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PORTS, HETEROTOPIAS, AND TRANSNATIONALISM: HERMAN MELVILLE IN RIO DE JANEIRO

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Abstract

This essay advances four interconnected aims. First, it presents newly identified Brazilian port registries that revise the chronology of Herman Melville's March 1841 visit to Rio de Janeiro, demonstrating that the *Acushnet* remained in port for five days, rather than the two previously assumed on the basis of U.S. consular records. Second, it argues that shifting the evidentiary base from U.S. to Brazilian archives reshapes our understanding of Melville's experience by foregrounding the transnational character of port life. Third, it proposes that ports function as heterotopias in Foucault's sense, a framework that clarifies Melville's formal and thematic engagement with disjunctive spaces. Finally, it uses this archival case to examine how nation-centered research practices continue to structure U.S. literary studies, marginalizing Latin American archives and scholarship despite the long-standing claim of a "transnational turn."
Keywords: Herman Melville; transnationalism; heterotopias; ports.

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One of the most widely traveled writers in the nineteenth-century U.S. canon, Herman Melville set foot on all six inhabited continents. Travel was foundational to his writing from the outset. His first novel, *Typee* (1846), largely inspired by the time he spent among the Tai Pī on Nuku Hiva, one of the Marquesas Islands, would remain the most popular of his books during his lifetime, to the point that he feared being remembered as "a man who lived among the cannibals," rather than as a literary author (Melville 1993, *Correspondence* 193). While this fear ultimately proved unfounded, Melville's travels have nonetheless retained a central place in discussions of his works. The long-established consensus regarding the transnational and transcultural scope of his writings has generated an extensive amount of research aimed at reconstructing his voyages in as much detail as possible. As a result, it has been long known that Melville landed in South America for the first time in March 1841, when the *Acushnet*, the whaler on which he served, arrived at the port of Rio de Janeiro (Heflin 2004, 59; Parker 1996, 191). The records of the U.S. consulate in Rio register the ship as arriving on the 13th and departing on the 15th (Heflin 59-60). Very little is known about Melville's time in the city, yet Rio surfaces in several of his texts, most notably in *White-Jacket* (Melville 1970, *White-Jacket* 159-60, 210-12; Kelley 2020). In some instances, these references are explicitly grounded in personal experience, as in an early passage of *Omoo*, where Melville recalls "an old man-of-war's-man, whose acquaintance I had made in Rio de Janeiro, at which place touched the ship in which I sailed from home" (Melville 1968, *Omoo* 6).

Melville indeed landed in Rio while sailing "from home," as he writes in *Omoo*, and in 1844, on his return voyage, he would spend eight days in Guanabara Bay, although on this occasion he does not appear to have gone ashore (Anderson 1939, 356).[1] As for his 1841 visit, the belief that the *Acushnet* remained in Rio for only two days has led scholars to assume that Melville spent little time on land, probably no more than a few hours. It has therefore generally been assumed that Melville's references to Rio throughout his works must be largely based on readings, images, and oral accounts, rather than on his personal experience of the city. After all, Melville had a tendency to magnify his firsthand knowledge of the places, people, and languages he encountered during his travels. In *Typee*, for instance, the weeks that he spent on Nuku Hiva are expanded into months (Bryant 2021, 2: 885-87), long enough to support the text's claim that what is "recorded in this volume" (Melville 1968, *Typee* xiii) derives from direct experience. By offering extended information about Polynesian culture and languages seemingly obtained on-site, the novel's narrator presents himself as a sort of ethnographer *avant la lettre*. And yet, the narrator's claims to be recording what he encountered appear to be at least partially true. Linguistic research has demonstrated that the transcriptions of Polynesian languages are strikingly accurate, to the point that *Typee* is considered one of the most important documents for the study of Maritime Polynesian Pidgin (Drechsel 2014, 68, 77, 199-216). Similar precision has been observed in other references to the places, people, cultures,

and languages Melville encountered during his travels – from South American traditional garments to Polynesian tattoos. While Melville tends to overstate the duration or depth of his firsthand knowledge of the foreign motifs represented in his writings, what he did experience appears to have left a durable and reliable imprint.

In the case of Rio, scholars have found a few sparse details about Melville's time there: besides the dates, we only know that the *Acushnet* transferred 150 to 200 barrels of whale oil while in port, and that Melville mailed a letter to his mother (Melville, *Correspondence* 24; Bryant, 2: 764). Yet even the most basic of these facts have proven unreliable. For more than seventy years, it has been repeated that the vessel remained in Rio for only two days. Recently located port registries kept at Brazil's National Archive record that the *Acushnet* entered Rio on March 12 and departed on March 17, 1841.[2] The whaler thus remained in port for more than twice the duration previously believed. Five days in a major imperial port would have afforded ample opportunity for Melville to explore the city on foot, as he later did in Lima when given a similar chance. He may well have experienced in the flesh aspects of Rio that scholars have assumed he derived solely from secondhand sources. The newly located documents carry broader implications, both for our understanding of Melville's experience in Rio and for the critical frameworks through which that experience has been interpreted. Before turning to these larger issues, however, it is necessary to examine the documents themselves.

The port registries were produced by the police of the imperial court of Rio de Janeiro. The surviving volumes have been digitized and are accessible through the Archive's online system. Fifteen codices from the nineteenth century are known to survive: an incomplete volume registering arrivals (1823 - 1824), six consecutive books of arrivals (1835 - July 1841), and eight volumes containing departures (1835 - January 1842). This narrow window coincides with the *Acushnet* visit. Codex 415, vol. 3, the latest registry of arrivals, includes the entries made between July 22nd, 1839, and July 19th, 1841. Each entry registers the vessel's port of origin, days at sea, ship type, flag, name, commanding officer, crew size, and cargo. In folio 246, front (fig. 1), the fourth entry for March 12th, 1841, reads: "New Bedford, 67, Galera Amer[a] Acushnet, [illegible] Valentine Pease Equip 24. Carga Azeite [illegible] pesca." That is: New Bedford [as port of origin], 67 [days at sea], U.S. Ship *Acushnet*, Cpt. Valentine Pease, crew 24. Cargo Oil, [illegible] fishing [most likely referring to the ship's fishing gear] (fig. 2). The whaler's departure is registered in codex 417, volume 8, folio 72 (back), as the seventh of thirteen vessels that left on the 17th: "Pesca. Galera Americana Acushnet. Valentine Pease, Equipe 24. Carga utensilios para pesca." (Fishery. U.S. Ship *Acushnet*. Valentine Pease. Crew 24. Carries fishing gear.) (fig. 3).

Because these registries were produced at the port as vessels arrived and departed, they are arguably a more reliable record than the consular files, initiated when a captain presented the ship's papers at the consulate, and on which scholars have primarily relied.[3] Moreover, the arrival date of the *Acushnet* in the port

records corresponds closely with the stated number of days at sea (67), since the whaler is believed to have left New Bedford on January 3rd. The registries, therefore, allow us to finally establish with certainty the dates of Melville's visit to Rio. Their importance, however, extends beyond chronological correction. By shifting the evidentiary base from U.S. consular records to Brazilian port archives, they offer a different perspective on our understanding of Melville's presence in Rio and, more broadly, on the spatial and methodological assumptions that have shaped much of Melville scholarship. Ports, as sites of transnational encounter, resist nation-centered frames of analysis. Yet the historiography of Melville's travels has depended almost exclusively on U.S. sources, reproducing a subtly national orientation in both evidence and interpretation. The Brazilian registries do more than add three days to Melville's sojourn in Rio; they invite us to reconsider what counts as an archive, where we look for it, and how geopolitical habits of research shape the narratives we construct about worldliness, experience, and literary authority.

Ports as heterotopian spaces

While critical assessments of Melville would shift dramatically over time (Yothers 2011), one thing has remained largely unchanged: the centrality of Melville's life and travels to the interpretation of his works. The most famous argument for the necessity of considering Melville's work together with his overseas experiences comes from Ishmael, the first-person narrator of *Moby-Dick*. Near the beginning of the novel, Ishmael justifies his attempt to encompass within a single book the whole universe of whales and whaling. He is uniquely qualified for such a monumental task, he argues, by his combination of personal experience and literary credentials: "I have swam through libraries and sailed through oceans" (Melville 1988, *Moby-Dick* 136). Accordingly, scholars have long recognized the intimate connection between lived experience and literary sophistication in Melville's writing. It is therefore unsurprising that his insights on issues such as imperialism and ethnocentrism would be linked to his personal exposure to ethnic and cultural diversity (including the time when he did, indeed, live "among the cannibals"). The port registries presented here add to our knowledge of Melville's experiences abroad by providing more accurate information about the duration of his stay in Rio. More significantly, however, they recalibrate the imaginative horizon within which that stay has been interpreted. By situating Melville within the dense, multilingual, and commercially entangled environment of an imperial port, they allow us to reconstruct not only what he may have seen, but the conditions of perception that informed his writing. In doing so, they remind us that archival shifts do not merely add facts; they reshape the interpretive frameworks through which literary experience itself becomes legible.

Critics have long observed that Melville's travels contributed not only to his personal views and political opinions but also to the formal complexity of his texts. Melville developed a mode of writing capable of portraying the extraordinarily diverse, strange, and complex places and people he encountered on his travels. When scholars talk of an "oceanic Melville," for instance,[4] they do not refer only to the physical oceans he traversed but also to the proto-modernist character of a literary form that aims to condense both the natural sea environment and the shifting human relations depending on it (Casarino 2002, 45-60, 76-77, *passim*; Blum 2012, 119-39, 145-57, 182-83, 188-90). Similarly, when "The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles," a collection of sketches about the Galápagos Islands, is read as an example of archipelagic thinking (Smith 2019, 48-49; Mueller 2023), it is not due merely to its setting but, more significantly, because of its exploration of ways of representing non-continuous space and, more broadly, a variety of events, phenomena, and beings that inherited narrative structures struggle to contain. Let us consider, for instance, the table of the population of Albemarle Island:

> Men. . . . . none.
> Ant-eaters . . . . . unknown.
> Man-haters . . . . . unknown.
> Lizards . . . . . 500,000.
> Snakes. . . . . 500,000.
> Spiders . . . . . 10,000,000.
> Salamanders . . . . . unknown.
> Devils . . . . . do.
> Making a clean total of . . . . . 11,000,000.
> (Melville 1987, *Piazza Tales* 140)

This seemingly exhaustive yet completely incongruent collection of "statistics" (*Piazza Tales* 140) anticipates the famous classification of the animals in a fictional Chinese encyclopedia that Jorge Luis Borges (1975) invents in "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" (103), which Michel Foucault (1973), in turn, would credit in the opening lines of *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*), as the inspiration for his own book (*Order* xv-xix). As Foucault points out, what "the exotic charm of another system of thought" demonstrates "is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*" (*Order* xv). Foucault concludes: "The monstrous quality that runs through Borges's enumeration consists […] in the fact that the common ground on which such meetings are possible has itself been destroyed. […] Where else could they be juxtaposed except in the non-place of language?" (*Order* xvi-xvii). One of the things Melville highlights with his table – as Borges and Foucault will do later – is the irreducible difference between the world and human technologies of representation, and the madness of attempting to reduce the former to the latter. Melville's survey, like Borges'

encyclopedia, is an explicitly imperial enterprise (Spengler 2021), and as such, it constitutes a delusional and phantasmagoric attempt at totalization. Melville addresses this tension between the wild diversity of the world and the imperial design of organizing it into a controllable unity throughout his works, from the explicitly colonial cartography of "The Encantadas" to the seemingly benign but no less totalizing and extractivist project of the narrator of *Moby-Dick*: capturing the whole world of whales and whaling within a book – or, to use Ishmael's own words: "The classification of the constituents of a chaos, nothing less is here essayed" (*Moby-Dick* 134).

Numerous critics have recognized this tension between the world and its human representation as a major Melvillian topic. Michael Jonik (2018), for instance, in the introduction to *Herman Melville and the politics of the inhuman* argues that Melville explores "the archipelago as a nontotalizing form, heterotopic commonalities such as his 'plurality of mortals', the 'ragged edges' of truth – in short a proto-radical empiricism of disjunctive syntheses and loose confederations" (15). Jonik's use of the term "heterotopic" here refers to Foucault's notion of heterotopia, first presented in the opening pages of *Les mots et les choses*, shortly after mentioning Borges's story. While Foucault's description and usage of the concept has been justly criticized as vague and at times somewhat contradictory, what some scholars have called heterotopian thinking nonetheless proved a productive lens for examining certain spaces and the ways they are inhabited.

In the preface of *The Order of Things*, Foucault applies the concept of heterotopia to texts:

> *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'. […] they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences. (*Order* xviii)

It is only much later, in "Of Other Spaces" ("Des espaces autres"), a talk addressed to an audience of architects that he did not originally intend for publication, that Foucault (1986) offered a broader and more systematic account of the concept. In this presentation – which, once published, would become highly influential – he states that heterotopias "are something like counter-sites," in which "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" ("Other Spaces" 24). He further explains that "places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" ("Other Spaces" 24), and that a heterotopia "is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" ("Other Spaces" 25). Foucault examines a wide range of examples of heterotopias: from general categories (the

prison, the hospital, the cemetery, the fairground, and so on), to specific forms (such as "the famous bedrooms that existed on the great farms of Brazil and elsewhere in South America," where "every individual or traveler who came by had the right" to sleep for a night). Human geographers have applied Foucault's concept to many other places, such as public toilets, and even whole realms of spatial perception, such as our experience of digital media. I would argue that ports, too, are heterotopian spaces, in Foucault's most strict sense. All the traits he attributes to heterotopias apply to ports. Take, for instance, the "fourth principle", which states that "heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" ("Other Spaces" 26). Time at port is, indeed, a break with traditional time – or rather a double break, since it is a break or suspension of the (itself suspended) time at sea. Or the fifth: "Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place" ("Other Spaces" 26). The port is both part of a city and contrasted with it (in modern cities it is usually fenced, partially visible yet largely inaccessible); it is also a zone where the regular order and rules both apply and are subverted. A port is a form of "other space" that is neither entirely "national" nor "local," nor exactly "transnational," a space that is not out of context but rather is, to a certain extent, its own context.[5]

Foucault considered the ship "the heterotopia *par excellence*" ("Other Spaces" 27):

> if we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea […], from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, […] you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development […], but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. (Foucault, "Other Spaces" 27)

Since the ship is the most iconic setting of Melville's narratives, it is only natural that the concept of heterotopia would be extensively discussed in Melville scholarship. It has been applied also much more broadly, as a conceptual tool for thinking about Melville's sustained engagement with spaces – such as "oceanic" and "archipelagic" ones – that exceed established categories. The kind of spaces that, as Ishmael says of Queequeg's island, are "not down in any map; true places never are" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 55). The notion has also been used to other ends, such as to discuss Melville's treatment of Latin America as a site of otherness that is simultaneously geographical, geopolitical, and cultural (Breinig 2008, 20-21).

If a port is a straightforward example of heterotopia and heterotopias are "worlds within worlds" (Bashiran et al. 2022), a ship at the port could be described as a heterotopia within a heterotopia. This image may be particularly

productive when applied to nineteenth-century ports, which functioned as archipelagic formations: sailors such as Melville would spend extended periods at port onboard vessels anchored near other ships, with which they occasionally interacted. Recent studies have challenged Foucault's view of the ship as the ultimate heterotopic space, arguing that "the ship is not a self-enclosed space, nor is it entirely given over to the infinite sea" (Packham 2017, 116); nowhere does this become clearer than when the vessel lies in port.

While some scholarly attention has been paid to the time Melville spent onboard while in a harbor, the subject has often been approached from a nation-centered framework that fails to fully consider the transnational and multidirectional nature of port experiences, as well as the heterotopian character of the ports themselves. This limitation begins, in part, with the sources scholars have favored. What is known of Melville's time in Rio – as with the other Latin American places he visited – is almost entirely based on U.S. sources, such as the consular records, which only registered U.S. ships. The Brazilian documents presented here, with their listings of vessels from different parts of the world, offer a much wider picture of the cosmopolitan environment Melville encountered in places like Rio. The succession of vessels, places, and activities recorded in the registry – at once orderly and unpredictable – provides a limited but realistic window into the rigidly structured yet somewhat chaotic experience of life in a big international port. In this sense, the registries textually enact the heterotopian condition they document.

It is precisely this transnational and transcultural confusion that Melville's own depictions of ports tend to foreground. The most famous example is his portrayal of the port of New Bedford, near the beginning of *Moby-Dick* (31-32):

> In thoroughfares nigh the docks, any considerable seaport will frequently offer to view the queerest looking nondescripts from foreign parts. Even in Broadway and Chestnut streets, Mediterranean mariners will sometimes jostle the affrighted ladies. Regent street is not unknown to Lascars and Malays;[6] and at Bombay, in the Apollo Green, live Yankees have often scared the natives. (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 31)

The scene is narrated from the point of view of a young man embarking for the first time on a whaler – a situation akin to that of Melville when he arrived in Rio. The then-capital of Brazil was only the second foreign port Melville had ever visited. It must have made a very different impression from Liverpool, which he had visited in 1839 (Parker 144-151). Unlike Rio, the English city would have seemed, culturally and linguistically, relatively familiar to him. The novel inspired by that trip, *Redburn* (1849), "draws liberally on Melville's own family history and travels to Liverpool" (Levine 2020, 110), especially those made by his father (Bryant 1: 20, 30), and the hero's traveling experiences are not mediated by the extreme linguistic, cultural, and environmental differences that are so prominent

in the novels inspired by Melville's later travels in Latin America and Polynesia. As John Bryant observes in the opening sentence of the section "Brazil," in his biography of Melville: "Herman was now farther from home, and farther south, than he had been while in Liverpool" (2: 788) – indeed, farther than he had ever been. Rio was the first entirely *foreign* place that Melville encountered.

The *alien* nature of ports is closely related to another notorious aspect of them: their bad reputations. If, as Foucault points out, some heterotopias "are entirely consecrated to […] activities of purification" ("Other Spaces" 26), there are others that are commonly associated with images of corruption. While Foucault does not explicitly address this, he does establish a spectrum, demarcated on one end by brothels and on the other by colonies (such as the Jesuit missions), that purport to create a perfect world within the world: "Brothels and colonies are two extreme types of heterotopia" ("Other Spaces" 27). Within this arc, ports align more closely to the former – both in the physical space and in the urban imaginary. Like brothels, ports are usually associated with the city's underworld. As spaces within the city that disrupt and often contest its order, both are usually perceived as heterotopias of corruption. They function as sites of fleeting encounters and transactions that subvert the order of things by bringing people and goods into contact in non-sanctioned ways. To the denizens of the city, ports are suspect not only because of the exchanges that take place, or may take place, within them, but also – and perhaps especially – because they function as "contact zones" (Pratt 2008, 7-8, *passim*) that are located not in exotic, far-away places, but at home.

This shadowy dimension of port life may be relevant to a question triggered by the Brazilian port registries. Until now, reconstructions of Melville's visit to Rio have faced an apparent contradiction. In the two days the *Acushnet* was believed to have spent in Rio, the Captain would have had to locate a vessel bound for the U.S., negotiate the transfer of oil, and oversee its transshipment. This leaves little time for common sailors like Melville to go ashore. Wilson L. Heflin is right to argue: "If there was any liberty in town for the crew, it must have been brief and unsatisfactory; sightseeing of picturesque Rio was done from the deck." Since there are clear indications that Melville did set foot in Rio, Heflin speculates that he may have served as one of the oarsmen in the boat ferrying Captain Pease to shore (59). John Bryant, the most widely recognized biographer of Melville, confronts the same problem:

> Captain Pease's sole objective [when stopping in Rio] was to transship his 150 or 200 barrels of oil […]. To spend more than two days in port would be to lose precious time whaling. Giving his crew liberty – that is, one day's leave for each of the ship's two watches – would have wasted another two days and risked desertions, requiring more wasted time in seeking the deserters' return or recruiting their replacements.[7] And yet, evidence suggests Herman might have gone ashore. (Bryant 2: 793)

The information provided by the port registry seemingly resolves the apparent contradiction: the *Acushnet* spent five days in Rio, which makes it much more likely that the crew would have been granted a measure of "liberty" in the city. Yet the date correction raises a new question: Why remain in port for two additional days? We can only speculate, but one possible clue lies in the uncertainty surrounding the quantity of oil transferred from the *Acushnet*. As Bryant mentions in passing, sources differ on whether it was 150 barrels, which is the amount that appears to have been received in New Bedford (Heflin 59), or 200, the quantity reportedly unshipped from the *Acushnet*, as mentioned by Melville in the letter to his family (*Correspondence* 24). Complicating matters further, less than two months later Captain Pease would provide a somewhat confusing report of how much oil the *Acushnet* had produced to date (Heflin 66, 259n29). Given how notoriously slippery the movement of commodities in ports can be, the two unexplained days that the ship remained after being officially "cleared" (Heflin 59) invite questions about transactions related to an unaccounted movement of barrels. This remains conjectural, yet hardly implausible in light of Melville's own depictions: in his texts, whether we are at sea or in port, smuggling and deception are not the exception but the rule.

Ports are often perceived as dubious places, a gray zone where otherness disembarks in the familiar space. In the description of seaports Melville makes in *Moby-Dick*, he underlines the tension between the orderly space of the city, with its stable categories and hierarchies, and the disruption associated with the port. But in Melville, transcultural encounters are usually contemplated from both sides, and positions are always presented as reversible. Ishmael observes that just as New York ladies are "affrighted" by foreign sailors, "Yankees" scare "the natives" in India. The tension and the queerness work both ways: Ishmael's observation that "any considerable seaport will frequently offer to view of the queerest looking nondescripts from foreign parts" refers to the visiting sailors, as perceived by the locals, but it could equally apply to what the sailors themselves encounter abroad. Understood in this way, the port is not merely a site of corruption or disorder, but a multidimensional and multidirectional environment in which spatial, cultural, and epistemological boundaries are suspended and renegotiated. The following section argues that the Rio registries embody this heterotopian condition in documentary form.

On scholarly narratives: from nation-centered to transnational archival research

Most of the information we have about Melville's visit to Rio was first established by Wilson L. Heflin, one of the most influential historians of Melville's "whaling years." Following his 1952 dissertation, Heflin developed and disseminated his findings over several decades, culminating in the posthumous *Herman Melville's Whaling Years* (2004). What he discovered about Melville in

Rio has been reproduced and occasionally expanded by subsequent scholarship, most notably the two standard biographies of Melville (Parker 187-92; Bryant 2: 793). These three towering works share a few traits, including a marked reliance on U.S. records and a tendency to reconstruct – sometimes imaginatively – the scenes and situations in which Melville found himself. Heflin opens chapter 8 of his book, "Rio, the Horn, and the In-Shore Ground," by picturing Melville's arrival in the port of Rio:

> On her seventieth day out, Saturday, March 13, 1841, the *Acushnet* passed between bold and precipitous barriers flanking the narrow entrance to the Bay of Botafoga. She worked her way into the beautiful sheet of water that fills an oval basin 30 miles long and 15 miles wide and came to anchor in the harbor of Rio de Janeiro. This may have been her first port since leaving Fairhaven. (Heflin 59)

This reconstructed scene intertwines exact measurements of time and space ("seventieth day out, Saturday, March 13, 1841," "an oval basin 30 miles long and 15 miles wide") with picturesque descriptions of both the surroundings and the ship's progress ("bold and precipitous barriers flanking the narrow entrance," "She worked her way into the beautiful sheet of water"). While seemingly based on solid data, the scene is largely a product of Heflin's imagination. The confusion between the cove of Botafogo (mistakenly spelled as Botafoga) and the much larger Bay of Guanabara, of which it is part, may stem from the popularity of the cove in pictorial representations of Rio since the nineteenth century, such as Nicola Antonio Facchinetti's 1869 painting, *Enseada do Botafogo*, now in the São Paulo Museum of Art. As the entry in *Wikipedia* in Portuguese aptly puts it, the cove has long provided one of Brazil's most emblematic postcard vistas ("um dos principais cartões-postais brasileiros") ("Botafogo"). For all its reliance on evidence and geographical detail, Heflin's depiction reads less as a precise historical reconstruction than as a subtly exoticized tableau.

From Heflin onward, reconstructions of Melville's time at port have relied predominantly on U.S.-based sources, often reproducing certain nation-centered assumptions about foreign spaces. Despite sustained statements about a "transnational turn" in the study of U.S. literature and culture, interpretive frameworks frequently remain anchored in national archives and perspectives. The extensive scholarship on Melville's travels is a case in point. It is generally acknowledged that in ports such as Rio, Melville would have encountered ships and crews from various parts of the world. And yet, most studies focus almost exclusively on U.S. vessels. Heflin's text provides a representative example:

> In the harbor the *Acushnet* found another American whaler, the *Henry* of Stonington, Captain G. Pendleton […]. Also in port were eight American

> merchant vessels, one of which, the brig *Tweed* of Baltimore, Captain John Roberts, was going to do business with the *Acushnet*. (Heflin 59)

This information is expanded in a note, which is worth quoting in full, since it shows both the extraordinary weight of detail **and** the strong national focus that characterizes much of Melville scholarship – that is: the weight of *national* detail:

> The nine vessels in the harbor of Rio de Janeiro when the *Acushnet* arrived on March 13, 1841, were the barque *Brothers* of Boston (February 23–March 24), the brig *Saldana* of Baltimore (February 23–March 20), the brig *Archibald Gracie* of Norfolk (February 25–March 20), the ship *John S. Gossler* of Philadelphia (February 27–March 20), the brig *Tweed* of Baltimore (March 2–27), the ship *Marion* of New York (March 9–16), the brig *General Marion* of New York (March 10–31), the brig *Himmaleh* of New York (March 10–April 15), and the whaling brig *Henry* of Stonington (March 8–24). The schooner *Leven Jones* of New Orleans arrived on the same day as the *Acushnet* (March 13) with a load of codfish worth $4,500. The *John S. Gossler* was heading for Valparaiso, the *Marion* for Sumatra, and the *Himmaleh* for the coast of Africa; all others were loading cargoes to be sold in the United States. (Heflin 256n2)

"The nine vessels in the harbor of Rio de Janeiro" refers, of course, to the nine U.S. vessels that were there at the time; or more exactly, to those recorded in the consular records that Heflin consulted. When I framed this quotation as exemplary of the weight of national detail, I was not referring only to the specific country in question but also, more broadly, to a nation-centered interpretative framework that tends to either exoticize foreign settings and people or, more often, simply ignores them. In the port of Rio, in March 1841, ships, people, and commodities from different origins (and with different destinations) crossed paths in various ways, some of which must have been unpredictable, random, chaotic, non-sanctioned, and/or clandestine. The Brazilian port registries, themselves official documents produced by the nation-state, offer a window into that fleeting coexistence. In their pages, the U.S. ships identified by Heflin do not appear as a unified whole ("the nine ships") but are instead peppered among many others – much like they must have been in the harbor. We cannot picture them isolated from their surroundings; on the contrary, we need to painstakingly search for them among a variety of vessels and nations. The archive does not present them as a national unit; in fact, to perceive them as such requires extracting and regrouping them, effectively imposing a coherence not supplied by the source. What the registry does offer is a much wider and less organized picture – one whose worldly heterogeneity and chaotic juxtaposition is closer to what Melville himself may have experienced: a Portuguese vessel arriving from Porto; an English one from Montevideo; another from Jersey; a French ship from Buenos Aires; an English vessel arriving from the Falkland Islands and

still another, from Guayaquil; a Dutch ship from Sète; a Brazilian vessel from Montevideo; a Swedish one bound for Valparaíso, and so forth.

Without further research on local sources, Melville's time in Rio – like his stays in other ports – remains largely a matter of conjecture. What we do know, however (both from these particular documents and from our knowledge of life at port more generally), allows us to sketch the contours of his likely experience. During the days or weeks sailors spent at port, with relatively few duties to fulfill, it was not uncommon to receive visitors from shore or from neighboring vessels. Supplies of goods would arrive with some regularity, including not only food and other essentials but also much welcomed distractions, such as books and newspapers. This is particularly relevant, since many of the idle hours and weeks Melville spent anchored in Rio in 1844 were likely dedicated to reading. As the narrator of *White-Jacket* explains in the opening lines of chapter 41, "A Man-of-war's library":

> NOWHERE DOES TIME PASS more heavily than with most man-of-war's-men on board their craft in harbor.
>
> One of my principal antidotes against ennui in Rio, was reading. There was a public library on board, paid for by government. (Melville, *White-Jacket* 167)

The narrator, always eager to distinguish himself from his less-cultured mates, focuses on the highbrow contents of the library, but this was not the only material available on board: "other sailors were diligent readers," too, he notes, but of "slightly physiological," texts (169), "that is, pornography," as Bryant interprets it (2: 1089). Regardless of whether the ship's official library "paid for by the government" would include "pornography," sailors had other sources: "whenever the frigate anchored at port on the coast, then an erratic but treasured cargo of newspapers […] was brought aboard, and in due course made available to the men" (Parker 270). Hershel Parker and Bryant refer primarily to English-language materials, yet we know that local newspapers and other texts were also present onboard. As Kirsten Silva Gruesz (2021) has pointed out, if even "a small brig had a Spanish grammar and dictionary in the cabin library," then "a naval frigate cruising up and down the Spanish American coast on a tense lookout for happenings of strategic interest to the state during a fraught post-revolutionary period" must have had more than that (25). The "treasured cargo" collected at ports likely included not only the most recent local newspapers but also books. This dimension of Melville's maritime experience has received relatively little attention and may prove difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct. As a result, we cannot determine with certainty whether Melville's references to Rio de Janeiro and Brazil might have been informed by Brazilian sources he consulted while

in Rio. Yet the plausibility of such a scenario gains further credibility when we consider a parallel case in the other South American capital Melville visited: Lima.

Callao, the port of Lima, was the place where Melville spent the longest continuous time anchored while serving on the *United States*. The frigate first arrived on December 15th, 1843, and remained there for much of the following five months, during which the crew was granted two forty-eight-hour periods of "liberty" (Bryant, 2: 1055, 1083). Lima left a profound impression on Melville. One of the most vivid and enduring motifs in his work is the *saya y manto* worn by Lima women, known as *tapadas*. Scholars have discussed how much – if anything – of Melville's references to the garment may be related to having encountered *tapadas* himself (Casey 2017). The *saya* appears in at least seven texts over a span of forty-nine years. The last of these mentions is the epigraph to the poem "Crossing the Tropics": "(From *The Saya-y-Manto*)" (Melville 2009, *Published Poems* 239). This has generally been read as the name of the ship on which the speaker is traveling, yet it may also refer to a text in which the poem is contained. The editors of the standard critical edition wonder "whether or not Melville ever wrote a work called *The Saya-y-Manto*" (Melville, *Published Poems* 742). What we do know is that somebody else did, and Melville may have known about it. Scholars who have discussed Melville's fascination with the *saya* have largely relied on U.S. and European sources – primarily the impression it made on travel writers, such as Flora Tristan. A shift in archival perspective, however, yields a different horizon. A cursory search for potential Peruvian sources reveals that in 1843, when Melville visited Lima, *La saya y manto* was the title of the most recent comedy by Peru's most popular playwright, Manuel Asencio Segura.[8] Melville may have heard of or read about this play, either by perusing local newspapers during the many weeks he spent in Callao or by conversing with like-minded interlocutors during his two visits to Lima, as he famously described in chapter 54 of *Moby-Dick* (242-59). Whether or not such a connection can be proven is ultimately secondary.[9] What this example underscores is how a nation-centered archival lens narrows the field of possibility, while local sources reopen questions that standard U.S.-based documentation leaves unasked.

Conclusions: The conditions and opportunities of transnational studies

Not long ago, the possibility of worldwide digital access to historical documents and current scholarship was hailed as one of the most potentially transformative developments in the history of our disciplines. The discovery of the documents examined here was itself made possible by their inclusion in an online repository. For generations, scholars seeking to reconstruct the facts of Melville's travels relied on limited and/or unreliable sources. The little that was known about the *Acushnet*'s time in Rio was pieced together from the records of the U.S. consulate in Rio, an abstract of the log of the *Acushnet* corresponding to a later portion of the ship's journey, occasional news about New Bedford vessels

overseas that appeared in local newspapers, correspondence between sailors and their families, and the like. As a result, for more than seventy years it was believed that the *Acushnet* remained in Rio for only two days. It took a short visit to the Archive and a few hours of research online to discover and retrieve the official port records, which establish that the whaler spent more than twice that time in the harbor. On the one hand, this is a straightforward example of the opportunities technological changes make possible. On the other hand, it illustrates how little those changes, in and of themselves, may alter the *habitus* and the geopolitical imagination of a discipline.

The neo-Marxist sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) calls *habitus* the "acquired system of generative schemes" that structures practice within a given domain; "the *habitus* makes possible the free production of all the thoughts, perceptions and actions inherent in the particular conditions of its production – and only those" (55). While the *habitus* is key to "the dialectic of the *opus operatum* and the *modus operandi*" (52), it does not necessarily work in deliberate or even conscious ways: it operates as a structured set of principles that "generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends" (53). This often-overlooked aspect of Bourdieu's notion brings it closer to what – from a different theoretical tradition – Donald E. Pease (1990) called the "disciplinary unconscious:" the internalized "norms, working assumptions, and self-understanding" of a scholarly field (3). Pease locates this unconscious in what he terms the "field-Imaginary:" "the field's fundamental syntax – its tacit assumptions, convictions, primal words, and the charged relation binding them together" (11).

That the Brazilian codices remained unknown until now suggests that accessibility alone does not determine *what* scholars seek – or *where* they seek it. Several decades into "the digital age," one might expect that non-U.S. archives newly accessible online would figure more prominently in the field's evidentiary base. Especially when we consider that since the 1990s, as the opening line of *The Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature* declares, "it has become commonplace to declare a transnational turn in American [that is: U.S.] literary studies" (Goyal 2017, 1). Yet the *habitus* and the "disciplinary unconscious" of the field remain fundamentally shaped by nation-centered frameworks, particularly within the U.S. One telling symptom is that essays and volumes advancing "transnational" approaches often draw predominantly on U.S.-based scholarship, engaging only minimally – if at all – with research produced outside the United States, and especially beyond Anglophone Europe. In the *Cambridge Companion* itself, fourteen of the sixteen contributors are based in the U.S.A., and the remaining two in the United Kingdom and Germany. Like the "multiculturalism" of the 1980s, to which it succeeds, this claim of "transnationalism" by a scholarly discourse produced largely within a single nation, and almost exclusively within a narrow geopolitical space, can only make sense from a neocolonial perspective – or more exactly, from a metropolitan position in the neocolonial cartography of scholarly discourse. It exemplifies

what Bourdieu describes as practices and representations that adapt to their own outcomes without conscious design; or, to slightly repurpose Pease's notion, the geopolitical unconscious of a discipline in whose field-Imaginary regions such as Latin America exist as a background for literary motifs, rather than as potential sources of archival information, let alone scholarly discourse.[10]

Within Melville studies, a revealing case is the critical history of "Benito Cereno." Since 1928, when it was established that the novella was closely based on the 1805 events off the coast of Chile – known to Melville through the chronicle of U.S. captain Amasa Delano—attention has focused overwhelmingly on Melville's fictional transformation of the episode, while the historical event itself received relatively little scrutiny. The first detailed English-language study on the subject was Greg Grandin's (2014) *The Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom, and Deception in the New World*. Grandin's book was hailed as a revelation by situating "Benito Cereno" within a far broader transnational and hemispheric history than earlier Anglophone scholarship had considered. Although it does not particularly engage with Melville's literary vision, it illuminates aspects long overlooked, such as the conspicuous anomaly of a colonial Chilean vessel bearing an English name. Yet South American scholarship had recognized – and explained –such incongruities decades earlier, sometimes as early as the nineteenth century (Vicuña Mackenna 1936, 431; Pereira Salas 1971, 147-49). That this scholarship remained largely ignored in Melville studies cannot be attributed to inaccessibility – the works were widely available in U.S. libraries – nor to linguistic barriers. What distinguished Grandin's intervention was his archival work in Latin America and his engagement with the region's historiography.

Latin American scholars may be particularly drawn to topics such as Melville's visit to Rio, and they may also have certain advantages in their approach. Beyond proximity to local and regional sources, they can bring alternative historiographical frameworks and intellectual traditions to bear. In that respect, the impetus for this essay is not unrelated to its argument. The decision to consult Brazilian archives was informed in part by my own position as a South American scholar. The Rio archives are closer to me, both geographically and imaginatively, than those in New Bedford and New York. A similar dynamic may be observed in the scholarship on "Benito Cereno:" although the novella has been the object of various U.S. studies linked to the so-called "transnational turn," the first genuinely transnational book on "Benito Cereno" was published in South America (Cordery and Vegh 2006).

A body of work like Melville's so deeply invested in transnational and transcultural encounters, and in the reciprocal transformations they generate invites research that moves with comparable fluidity across borders. To conduct research on and from the places he visited is not merely to add detail to a biographical itinerary; it is to shift the coordinates from which interpretation proceeds. Such work can deepen our understanding of Melville's writing, but it can also expose the nation-centered assumptions and geopolitical hierarchies that continue to shape research trajectories and scholarly visibility. If a "transnational

turn" is ever to become more than another metropolitan rebranding of neocolonial frameworks, it may well begin with the simple acts of looking and asking – seriously and systematically – elsewhere. Or, to borrow a phrase from one of Melville's most admired writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1962): to look for the insights of those who read his works from "somewhere else" (44-5).

Images[11]

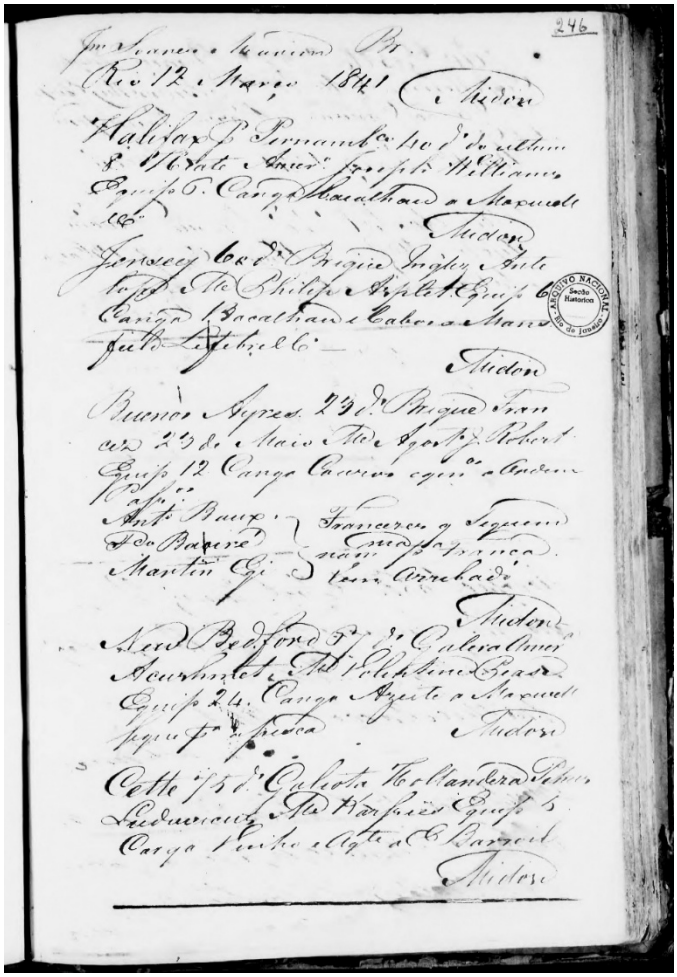

Fig. 1

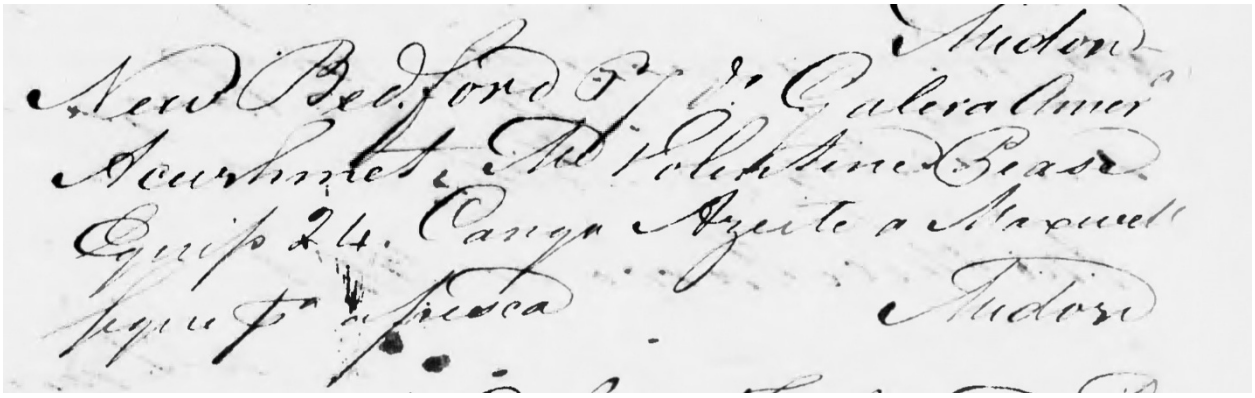

Fig. 2

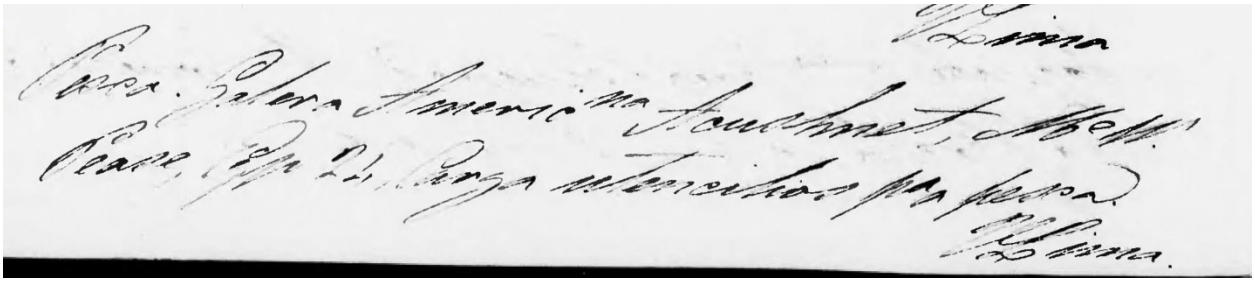

Fig. 3

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End notes

1. Melville was serving on the frigate United States, having enlisted in Hawaii as a way of returning to the U.S.A. A "Note" prefacing White-Jacket states that the author's "experiences and observations" on the frigate "are incorporated" in the novel (White-Jacket ix).
2. I located the registries in the Archive's online repositories with the invaluable assistance of several staff members, who assisted me both onsite – during a visit to the National Library of Brazil in August 2024 – and through subsequent email correspondence.
3. Each entry in the port registry is signed. In the series of 14 volumes running between 1835 and 1842, there are a very reduced number of officers, who alternate daily. All the entries from any given day are usually written by the same person (as indicated by both the signature and the handwriting), although in rare occasions, one of the two officers will register the first entries of the day, and the other one will do the rest. All this suggests that, as it can be expected, movement of ships was registered at the port, as the vessels arrived and departed.
4. This was the theme of the latest biennial Melville Society conference, held in June 2025.
5. The landscape of a port and its immediate surroundings (the stores, the taverns, the brothels) often resembles a décor where nomadism appears to have been reified by a sedimentary yet forward-looking accumulation of signs, where the profusion does not preclude the flatness, but rather appears to echo it. In this, ports are like some hyper-touristic sites, but in port areas (even those destined for cruises) labor and profit are more bluntly exposed, or at least less successfully disguised. At ports, as in brothels (one of Foucault's main examples of heterotopia), encounters are often not so much transnational as transactional and can be experienced as both depthless and intense. As argued below, Melville's descriptions of ports

appear to touch on this.

6. Chestnut was a street in lower Manhattan, not far from where the port of New York was at the time. Broadway and Regent are the famous thoroughfares of New York and London, identified as some of the most "elegant" parts of those cities.
7. Melville himself would desert the ship, the following year.
8. The play opened in Lima in December 1842.
9. It may be tempting to see Melville, here again, anticipating one of Borges' most recognizable habits: presenting one of his texts as originating from a work by a foreign writer – one that his audience could barely know (if at all), to the point they might wonder whether the invoked author and/or text were real or fictitious.
10. For a discussion of the place of Latin American historiography on non-Latin American subjects see Irigoyen (2017) (for Melville studies in particular, 23-31).
11. All images were created and published with permission from the National Archive of Brazil.

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