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“Reader, the violence they did”: Employing Metalepsis Towards a Collective Narrative in the Historical Novel

Let us not begin at the beginning, nor even at the archive.
--Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”

It may be observed that, in the description of the principal outrages, reference has been had to the best authorities of that time, such as they are; and that the account given in this Tale, of all of the main features of the Riots, is substantially correct.
--Charles Dickens, preface to *Barnaby Rudge; A Tale of the Riots of ‘Eighty*

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INTRODUCTION

By its own conventions, the historical novel as genre has been saddled with a somewhat Herculean task: it is expected to portray the spirit of the epoch which it addresses and represent the social, cultural, and political conditions of its age all while doing so with the strictest attention to accurate and realistic detail in illustrating the fictional (or fictionalized) characters, events, and objects within. Although a great deal has been written about the historical novel—its formal qualities, its attempts at realism, its bourgeois origins and constraints, etc.—few scholars have identified the rhetorical device of metalepsis, as described by Gerard Genette, as a formal and critical method of disrupting the violence of traditional narratology in the historical novel. In this paper, I argue that in two historical novels written in and portraying vastly different historical periods, Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855) and Jordy Rosenberg’s *Confessions of the Fox* (2018), the authors employ metalepsis, or narrative intrusion in some form, to two distinct ends: first, to alert the reader to moments of violence—cultural, imperial, racial, or otherwise—and second, to create a dialectic space which allows for the construction of a more collective history in their texts. Working through the narratology theory of Genette, with attention to Gayatri Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* and Hayden White’s *The Content of the Form,* and in some tension with Georg Lukács’s and Walter Benjamin’s respective theories of the novel, I argue

that the usage of metalepsis in both Melville and Rosenberg's historical novels creates ruptures in the stories through which the authors can draw attention to spaces in traditional narrative forms where certain populations (enslaved people, sex workers, and trans folx, just to name a non-exhaustive few in whom Melville and Rosenberg are invested) have been denied a voice and, in doing so, approach a fictionalization of historical personages and events more inclusive of a range of experiences across non-linear time. Through metalepsis, these authors offer their readers an opportunity to divest themselves from the narrative mechanisms of the historical novel that have traditionally prevented marginalized voices from participating in and solidifying their stories whether in fiction or in archival history. By doing so, they create spaces for these histories to exist and persist through the potential for dialectic interpretative exchange that their metaleptic narrators invite.

While at first glance, it may seem that these two novels have little in common and that it is arbitrary to analyze them in tandem, I have placed them together for several reasons. To start, and maybe most obvious, is that they are two novels of the same sub-genre: historical fiction. But beyond that similarity, and despite the vast gap in history between their publications and difference in their subject matter, both novels operate through an exploration of power and revolt, in the respective slave rebellion of *Benito Cereno* and the lawless antics of Jack Sheppard in response to the economic, sexual, gendered, and racial discrimination and oppression of eighteenth-century London in *Confessions of the Fox.* What I am not doing is making a historical claim about empire and its transits; rather, I am identifying a particular formal technique in both authors' usage of metalepsis and paratexts to show an intervention in the problem of historical violence. Why these two novels work so well together is because of their specific reliance on metaleptic moments as an attempt to disable the violent silencing of others and in their disruption of linear time to further allow for a range of historically occluded voices. This appropriation of paratextual techniques into the historical novel as genre, then, works to divest the form from its bourgeois and imperial origins.

CRITICAL CONTEXTS

Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin have both addressed the limitations of the historical novel in portraying a collective history; specifically, they criticize its inability to separate itself from its singular author and bourgeoise origins and, as a result, foster narratives inclusive of a wider range of experiences across classes. While it is not at all my aim to dismiss or

contest Lukàcs's or Benjamin's criticism of the historical novel, my analysis of the novels on which this paper is focused functions through its tension with these two theorists' fundamental claims. In *The Historical Novel* (1955), writing about the nineteenth-century historical novel, specifically Sir Walter Scott's *Waverly* (1818), Lukács claims that "the being of the age can only appear as a broad and many-sided picture if the everyday life of the people, the joys and the sorrows, crises and confusions of average human beings are portrayed" (39). Lukács names this quality in Scott's writing as a hallmark of the genre, a convention which emerged from "the great realistic social novel of the eighteenth century" (31). While Lukács does not say which great novels to which he refers in this section[1], one example might be Samuel Richardson's epistolary tragic novel *Clarissa: The History of a Young Lady* (1748), in which Richardson explores both the hour-to-hour external happenings as well as the intense internal psychological fluctuations of his characters through the multitudinous letters they exchange with each other. As such, for Lukács, the historical novel as entity must pay special attention to realism and individuality while also "deriv[ing]…the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of the age" (19). However, Lukàcs notes that even if the historical novel is able to accomplish this feat of historically-grounded realism, it faces two distinct limitations towards "mak[ing] history a *mass experience*" (23): first, in its roots in the preservation of a record of bourgeois life and second, in the tendency of the author to display too much of his or her own modern senses and prejudices in the text. The eighteenth-century social novels from which *Waverly* and its successors inherited some of their most distinguishable traits were borne of writers that Lukács characterizes as "historian[s] of bourgeoise society" (20). As such, this historical novel, beholden to this disadvantage, can never fully represent the true circumstances of history amongst and between the classes because they are products *of* the bourgeois *about* the bourgeois made possible *by* the rise of bourgeois society. What Lukács identifies in the historical novel after 1848 is that the author's personal, subjective experiences, biases, and ideologies intrude upon the historical integrity of the text, and this definitively cheapens its effectiveness as a work aimed at an accurate representation of history. Ultimately, while Lukács acknowledges some formal accomplishments of the historical novel through his analysis of *Waverly*, he argues that the genre remains susceptible to the personal ideologies of its author, particularly after 1848, and thus closes off possibilities for including a wider range of collective experience.

Walter Benjamin, in his earlier essay “The Storyteller,” (1936) takes up many of the same issues that Lukács later identified in *The Historical Novel*. For Benjamin, we share collective experience of history through storytelling, but the advent of the novel diametrically opposes this. He argues, “The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times” (87). Whereas Lukács specifically addresses the genealogy, structure, and limitations of the historical novel, Benjamin focuses his criticism more generally on the novel and its destruction of the art of collective storytelling. However, like Lukács, Benjamin is troubled by the contained subjectivity of the novel:

> What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature—the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella—is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those that are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. (87)

Benjamin insists that that written, printed nature of novels (a formal element of the novel in itself indebted to the whims of the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism) automatically negates its potential for collective experience because it is finite and closed off, both by its fixed nature on the page as well as by the nature of the novelist herself. Because there is no dialectic relationship between speaker and listener where there is a possibility for exchange, and no possibility for a retelling as in the passing along of a fable or myth, the experience belongs singularly to the author and her characters. However, many historical novels style themselves to some extent as “tales” rather than “histories” or “novels.” Notable examples are two I have already mentioned, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Barnaby Rudge; A Tale of the Riots of ‘Eighty*, as well as *Benito Cereno*, which was originally published in *Putnam’s Monthly* but then later revised for *The Piazza Tales.*[2] By styling them as tales, their authors bestowed upon their texts some of the rhetorical power of the oral tradition with which Benjamin is so invested. This explains why many of these novels assume the almost-fairy-tale-like exposition of “Once Upon A Time” in their opening lines: Dickens adapts this most obviously with “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” keeping his setting temporally general, but Melville revises this convention by beginning *Benito Cereno,* “In the

year 1799”—which, of course, is not the year when the historical event of the Haitian slave revolt occurred.[3] That event took place in 1791. As such, *Benito Cereno* deftly hovers in the liminal zones between story and novel, time immemorial and historical time, factual events and fictional storytelling, singular events and collective experience. Rosenberg, too, repurposes the convention of “Once Upon a Time” at the beginning of his “Editor’s Forward” which begins, “Some time ago—never mind how long precisely—I slipped off the map of the world” (ix). Although Rosenberg’s text is titled *Confessions of the Fox: A Novel*, he nevertheless employs the language of the tale (in this instance, both temporally and spatially vague) to set his narrative, refashioning the conventions of oral traditional storytelling to the historical novel. As such, both *Benito Cereno* and *Confessions of the Fox* offer versions of the historical novel which do not suffer from but instead enlist authorial subjectivity to mitigate their bourgeois origins and pressure existing Marxist criticisms of the genre that claim they cannot construct a truly collective history by inviting the reader to participate in the telling of the tale, and in the collective experience of creating narrative history.

Gayatri Spivak and Hayden White’s respective criticism on the archive, an archive which both *Benito Cereno* and *Confessions of the Fox* mobilize as an important plot point as well as a mode of narration, further complicates constructing and preserving a collective history, particularly when applied to the genre of historical novel and its conventions. In *The Content of the Form*, White makes the important claim that what properly gets called “history,” including so-called non-narrative forms of historiography like archive and chronicle (as opposed to texts written *about* the events of history, like text books or non-fiction works), is in fact a form of historical representation rather than a token of object historical reality because it represents a discourse about what was worth preserving and not empirical evidence of things as they were. For White, annals, chronicle, and even archival documents are merely “particular products of possible conceptions of historical reality” (6), his language indicating that the description of events and personages recorded is not to be taken objectively as fact but instead was in some way constructed by the subjective thoughts of its author. Spivak revisits White’s argument in her chapter “History” from *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason.* In it, she claims:

> To me, literature and the archives seem complicit in that they are both a crosshatching of condensations, a traffic in telescoped symbols, that can only too easily be read as each other’s repetition-with-a-displacement. The authority of the

> author is matched by the control of the archon, the official custodian of truth. It is archivization that interests us, naturally. (205)

To a great extent, it is archivization that interests Melville and Rosenberg, too. According to Spivak, both the archive and the fictional text receive their authority from a subjective source, and neither should be fetishized as truth. The trace of the author, the archon, the colonizer, or Imperialism, is the only thing that is for certain left behind in the overlapping and dense "telescoped symbols" that are presented respectively as history or fiction. Using several examples of when historical documents or parts of them were revised, edited, or altogether removed, Spivak illustrates how imperial violence works to alter the historical unfolding of its legacy as well as silence "othered" populations. Spivak claims that the changes made to these historical documents indicate how power is invested in creating knowledge and meaning (215).

As we will see, the creation of the archive, its limitations towards historical truth, and its relationship to fiction are concerns that both Melville and Rosenberg explore in their texts. So if, as Lukács and Benjamin have alerted us, we cannot trust the novel due to its bourgeoise origins and authorial subjectivity, and if, as White and Spivak have taught us, we also cannot trust the archive as exemplary of empirical and historical "truth," where does that leave the historical novel and its authors in a project of representing a more inclusive experience of history? As alluded to previously, turning to and adapting Gerard Genette's definition of metalepsis creates a theoretical passageway and opens a range of interpretive possibilities through which we can see how both Melville and Rosenberg's fictionalized historical texts simultaneously cue the critical reader to moments of violence while also making space for what otherwise would have been silenced narratives. In *Narrative Discourse* (1979), Gerard Genette defined *metalepsis* as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse (as in Cortázar), produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical (when, as in Sterne or Diderot, it is presented in a joking tone) or fantastic" (234-5). Genette's definition sets up two important qualities of metalepsis: narrative intrusion between the text's "universes"; and the creation of an uncanny effect of either humor or astonishment on part of the reader. I take Genette's description of "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator" to include free-indirect discourse, allusions, references to the text's own production, narrator addresses directly to the reader, extra-textual features (footnotes,

marginal notes, parentheticals, addendums), and any other number of literary devices that effectively place the narrator in the narrative.[4] The authors I am concerned with implement many of these modes of narrative intrusion as metalepsis. The second half of Genette's definition, which is concerned with effect and readerly reception, requires a more thorough parsing. I want to expand somewhat upon Genette's terminology of "comic" and "fantastic" as they relate to Melville and Rosenberg's texts. The fantastic effect refers more generally to the uncanny and often uncomfortable experience of encountering an intrusive narrator. However, the comical cannot so easily be reduced to the aesthetics of humor. The comic effect of metalepsis I wish to explore in *Benito Cereno* and *Confessions of the Fox* is the effect produced by a shared secret with the author, a joke between storyteller and listener which the former can only hope that the latter will understand. Enhancing Genette's study of metalepsis is Saartje Gobyn's revised definition: "*Narrative metalepsis is a text-internal transgression of hierarchically ordered diegetic universes which reveals the internal structure of the text*" (121). Metalepsis, then, is not only a formal device that these authors employ towards a dramatic effect, but a larger manifestation of the content of the work in which text's meaning is dependent upon the blurring of narrative boundaries. With these theoretical considerations of the novel and the archive in place, we can now turn to the texts themselves to illuminate how these authors exert metaleptic narrative intrusion, in moments when the violence of power operates, to work towards a more collective understanding of history inclusive of a broader range of experience.

BENITO CERENO'S METALEPTIC SHIFTS

In *Benito Cereno* (1855), Melville relates the story of a Spanish slave ship overthrown by its captives and leader Babo. The ship is headed by Captain Don Benito, and though not known to be in revolt, is unsuccessfully offered aid by the self-possessed Captain Amasa Delano. In *Benito Cereno*, Herman Melville employs metalepsis most notably through free-indirect discourse to signal moments of racist ideology and the violence of slavery, creating an interpretive space for a reader to question Captain Delano's goodness while simultaneously considering their own personal allegiances. In this section, I claim that Melville's usage of metalepsis and free-indirect discourse does not indicate unnecessary authorial subjectivity intruding upon the historical events but rather heightens his ability to form a more collective historical discourse. One of the first and most striking instances of

Melville's use of free-indirect discourse as narrative intrusion happens when Captain Delano notices the rogue ship idling near his own vessel:

> To Captain Delano's surprise, the stranger, viewed through the glass, showed no colors; though to do so upon entering a haven, however uninhabited its shores, where but a single other ship might be lying, was the custom among peaceful seamen of all nations. Considering the lawlessness and loneliness of the spot, and the sort of stories, at that day, associated with those seas, Captain Delano's surprise might have deepened into some uneasiness had he not been a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man. Whether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine. (35)

The shift from the third-person omniscient narrator who is privy to objective fact and the personal opinions and ruminations of Captain Delano happens discreetly yet perceptibly in this paragraph, and Melville's use of the word "undistrustful" (as opposed to "trusting," "naïve," or "gullible") indicates the possibility of an unreliable narrator on whom a careful reader should keep her eye. Melville begins the passage firmly rooted in the third-person omniscient narrator's register of Delano's "surprise" at the ship's lack of flag to display its national or private affiliation. Although this phrase literally signifies that the ship bears no national flag, Melville already alerts the reader towards Delano's interest in color and nationality as a marker of who gets coded as friend or foe. While subtle, this example hearkens to the racist and eugenic tendencies that we come to learn the seemingly amiable Delano truly harbors. Once the narrator asks the reader to start "considering," the delineation of whose thoughts are whose is less exact. Are we to assume that Delano, the narrator, or the reader has considerations regarding the safety of the sea in that area? Instantly, Melville reinserts us into Delano's surprise, but here, the narrator's description of it is conditional indicated by usage of the verb phrase "might have deepened." Using free-indirect discourse throughout this paragraph invites the reader to question who is speaking and to ask themselves if it is them—do they harbor these same concerns? Melville further invites the reader's insertion into the text in the last sentence of the passage when the narrator literally

prompts the reader to question Delano's qualities. Melville engages in what Jared Hickman describes as

> …the mapping of the shifting relations of a former cosmic others within the now, single dynamic cosmos of the planet, a project that confounds easy distinction between the material and the ideal, the practical and the theoretical, the real and the representational, and the secular and the religious…the deep structure of modern discourse—the reason all we say and do can ultimately be translated as a shaping of a finite, particular world. (42)

Through this interactive metaleptic intervention, *Benito Cereno* shifts from the history of the "former" personages and events to the inclusion of the "now"—the reader and the cosmos that they inhabit. These moments of metalepsis not only fortify the text against a notion of the historical novel's finite authorial subjectivity that Lukàcs insists upon but also situate it in the speaker-listening dialectic that Benjamin claims constructs shared historical experience over time.

Later in the narrative, these instances of free-indirect discourse function more obviously to alert the reader to Delano's racist and imperial violence. This occurs in the scene in which Melville describes the oakum-pickers and hatchet-polishers. The passage begins with a listing of objective observations of the ship and its enslaved people: what they are doing, what tools they are using, what sounds they make, and any number of empirical descriptions of the scene. It reads, "The quarter-deck rose into an ample elevated poop, upon the forward verge of which, lifted, like the oakum-pickers, some eight feet above the general throng, sat along in a row, separated by regular spaces, the cross-legged figures of six other blacks, each with a rusty hatchet in his hand…" (39). This passage uses descriptive language, but it is devoid of any subjective commentary. However, the paragraph ends with a description of the six hatchet-polishers as having "the peculiar love in negroes of uniting industry with pastime" and "the raw aspect of unsophisticated Africans" (39). The blatant insertion of these offensive *opinions* of the slaves at the end of a long section of third-person omniscient depiction of the *actions* of the slaves signals a moment of racist ideology, opening a space in the narrative for the reader to go through a number of interpretive upheavals. They must not only ask themselves the ever-important critical question of "who is speaking—Delano, narrator, or Melville?" but they must also necessarily ask themselves, "Is it me?" As such, Melville uses these metaleptic moments to invite the reader across

historical time periods to participate in a collective refashioning of whose story is lionized or despised over time. Thus, the goal is not, as Spivak says, “to describe ‘the way things really were’ or to privilege the narrative of history as imperialism as the best version of history” but instead to “continue to account of how one explanation and narrative of reality was established as the normative one” (267). Melville invites the critical reader to question how racial and imperial violence exist in the nineteenth-century and may indeed persist in their own time through these narrative intrusions.

Moments of free-indirect discourse continue throughout the novella but reach their dramatic peak in the two paragraphs describing the Africans’ fitness for servitude alongside Captain Delano’s personal treatment of black people. This passage illustrates perfectly the effect of the fantastic and the comical which Genette attributes specifically to metalepsis and which Melville employs through free-indirect discourse. Immediately following a paragraph of third-person omniscient narrative of the events, the narrator begins, “There is something in the negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one’s person” and concludes that “God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune” (70-71). The sudden shift from third-person narrative to free-indirect discourse has a double effect in that it both creates the fantastic effect Genette describes—the jarring change gives the uncanny feeling of being unsure of who is speaking—but it also tips the reader to this moment of racial violence, a recodification of an entire race of black people as destined to a finite range of possibilities limited to serving their white superiors. As Hickman states, “Race is ontological in the historically qualified sense. Race is woven into the global cosmos by virtue of its historical role in mapping—not only retrospectively and descriptively but prospectively and prescriptively—that cosmos” (51). The fantastic effect of Melville’s metaleptic moment alerts the reader to this moment of racist ideology constructing the cosmos. Race does not “play over something else” in the text but is the very thing to which Melville’s narrative structure is attuned. However, more important in this example and related to Hickman’s claim of race mapping the cosmos is the “comical” effect of this instance of metalepsis on the reader. After the reader has been told how the Africans were divinely created with the express purpose to cheerfully serve whites, there is a description of Delano’s feelings towards black people:

> Captain Delano’s nature was not only benign, but familiarly and humorously so. At home, he had often taken rare satisfaction in sitting in his door, watching some free man of color at his work or play. If on a voyage he chanced to have a black sailor,

> invariably he was on chatty, and half-gamesome terms with him. In fact, like most men of good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men took to Newfoundland dogs (71).

The moment begs the reader to consider whether it is Delano, the narrator, or Melville who think Delano to be "benign" as well as "of good, blithe heart." The imagery of a hairy, slobbering canine juxtaposed with human men in conjunction with the narrative strangeness of the passage creates a doubly comic effect; not only are the images themselves humorous, but the interspersed free-indirect discourse tells Melville's joke, a joke that asks the reader to find humor in the preposterousness of Delano's supposedly "benign" association of humans with animals. Catharine Shipps has written about how *Benito Cereno's* message has continued relevance in the contemporary efforts of activism, particularly the Black Lives Matter movement, to illuminate how figures of power can construct or destruct the actions, motives, and lives of black citizens (1). She suggests that the use of free-indirect discourse throughout makes *Benito Cereno* "a text with a powerful message about authority which has long outlived its intended audience: one cannot assume authority figures are objective" (4). At this juncture, and with Shipps's comments in mind, that we can now examine Melville's inclusion of the deposition in the narrative.

In addition to his usage of free-indirect discourse to both a "comical" and "fantastic" effect, Melville's creation, insertion, and explanation of a fictionalized archival report attempts to fill in the narrative gaps that the story proper misses and, in effect, reconstructs its own idealized version of actual, historical events. Melville introduces the deposition, explaining that "the following extracts, translated from one of the official Spanish documents, will it is hoped, shed light on the preceding narrative, as well as, in the first place, reveal…the true history of the San Dominick's voyage…" (89). Melville prefaces the included historical-archival information by offering it as empirical truth of the events and history of the personages involved in the revolt. However, the extreme metaleptic shifting into the paratext complicates this reading. As Shipps claims, "Upon reaching the deposition, the reader is likely yearning for clarification or is completely skeptical of the text's perspectival game, and therefore skeptical of the 'official document' that is introduced" (3). Of course, the "official document" is not official at all; it is instead Melville's fictionalized revision of the archival documentation that actually existed. As such, Melville has styled himself with the strange liminal identity of being both historian of facts and author of fiction. As Mark C. Anderson

notes, “[that] he alters and adds to the tale in no way discredits his version as history any more than does Delano's imperfect recollection of reality (moreover, as will be discussed, Delano also altered the documents). In fact, in so doing, Melville attempts what all good history writing does-to interpret the past in order to make sense of the present” (64). The insertion of the deposition functions both as a metaleptic moment, as it represents a crossing of diegetic worlds, but paratextual inclusion also represents an attempt at a more inclusive history that can more fully tell the tale. Notwithstanding, Melville’s deposition, a document completely fabricated and that could be constructed entirely to Melville’s ends, fundamentally denies Babo an opportunity to tell his story. The final two paragraphs express Babo’s “voiceless end” (102) and refusal of participation in the deposition. Arguably, for Michel-Rolph Trouillot, this could signify a moment of unthinkable history: “When reality does not coincide with deeply held beliefs, human beings tend to phrase interpretations that force reality within the scope of these beliefs. They devise formulas to repress the unthinkable and to bring it back within the realm of accepted discourse” (72). While Trouillot’s work specifically addresses the Haitian Revolution, there are obvious connections to the events described in Melville’s fictionalized legal documents. Altering the historical event to rename the ship the San Dominick ties it to the Haitian Revolution of the late eighteenth century, creating an important link across geographical space as well as historical time. But the continued silencing of Babo has complex implications for Melville’s collective history, presenting two possibilities: either Melville is enacting the very repression of the “history of the impossible” (73) of which Trouillot speaks—in this case a successful slave revolt in which the leader’s voice is heard and recorded—or, as Shipps suggests, Melville’s silencing is deliberate, wherein “the deposition gives flesh to Babo’s character, showing his power as a leader and will to gain freedom, but removes his only means of communicating his perspective, thus reminding the reader that at the time Babo did not and could not legally have a voice” (3). As such, the inclusion of the fictionalized archival documentation of the events simultaneously conceals and reveals the entire truth of the history of the revolt on the San Dominick, complicating the novel’s relationship to Delano’s racist ideologies. Turning now to *Confessions of the Fox*, I will examine how many of these same metaleptic and paratextual techniques function similarly in the historical novel of the twenty-first century.

METALEPSIS AND PARATEXT IN CONFESSIONS OF THE FOX

Jordy Rosenberg's recent historical novel *Confessions of the Fox* (2018) is a text deeply concerned with the mechanisms of intersectional violence. Telling two entwined stories taking place centuries apart, the novel focuses on present-day academic Dr. Voth, who has discovered the lost manuscript of eighteenth-century jailbreaker and legend Jack Sheppard (both trans men according to Rosenberg). The novel primarily documents Sheppard's criminal exploits with his partner Bess, a sex worker, while Voth's narrative occurs primarily in the footnotes, or what Genette would call "paratext," and centers on his fraught relationships, both professional and personal. While Melville uses metalepsis to alert the reader specifically to racist ideology, Rosenberg uses metalepsis to illustrate how power mechanisms operate across historical time periods while also creating a narrative space for combatting the classist, racist, sexist, and literal bodily violence that pervades the book's two convergent narratives. Like Melville, Rosenberg employs free-indirect discourse in the Sheppard storyline to signal such moments, particularly as they occur between Jack and Bess. The first instance of this in the Sheppard manuscript occurs just before he is to be executed, an event that happens at the beginning and then again at the end of the narrative. As the mob grows and the executioner approaches, Jack remembers Bess's last words to him, which are italicized in the text. Rosenberg then sandwiches the following questions between two large blank spaces on the page. The questions read, "But *is* Bess at the bat house? Is she, indeed, even alive?" (8). There is nothing to indicate that Jack asks these questions himself, and the formal use of additional space between the text separates it from the rest of the omniscient narrator's exposition of the scene. They allude to the violence that both Jack and Bess experience—the literal bodily violence of injury, execution, and death, but also the classist and sexist violence they face as rogues and sex workers, societal outcasts of their historical time. As Valerie Traub has noted, "a metaleptic sleight of hand enables the ground of critique to keep shifting" (31). In *Confessions,* these tricky modes of narration create space for critical discourse to ensue.

Another such instance occurs later in the Sheppard manuscript but earlier in linear time when Jack and Bess first formally meet. As the two size each other up, Bess "cocked her head. Squinted. What an odd bird he was. But then Bess's taste ran towards the Odd" (42). While Bess's movements and the explanation of her personal preference in a romantic partner are squarely omniscient narration, the strange non-question and non-exclamation rhetorical phrase "what an odd bird he was" cannot easily be attributed to Bess. Nestled into

the narration, the free-indirect discourse forces the reader to consider Jack's oddness, what makes him odd, and how there is indeed a space for the odd within the realm of somebody else's desire in a way that is not fetishized or ashamed. As Traub notes, "the material, social, and psychic conditions of queer life may not always be served by the presumption of an exclusive queerness: perhaps at least some of us, and the worlds in which we live, are queer and gay, queer and bi, queer and trans, queer and lesbian, queer and heterosexual" (33). Just as there is a violence associated with a hierarchical implementation of male/female and gay/straight binaries, Traub acutely attunes her reader to the violence of exclusivity within queer communities as well. "What an odd bird" is not just Bess or the narrator's flippant observation of Jack's uncategorizable-ness, but an immensely powerful moment of free-indirect discourse in which we are delivered a question in the form of an exclamation with a period at the end. Jack exhibits oddness but the phrase also signals the potential for an evolution past imposed identities of normal versus odd, indicated in Rosenberg's use of the past tense "was." As such, it is no coincidence that in this same scene, Jack self-constructs his identity by "*saying himself into being*" and therefore, cements his rightful place in the course of historical time. Here, too, a strange metaleptic moment is at work in the italicized text. Rosenberg generally indicates the characters' verbatim thoughts—things said to themselves—with italics (as opposed to quotations), but the moment creates a Genettian "fantastic" moment in which it is unclear whether or not those are Jack's words, the narrator's, Voth's, or even Rosenberg's. On the next page, Rosenberg explains, "He was becoming Jack Sheppard. He was entering History" (44). The metaleptic moment invites a space in which the reader can consider what it means to "become" who you are, but it also re-inscribes Jack's history, his former life as P—a dead name we never hear or see—and provides a narrative moment in which the experience of the other, the "odd bird," can speak truth to power.

Aside from his usage of traditional free-indirect discourse towards narrative intrusion, Rosenberg also employs the preface as well as the textual footnotes to insert another diegetic universe, one both fully invested in and temporally and narratively divergent from the Sheppard manuscript, into his text. The "Editor's Foreword" structures the two narrative universes of eighteenth-century London in the Sheppard manuscript and the contemporary American university in the footnoted Voth text. The strange vacillation between where each narrative occurs—forward, textual body, footnotes—disrupts the linear teleology of history as

well as the narrative of events in the novel. While the first few footnotes seem to be of the traditional, clarifying nature, Voth makes a metaleptic appearance fairly quickly as in the footnote for “bat house” which reads, “Sex workers. I settle on this annotation rather than ‘prostitute’ as, in the anti-vagrancy laws of the period, the doxy was condemned specifically as someone who would not go gently into the *good night* of the capitalist workday” (7). While a traditional explanation of the term in the footnote certainly occurs, it also contains an indication of Voth’s personal interests and allegiances outside of the manuscript, evidenced by the sarcastic allusion to Dylan Thomas in describing Bess’s refusal of the mechanisms of capitalist violence. At the end of the same chapter, Voth returns in another footnote to her previous clarification on the “bat house”; since the exact meaning of the phrase “is not corroborated in any reference materials, I must surmise that it is in fact not meant cruelly here, but it is used in a loving and familiar manner, such as would be exercised only by a member of the subculture to which it applies. But I’ve gotten ahead of myself. We’ve only just begun” (10). Voth’s self-insertion into the narrative here is significant for several reasons: first, it sets up the framework for the limitations of the archive—something was missing from the existing reference materials that could fully explain this term in way that was meaningful to the marginalized peoples to which it referred. Additionally, it reinforces a fuller inclusion of individual experiences across history in the strangeness of its temporality wherein Voth is already “ahead” of the story as it commences. This collective experience is further privileged in Voth’s movement from the first-person singular pronoun “I” to the first-person plural pronoun “we.” Through the footnotes, Rosenberg is able to create narrative interruptions that alert the reader to the violence of omission while filling in the blanks with fictionalized archival construction and improved inclusion of previously those left out.

Like Melville, Rosenberg uses metaleptic moments to deliberately play with the notion of the archive as concept, including its deficits, its merits, and ultimately, how we can alter it to form a more perfect archive as a utopic version of historical record-keeping. Rosenberg initiates this in the entirely metaleptic “Editor’s Foreword” when he depicts Professor Voth’s former university purging itself of archival material: “Several months prior to my precipitous departure, as a kind of Welcome Back to School/Fuck You event, the University held a book sale. It seemed that over the summer the Chancellor’s office had emptied out the seventeenth to twentieth floors of the library for a big renovation. Deans’ offices and a dining atrium for upper-echelon administrators” (x). Voth explains how “the

University's entire collection of philosophy, linguistics, and post-colonial theory" (x) are essentially deleted from the university "archive," the library in a move to make space for high-paid academic administrators—the same administrators who we can assume are complicit, if not instrumental, in Voth's firing, exploitation, and attempted appropriation of the manuscript. This act essentially purges the institution of a range of human narratives. By initially taking the manuscript, Voth attempts to mitigate the institutional violence imposed by the university in the destruction of its library.

Perhaps the most striking moment of this institutional violence within the metanarrative of the footnotes occurs in the email Voth receives from P-Quad Industries requesting they fund his work on the Sheppard manuscript. Voth prefaces the email by incredulously asking "can you believe they quoted Derrida in their email to me?" (84). P-Quad's email then goes on to quote a line from Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* in which Derrida claims, as Voth nicely summarizes for us, "The archive is less a record of what has been said, and more an ongoing problem of what cannot be. What is forgotten, repressed, and disallowed" (84). Rosenberg's allusion to Derrida in the moment is particularly salient because at the same time it shows the hypocrisy of P-Quad's position and poor understanding of Derrida, it also sets up the possibility of identifying and inserting the missing elements. Most importantly, it gives Rosenberg a means to send out a signal; "I mean, Reader, the violence they did to Derrida in this email was truly unconscionable" (84). By employing the capital "R," Rosenberg employs the same sort of "trying to say something" (76) that Voth describes in his courting of Ursula. While Ursula could see the signal of desire but not the other signal, in the end, Voth can only hope that the Reader is a better reader than Ursula, or possibly just a different type of reader altogether.

CONCLUSION

What these two texts deftly identify is that neither the archive nor fiction can ever be the sole arbiter of universal truth. Both hold immense power in granting narrative authority, and to separate them entirely or privilege one over the other further upholds the structures of institutionalized silencing that have persisted in modern Western culture. Both Melville and Rosenberg use metaleptic narrative intrusions, either through free-indirect discourse or the strangeness of the formal elements within the novels themselves, to alert the reader to instances of imposed violence on silenced peoples.

These texts not only rely on metalepsis to create collective narrative across historical periods but also a particular Reader, a reader with a capital “R”, who is in on the joke of these metaleptic interferences. It is this reader who understands the code, the reader who reads better than Delano, who reads “only through tears” (xiv) and the Reader who Voth “edited this for, the one I stole this for” (316). It is this reader to whom these metalepses speak, and it through this signal that these texts reach out to us across time and allow us to unsee the mechanisms of power that prevent solidarity.

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[1] Earlier, he refers to Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* as eighteenth-century novels that demonstrate a "broad, realistic portrayal of the present takes in here and there important events of contemporary history which it links with the fortunes of the characters" (20). His mention of *Moll Flanders* is significant, as it functions as main source of stylistic influence on Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox.*

[2] For information on the publication history of *Benito Cereno,* I use Dan McCall's editorial notes in the Norton Critical Edition of *Melville's Short Novels* as my source.

[3] For a further analysis of Dickens as storyteller and his relationship to Benjamin, refer to my article "'The Golden Thread': Uniting Benjamin and Dickens through Memory and Death," previously published in *Interpretations: SFSU's Graduate Literary Journal (2017).*

[4] I want to make an important distinction here: I am not claiming that *any* time footnotes, free-indirect discourse, or any of the literary devices mentioned above are used that it qualifies as metalepsis as Genette or I define it. What I am saying that any of those devices listed can be marshalled towards a metaleptic narrative intrusion.