7.4: Finding Historical Evidence: Melville’s “Benito Cereno”

Now that Paige has a topic, she needs to begin researching it to find evidence that she can use to develop and support her claims. Most historical claims require two kinds of evidence. Primary sources are texts—literary or nonliterary—from the historical period being studied. When you’re writing about literature, your literary texts are usually primary sources. Paige is writing about American culture just before the Civil War, and so she can consider “Benito Cereno”—which was written in 1855—a primary text. Paige knows that she needs more primary texts to help her understand the complex treatment of slavery in “Benito Cereno.” She must read the short story in parallel with contemporary texts that discuss similar subjects. She decides to look for other texts about slavery in several digital archives. A good researcher, however, will make certain that he or she has investigated what other scholars have written on a particular topic. In order to help her make better sense of her primary sources, she next turns to the ideas of other modern scholars. Books and articles written by scholars about a particular literary work, historical period, or other academic topic are referred to as secondary sources.

Archival research involves visiting collections of primary texts. Sometimes these collections are stored physically in libraries. Scholars interested in these materials must travel to the archives that hold them. If you’re a student in California and are interested in William Faulkner, for instance, you’d have to travel to the University of Mississippi or the University of Virginia to see many of Faulkner’s papers. Though special collections like these are accessible only to a small group of faculty and students (mostly those at larger research universities), this type of research has been the basis of most historical literary criticism. Increasingly, however, primary sources can be found in extensive—and often freely available—digital archives. Today, literary scholars and students at all types of schools have access to a wealth of primary historical sources, including magazines, newspapers, out-of-print novels, artworks, and much more.

PAIGE’S PROCESS

1. Paige begins her research centered on her working thesis claim. She first wants to see what other literary critics
have written about “Benito Cereno,” so she uses the *Modern Language Association International Bibliography*. She finds that there are 270 entries for her story; when she restricts the search to “Benito Cereno” and “slavery,” she finds that there are thirty-seven entries. She suspects that her idea is a common one.

2. As she continues her research, she is especially interested in digital archives. She finds an important research source: Cornell University’s Making of America Collection ([http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/boa](http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/boa)), a free archive of primary materials from the nineteenth century. Making of America Collection, Cornell University Library, [http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/boa](http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/boa). When she first visits the collection, she searches for “slave.” This search returns 21,319 matches: far too many for Paige to investigate for this paper. Searching in digital archives can be tricky. When a search term is too broad, like Paige’s, then it will result in too many primary sources. If a scholar’s search terms are too precise, she might not find anything using them. When Paige searches Making of America for the term “slave revolt,” for instance, nothing matches. This isn’t because none of the sources there discuss slaves rebelling against their masters, but because none happen to use that exact term to describe those rebellions.

Good historical research requires a mixture of precise and broad inquiries. When “slave” returned 21,319 hits, Paige knew she needed to hone her search terms. When “slave revolt” returned none, she also knew to try other combinations, to keep experimenting until she found a set of results she could manage. Good historical research also requires scholarly flexibility. Often claims must be reconsidered, adjusted, or entirely revised in light of the primary evidence the scholar uncovers. Writing well about history requires that a scholar’s claims follow from the evidence; historical criticism suffers when scholars pick and choose only the evidence that fits the claims they want to make.

3. Paige’s initial idea on slavery seems simultaneously too common and too large, so she begins to rethink her topic. How about approaching the story from a different perspective? As she looks through the Making of America Collection, she finds an article, titled “Cuba,” in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* from January of 1853 ([http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=putn;cc=putn;idno=putn0001-1;node=putn0001-1%253A3;view=image;seq=15;size=100;page=root](http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=putn;cc=putn;idno=putn0001-1;node=putn0001-1%253A3;view=image;seq=15;size=100;page=root)). “Cuba,” *Putnam’s Monthly* 14, no. 5 (January 1853): 3–16, Making of America Collection, Cornell University Library, [http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=putn;cc=putn;idno=putn0001-1;node=putn0001-1%253A3;view=image;seq=15;size=100;page=root](http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=putn;cc=putn;idno=putn0001-1;node=putn0001-1%253A3;view=image;seq=15;size=100;page=root). While this article does briefly mention Americans’ fears of “the rising of a fierce black population”—what she hoped to read about—she becomes more and more interested in the way that the author compares the American “race” and the Spanish “race.” The author, no doubt a white American, consistently describes white Americans in glowing, positive terms, while describing the Spanish rulers of Cuba in less flattering ways. Paige sees two connections as she reads. First, the comparisons between the Americans and Spanish in the article remind her of the ways that Melville contrasts Captains Delano and Cereno in “Benito Cereno.” Second, the article reminds her of “Manifest Destiny” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifest_Destiny](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifest_Destiny)), a nineteenth-century idea that her teacher discussed in class. Basically, proponents of Manifest Destiny believed that the United States had the right—even the duty—to expand across North America. They saw American ideals as transcendent and believed that Americans had a moral duty to spread them to other people.

4. Paige returns to the *MLA International Bibliography* and finds only two entries on “Benito Cereno” and “Manifest Destiny,” which suggests that she has chosen a more original idea than her initial one.

5. Paige then returns to the digital archive. As Paige thinks about “Benito Cereno” in relationship to Manifest Destiny, more and more correspondences become evident. Because “Cuba” was published in the same magazine that published “Benito Cereno,” Paige can safely assume that Melville’s historical readers would have been familiar with the ideas and sentiments expressed in “Cuba.” Paige decides that this new topic will prove more fruitful than her original one, and so she returns to the Making of America Collection with a new set of search terms to explore. She can search far more precisely when looking for articles related to Manifest Destiny than she could when searching for articles about slavery, and she finds several potentially interesting primary sources. These include “The Great Nation of Futurity,” from the *Democratic Review* in November of 1839 ([http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=usde;cc=usde;g=moagrp;x=1;q1=futurity%3Argn=f%20text%3ACite1%3Atext%3Atext%3A1restict%3Aidno=usde0006-4%3Didno=](http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=usde;cc=usde;g=moagrp;x=1;q1=futurity%3Argn=f%20text%3ACite1%3Atext%3Atext%3A1restict%3Aidno=usde0006-4%3Didno=)).
Many scholars see this article as one of the earliest expressions of the ideas that would later become known as "Manifest Destiny." (In fact, the author of “The Great Nation of Futurity,” John L. O’Sullivan, coined the term “Manifest Destiny” in an 1845 article titled “Annexation.” John L. O’Sullivan, “The Great Nation of Futurity,” *The United States Democratic Review* 6, no. 23 (November 1839): 426–30, Making of America Collection, Cornell University Library, [http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=usde;cc=usde;rgn=full%20text;idno=usde0017-1;didno=usde0017-1;view=image;seq=0013;node=usde0017-1%3A3](http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=usde;cc=usde;rgn=full%20text;idno=usde0017-1;didno=usde0017-1;view=image;seq=0013;node=usde0017-1%3A3). Between “Cuba” and “The Great Nation of Futurity,” Paige has ample historical evidence with which she can begin interpreting the ways that “Benito Cereno” reflects contemporary ideas about Manifest Destiny.

Revised Working Thesis

An examination of the American attitude of Manifest Destiny during the 1850s and the factual event that Melville based his story after allows for an understanding of “Benito Cereno” as a political commentary on the effects of America’s perceptions of itself on its relationship with other nations.

Working Outline

1. Introduction with Thesis
2. Manifest Destiny: History of events: How Delano embodies this idea (historically and in the text)
3. Views of Spain: How Delano reflects this idea
4. How these views affect relationships, Delano’s desires, etc.
5. Melville’s commentary