also conspicuously suggests similitude between illustrations of Arab women who traveled in the company of a servant. Poole draws out other colonial realities in the visual genealogy of the tapada. Citing Cuvier's 1812 dissection of Saartjie Sara[h] Baartman, known crudely as the Hottentot Venus, Poole notes the tractability of newly emerging typology. The wealth of illustrations in which the buttocks of the tapada is



Fig. 2. “Coming from Mass,” the illustration which accompanied the *Harper’s Monthly* article “Lima and the Limanians” in October 1851.

specially emphasized, featured prominently and perspectively overblown, are a testament to the operations of this typology.

In many of these works, the tapadas are pictured only from the side or the back, their faces never meeting the artist’s gaze. It is during this historical shift in the early part of the nineteenth century, in the years immediately before Melville composes “Benito Cereno,” that “the eighteenth century’s ethereal sexual fantasies and disembodied notions of race as a historically mutable essence were giving way to a modern—and more visual—understanding of race as affixed biological or physical ‘types’” (Poole 87). These writings and paintings, then, situated as they are in repurposed aesthetics from one colonial landscape to the next, perpetuate a cross-cultural, geographically expansive type that helps to confuse identity and conflate once disparate sexism and racism.

One such painting, Angrand’s watercolor *Announcement of a Cockfight*, provides a ready example (Fig. 4). In the work, three tapadas flank a well-dressed organizer and his two attendants of the peasant class as they hype the afternoon’s sport. The figures crowd the foreground. The organizer offers one of the tapadas, her back turned but her head inclined flirtatiously toward her interlocutor, a ticket to the hyper-masculinized and metaphorical event of the



Fig. 3. Ink illustration of a tapada limeña by Syms Covington completed circa 1835. Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

cockfight. One of the attendants holds a caged cock aloft above his head—the pinnacle of the painting's frame. The muted colors of the background offer line over form, to suggest the arcades and public sphere of a colonial plaza as the site of the unfolding scene. The tapadas, as Poole has suggested, sport highly stylized veils. They are the darkest points of the painting's palette and Angrand has textured them using horizontal lines to connote a sumptuous



Fig. 4. Watercolor painting entitled *Announcement of a Cockfight* completed by Léonce Angrand around 1834. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

fabric, folded in and upon itself. The veils are the most detailed nodes of the painting and form balanced focal points on either side of the work. The tapada on the left faces forward. Her veil is draped over her shoulders to reveal her collarbone and the shadow of her breasts. The two tapadas on the right are seen only from the back, their veils, their backs, and their buttocks in full view. The posterior is exaggerated significantly. On both tapadas, haunches are noticeably rounded, the line of their burgeoning figure moves from a small waistline through a bowed and bulky buttocks to narrow legs and small feet. The material of the women's skirts, appears ruffled and seamed to accentuate the convex shape. Not one of the tapadas is pictured with their feet flat on the ground. Instead, the women are painted off kilter, their dainty toes pointing, angled, and engaged with men, both in the frame and outside of it. The men that are pictured are dark skinned and one of the servants appears to be wearing braids. The front man wears a gentleman's clothing, but his attendants are painted in ill-fitting, cheap clothing. One of the men is barefoot. The suggestion is that the picture is titillating not only because it depicts an interaction

between men and highly sexualized women, but also because it illustrates a vignette that transects race and class divides. “In her unsolicited representation by the European male artist,” Poole writes, “the upper-class white woman of Lima thus acquired those racially marked attributes of promiscuity and deviancy that her own aristocratic ideology would have vehemently rejected” (89). This concomitancy of inconsonant forms obscures indexicality and fortifies the entanglement of othering.

“Nearly every nineteenth-century writer,” observes Said, “was extraordinarily well aware of the fact of empire” (14). Said’s poststructuralist critique of Western examinations and explanations of the East allow us to approach these “expert” texts with intellectual suspicion. Anglophone travel writing of the Victorian era posed a problematic and extremely Orientalized account of the non-Western world. The imperfect explanations developed by European and Anglo-American observers in the Orient are readily deployed upon individuals who are othered by their origins in Africa and the Americas. This maneuver displays “the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large” (Said 20). As Marr convincingly demonstrates, Melville was deeply aware of and “invested in the multivalent conventions of nineteenth century Islamic orientalism” (“Circassian Longings” 230). While others reproduced flawed interpretations of the Orient throughout colonial elsewhere, Melville’s directed reading allowed him to identify these conflated interpretive conventions.

Interpretive misdirection permeates the novella from the moment the reader is transported to the deck of the *San Dominick*. “Always upon first boarding a large and populous ship at sea, especially a foreign one,” Melville’s narrator writes, “with a nondescript crew such as Lascars or Manila men, the impression varies in a peculiar way from that produced by first entering a strange house with strange inmates in a strange land” (49–51). These observations are collapsed accounts of unspecified alterity. The narrator establishes a broad binary between foreign and domestic, known and unknown, tethering the space of the boat to the rootedness of a “strange land.” He suggests that the inhabitants, the “inmates,” are racialized, captive, and unindividuated. This commutability extends not only between these distinct South and Southeast Asian men, but also between the black African men and women that Delano is actually beholding. As Greg Grandin writes, Delano “is hollowed out, trapped by the superficialities of his own perceptions of the world” (234). As he continues to take in the ship and “the living spectacle” it contains, the text notes that initially “these strange costumes, gestures, and faces [are] but a shadowy tableau” (50). Melville calls attention to the necessity of interpretive practice

in the face of this unrecognizability. The monolithic sights are made manageable by breaking them into composite parts: dress, delivery, and, finally, the individuals in front of him. These components are then subjected to a battery of comparison with other ready models of difference, namely those established through practices of Orientalism.

Melville's grasp of the evolution of racialized and gendered stereotypes is evident. His knowledge and appropriation of a diverse set of contemporaneous texts is well documented. In the early part of his career, Melville supplemented his own voyages with literary sources. As a more mature writer, distant from his travels, he conscripted texts wholesale. Melville borrowed and embellished his knowledge and experience with popular travelogues. In the year or so preceding the publication of "Benito Cereno," Melville worked closely with at least six books chronicling maritime voyages (Sealts 90). Through deft intertextuality, Melville conveys established modes of perception and epistemology. His appropriation of these predetermined tropes, however, is not without consideration. He draws particular attention to the movements and slippages between categorical identifications, easy recognitions, and the facts that elude Delano because of an insistence upon deploying an inflexible citationality.

Consider the following discrepancy within the manuscript history of "Benito Cereno." As Delano considers the black women on board the *San Dominick*, he signals his learnedness as a barrier to his understanding. Making comparisons instead of observations, Delano notes, "like most uncivilized women, they seemed at once tender of heart and tough of constitution" (73). These women are not particularized, but rather made an abstraction. Other, absent "uncivilized women" become constitutive of the women that Delano is scrutinizing aboard the *San Dominick*. Delano underscores his ability to interpret by citing an authoritative text. In the original text of "Benito Cereno," serialized in *Putnam's Monthly* in 1855, Delano observes that "these, perhaps, are some of the very women whom Mungo Park saw in Africa, and gave such a noble account of" (73). He refers to a 1799 travelogue by the Scottish explorer Mungo Park, who is believed to be the first European to visit West Africa. A year later, when *The Piazza Tales* was published, the text would change to: "Ah! thought Captain Delano these, perhaps, are some of the very women whom Ledyard saw in Africa, and gave such a noble account of." In this version, Delano's citation is of John Ledyard's extremely popular 1783 travelogue, *A Journal of Captain Cook's Last Voyage* which chronicles Ledyard's conscription into the British Navy and subsequent observations of Alaska, Russia's Far East, China, and the South Pacific Islands. The editors of the Northwestern-Newberry edition account for the inconsistency in this way:

Neither name quite fits the sentence, since the famous African traveler Park (1771–1806) did not write the “noble account” while John Ledyard (1751–89) did write it but about women of Asia not of Africa, where he had not traveled beyond the coast. The explanation of this crux seems to be that when Melville first wrote the sentence he had in mind the passage in Park’s *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (1799)—perhaps in a reprint or excerpt—about his kind treatment by African women that quotes Ledyard’s parallel “noble account”—an account which Melville mistook or misremembered as Park’s own. Then, as Seymour Gross has suggested, when Ledyard’s account was quoted in a *Putnam’s* essay (December, 1855 [VI, 608]), either Melville or a *Putnam’s* editor noticed the discrepancy and “corrected” to “Ledyard”, overlooking the fact that Ledyard was speaking of Asian women. In *Moby-Dick* (chap. 5), Melville identifies the two travelers correctly. NN keeps the P[utnam’s] reading “Mungo Park” because it is more certainly Melville’s and because the factual error is unemendable—neither name is right. (*Piazza Tales* 585)

This essay conjectures an alternative interpretation of this textual anomaly. Namely, Melville was deliberately trying to draw attention to the near farcical cross-pollinations of travel literatures from diverse regions with reference to wholly separate populations of women. Park does this in his invocation of Ledyard’s far away analysis. Substituting Ledyard for Park in the collected version arguably makes this point more effectively and humorously—Delano’s citation is now not even on the right continent. The timely appearance of the Ledyard text in *Putnam’s* would likely prevent the kind of editorial mistake hypothesized by Gross instead of enabling it; a *Putnam’s* editor would presumably be familiar with Ledyard’s text and not assign it erroneously to an observation made about women of African origin. Furthermore, Melville’s correct deployment of both authors in *Moby-Dick* demonstrates his competency with the texts and, therefore, lends itself to this proposed alternative. That “neither name is right” is precisely the point.

Melville continues to draw out the Orientalist models that impel the descriptions of ethnic or racialized individuals aboard the *San Dominick*, references made available from accounts written by European travelers to the Middle East. Atufal, a presumed slave notable for his magisterial frame, stands “like one of those sculptured porters of black marble guarding the porches of Egyptian tombs” (92). In another reference to ancient Egypt, the oakum-pickers “were couched sphynx-like” upon the ship’s bulwarks (50). In yet another scene, the oakum pickers resemble whirling dervishes imported by way of early travel literature from Turkey, saying, “Like delirious black dervishes, the six Ashantees danced on the poop” (99). At times, these Orientalist adornments are not merely simile, like the moment when the mulatto slave Francesco is

"orientally set off with a pagoda turban formed by three or four Madras handkerchiefs . . . approaching with a salaam" (88). Each of these examples, like the subjects shrouded in the tapada limeña, subvert knowability or stable meaning.

By the time Melville composed "Benito Cereno," the *saya y manto* had all but disappeared from Lima. The fashion faded out of popular usage around the time of Peru's independence, languishing drastically between the years 1800 and 1860. Disappearing on the cusp of photographic invention, the single eye of the limeña largely escaped the capture of the camera's sole lens. "The tapadas were hardly seen," complains nineteenth century Peruvian commentator, Ricardo Palma, in an 1860 column in Lima's *El Comercio*. "Our señoritas have abandoned their incomparable dress" (qtd in Calligros 106). It is, perhaps, this waning presence that impels Melville's usage of the Lima *intriguante* as a capacious symbol for the structuring of his global gothic. His world, Melville notices, is in decline. Instead of the optimistic republican spirit, he attends the grotesque, the sinister, the ironic—the forgotten projects of knowledge formation.

Broken by his experience aboard the *San Dominick*, Benito Cereno grows silent and "moody." He convalesces in Lima, feminized, himself figured like an *intriguante*, "slowly and unconsciously gathering his mantle around him" (116). "But the past is passed," enjoins Delano, to the flagging Cereno "why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun had forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves" (116). Benito Cereno finds the act of forgetting is an impossibility: "Because they have no memory," Cereno replies dejectedly to Delano's litany, "because they are not human" (116). To abandon memory, according to Cereno, is to give up humanity. To forget the origins and particularities of our knowledge making, according to "Benito Cereno," is to capitulate the possibility of recognition.

In the novella's finale, the slave revolt is discovered and quelled by Delano and his crew. The *San Dominick* is brought to port in Lima and the case tried in the Viceroyalty's courts, adjudicated by officers of the Spanish crown. At the grisly conclusion, Babo, the leader of the revolt is executed and his decapitated head, described as the "hive of subtlety," staked on a pole in the center of a plaza in Lima. This scene should be read as Melville instructs us, "instead of being set down in the order of occurrence," as if it is, "retrospectively, or irregularly given" (114). It is a story to be read back in time. The novella ends where the Lima *intriguante* begins. Babo's head is described as returning the gaze of white onlookers, "unabashed" staring out into the distance (116). This denouement marks the implicit narrative importance of the tapada. The head

echoes the initial conjuring of the Lima intriguing as a dark visage gazing out upon Lima's colonial Plaza. These inscrutable, silent faces become linked in their location, in their challenge, and in their subversion.

Notes

¹ Here, I am indebted to and follow Simone Browne's theorization of racialization as both a mode of surveillance and a technology of social control. Browne understands racialization as signaling "those moments when enactments of surveillance reify boundaries, borders, and bodies" (16).

² "Ha venido a tal extremo el uso de andar tapadas a las mujeres, que de ello han resultado grandes ofensas a Dios i notable daño a la república," reads the Cortes Act of 1586, "a causa de que aquella forma no reconoce el padre a la hija, ni el marido a la mujer, ni el hermano a la hermana" (Translation mine).

³ "mais qui n'a rien de maladié" (Translation mine).

⁴ The phrase "flat nosed as death" is likely cribbed from Théophile Gautier's *Les Grottesques*, collected in 1844. Clearly inflected with bunk physiognomic conclusion, Gautier writes in a treatment of Cyrano de Bergerac that "The reason that negroes are usually stupid . . . is because they are flat-nosed as death itself" (163–164).

⁵ This theory was likely popularized by Ricardo Palma's *Tradiciones Peruanas*, a serialized newspaper column published from 1872 through 1910, and later collected into a two volume book. Palma, notably, is not always reliable as he attempts to account for the new nation's history and picturesque folkloric. Of the saya y manto's origins, he writes, "Más fácil fue para Colón el descubrimiento de la América que para mí el saber a punto fijo en qué año se estrenó la primera saya [It was easier for Columbus to discover America than it is for me to pinpoint the year the saya first appeared] (183, translation mine).

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