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What Is the White American?
Race, Emigration, and Nation
in Melville's *Redburn*

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Herman Melville's fourth novel, *Redburn: His First Voyage; Being the Sailor-boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son-of-a-Gentleman, in the Merchant Service* (1849), is one of the great nineteenth-century works about race and emigration. I make this claim knowing that *Redburn* has generally been neglected or viewed as an inferior work in Melville's canon. Melville must take some blame for this, for in an October 6, 1849, letter to his father-in-law, Judge Lemuel Shaw, he states that *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* (1850) are "jobs, which I have done for money." Why give sustained critical attention to a novel that Melville claims he wrote simply for cash? But in the same letter Melville remarks about those novels that "I have not repressed myself much—so far as *they* are concerned; but have spoken pretty much as I feel."¹ *Redburn* may have been a "job," but Melville remained committed to truth telling in his finely crafted transatlantic novel that addresses travel, social class, the genres of nautical fiction and the bildungsroman, gender and sexuality, democracy, nationalism, and emigration. The novel's depiction of Irish emigration is particularly fascinating for the way it pushes readers to think about race beyond a Black-white binary. The depiction of Irish emigration also raises questions about the place of the migrant, or refugee, in antebellum culture, and in our own time as well.

One must always be cautious about reading the past through the lens of the present, but sometimes presentism is a good thing, helping us to see continuities across decades and centuries and the limits of periodization. Prior to the current debate on a border wall, I confess

that I had not picked up on the centrality of emigration to *Redburn*. Like many readers of the novel, I have focused my attention on the figure of Jackson (the mean-spirited sailor who uses his illness to lord over the ship), Redburn's queer relationship with the Englishman Harry Bolton, the depiction of the young Redburn's efforts to recreate the visit to Liverpool of his dead father (which is central to the bildungsroman aspect of the novel), and the treatment of slavery in an Anglo-American context. Reading the novel during a time of polarized debates on emigration, I couldn't help but notice the importance of Irish emigrants, and Ireland itself, to *Redburn*. The young sailor Redburn has Irish fellow crewmembers, his ship passes right by Ireland, he encounters starving Irish people in Liverpool, and on his return voyage to New York the ship's hold is packed with starving and dying Irish emigrants. In his account of the return voyage in particular, which constitutes the final fourth of the novel, Melville develops a story about the travails of the Irish emigrants below deck, while continuing the story about Redburn's relationships with Jackson and Bolton above deck. The extant criticism of the novel, much of which focuses on Redburn's personal growth in relation to Jackson, Bolton, and his dead father, would suggest that our attention has been distracted from the hold, even as the novel makes clear that readers must consider the close connections between the upper and lower decks. To put this somewhat differently, the novel calls on readers to consider the ship of state writ large, and to do so one must look directly at the Irish emigrants and what they reveal about race and nation during the American 1840s.

Those emigrants, in key respects, are refugees well before the refugee became defined as a legal category during the twentieth century.² The *OED*, however, does provide four uses of the word prior to the publication of *Redburn* that point to its current meaning: displaced people who have been forced to leave their native country, through politics or a natural disaster or both, to seek refuge in a foreign country. The Irish affected by the Great Famine of 1845–54 certainly fit this category. The famine was not simply a natural disaster; it occurred in a colonial context and had as much to do with politics as anything else. British prime minister Lord John Russell closed food depots, refused to offer corn to impoverished Irish for less than market price, and continued to import grain from Ireland for distilleries in England and Scotland, while doing what he could to shore up the landlords in control of Irish farmlands, most of whom were English or Scottish. By the time Melville began composing *Redburn*, rural Ireland had become a human disaster, with over 1

million dying during 1846–48, the worst years of the famine, and approximately the same number choosing to emigrate. The exodus of the rural Irish became what one historian refers to as a “headlong flight of refugees.” As immigration historian Mae M. Ngai puts it, “British colonial domination and capitalist agriculture in Ireland, which turned the potato blight of the late 1840s into a great famine, gave Irish migration a sense of exile and banishment more than self-improvement.”³ In other words, it was difficult for the non-Irish of the time, whether in England or the United States, to regard Irish migrants or refugees as immigrants who made voluntary choices for self-improvement through transplantation. During the 1845–54 period, over 2 million Irish faced circumstances that forced them to leave their native country to seek refuge abroad. Most of these desperate refugees boarded ships to the United States.

Emigrants, or refugees, as the Vietnamese refugee-author Viet Thanh Nguyen argues, are typically viewed by their host countries as lower forms of immigrants who are racially other and diseased. Years before Thanh Nguyen wrote about Vietnamese refugees, Hannah Arendt, in her classic essay “We Refugees” (1943), described the shame she and other Jews fleeing Hitler felt at being dubbed “refugees” instead of “new-comers” or “immigrants.” She elaborated on how European Jews coming to America were regarded, en masse, as a lower form of humanity, as signified by the very word “refugee.” Perhaps just as important, she described how refugees experience a sense of statelessness when they are forced to leave their native countries and are not readily adopted by their new host country. But it is precisely that lack of national connection that has led recent scholars to see the refugee as a positive figure, at least in terms of political hermeneutics, for raising questions about the bounded and bordered nation. In a 1995 forum on Arendt’s “We Refugees,” the political theorist Giorgio Agamben powerfully elaborated this argument, proclaiming that “the refugee is the sole category in which it is possible today to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come.” The figure of the stateless refugee, he says, “break[s] up the identity between man and citizen, between nativity and nationality,” and in doing so “throws into crisis the original fiction of sovereignty.”⁴

Agamben’s remarks in 1995 look forward to our own current debate about emigration, while having much to say about the 1840s, when political leaders sought to develop US sovereignty through expansionism and nativist exclusions. During the 1840s, racism, or white supremacy, had a crucial role in the development of US nationalism, and that would remain true arguably to our present moment. Though Melville in *Redburn*

works in a different tonal register from Agamben, moving back and forth between comic and reformist discourses, he is engaged in a similar sort of project in making clear that slavery and whites' anti-Black racism contribute to the mapping out of "the forms and limits" of the US nation. In surprising ways, the novel's Irish emigrants have a role in this, for at the time many Americans regarded the Irish as Black and thus viewed the hundreds of thousands of Irish refugees making their way to the United States as posing a threat to the white nation. That Melville near the end of *Redburn* invokes the image of a wall meant to keep such emigrants out suggests how prescient he could be on matters concerning race and nation.⁵ By moving the Irish emigrants from the background to the foreground in my reading of the novel, I hope to show how Melville engages in a complex dialogue with antebellum US culture about the varieties, types, and degrees of what came to be called "whiteness." His depiction of the multilayered, multisided nature of race exposes the fault lines of US national sovereignty and is one of the novel's signal achievements.

* * *

Melville's and many other antebellum Americans' thoughts on emigration developed from early national debates on naturalization and Americanization, which were also debates on race. Before turning to emigration in *Redburn*, it would be useful to consider one of the most famous, and indeed foundational, statements about emigration to America, the chapter titled "What Is an American?" in J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's classic *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). In this work, Crèvecoeur, through his fictional persona Farmer James, helped to articulate and anticipate the concerns that would persist in the United States about which "races" of emigrants would make the best sort of Americans.

Crèvecoeur was a Frenchman who married an American from a loyalist family and basically became a transplanted Anglo-American whose primary sympathies were with England. With the outbreak of the American Revolution, however, he was caught between warring factions, and in 1779 he spent several months in a British jail in New York City because of suspicions that, being French, he may have been a revolutionary. Even with what were ultimately his divided loyalties, he saw immense promise in the emerging United States, and he published *Letters* in London for the many European readers who were fascinated with America and were perhaps even considering the possibility of emigration themselves. In

Letter III, “What Is an American?” Crèvecoeur in the book’s best-known passage (the passage that helped give rise to the idea of the United States as a kind of melting pot) asks the large question of his moment: “What, then, is the American, this new man?” He responds by emphasizing emigration (“leaving behind”) over immigration. The American, he says,

is either an European or the descendant of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country . . . *He* is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.⁶

Several aspects of this overall optimistic account need to be highlighted. First, Crèvecoeur presents the new American in relation to blood and race; he refers to “that strange mixture of blood” that produces the American, and he talks about how “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.” But does he really mean “all nations”? His emphasis is on Europe, and in the same chapter of *Letters* he states that the Englishman who emigrates to America will want to know “whence came all these people?” He provides an answer that underscores the idea of racial mixture and the power of the land itself as an engine of what Katy L. Chiles has termed “transformable race”: “They are a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, that race now called Americans have arisen.” To say the obvious, Crèvecoeur’s notion of blood or racial “mixture” fails to acknowledge the African as part of that mixture or as a race that could be transformed. He thus closes his eyes to the existence of the emerging free Black communities in the Northeast—in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City in particular—and to the interracial sexuality (often coercive) that existed in the North and South from the time of the first colonial encounters, thereby contributing to the mythology that the emerging nation was a racially pure white nation. And though he acknowledges the existence of emigrants from a number of different European countries, he thinks hierarchically about those countries, with the Germans and Scots promising to be the most successful Americans and the Irish the least. He even offers statistics on

the matter, asserting that nine of twelve German emigrant families will succeed in America, seven of twelve Scotch families, but only four of twelve Irish families. Why is that the case? As a good Enlightenment rationalist, Crèvecoeur posits that “government or other local circumstances” may play an important role in these different levels of success, but ultimately he keeps the argument vague by simply allowing that “there must be some powerful causes which constitute this great national difference.”⁷ Racial scientists of the nineteenth century would be more direct in their assessment, maintaining that the Germans and Scotch are Anglo-Saxons (white), while the Irish are Celts (not quite white), with the implication that there are varieties of white races and those that are “whiter” will prove to be more successful.

To some extent, Crèvecoeur’s discussion of race, with an emphasis on the connection between whiteness and Americanness, looks forward to the nation’s first naturalization act, adopted in 1790, which states that “any Alien being a free white person . . . of good character” can be “considered as a Citizen of the United States” after two years of residency. Over the years, the residency requirements for that “free white person” were extended. As Carrie Hyde and Martha S. Jones have both recently demonstrated, US citizenship from the 1790s to the time of the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) was difficult to define, though whiteness certainly helped to argue in people’s favor.⁸ But whiteness itself was a troubled category, especially given the long, violent history in the Americas of the sort of coercive sexuality that would produce mixed-race people. Moreover, with the rise of racial science in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, there was ongoing debate about which “races” actually were white.

Melville’s great novel about emigration, and about Irish emigrants in particular, is *Redburn*, but one could argue that all of his nautical romances are in some ways about emigration. Again and again Melville presents the ship—whether merchant, naval, or whaling—as a ship of state in which there is racial and ethnic diversity, along with a mix of native-born and emigrant seamen. In a sly, ironic passage in *Moby-Dick* (1851), Melville notes that “not one in two of the many thousand men before the mast employed in the American whale fishery, are Americans born, though pretty nearly all the officers are,” and he goes on to declare that “it is the same with the American whale fishery as with . . . the engineering forces employed in the construction of the American Canals and Railroads. The same, I say, because in all these cases the native American liberally provides the brains, the rest of the world as

generously supplying the muscles.” In this darkly comic conception, America welcomes emigrants to do the work that the native-born are happy to supervise. Perhaps for that reason, the character Max the Dutchman in *Redburn* “prided himself not a little upon his naturalization as a Yankee, and if he could, would have been very glad to have passed himself off for a born native.”⁹

In *Pierre* (1852), which Melville published a year after *Moby-Dick*, Melville addresses emigrants from a different perspective, giving a back-history of how numerous people emigrated from Paris and Saint-Domingue during the revolutionary 1790s. One of the novel’s key plot developments involves the seeming revelation (in a novel where everything remains ambiguous) that Pierre’s father before his marriage had had an affair with one of those émigrés, whom Pierre’s aunt Dorothea recalls came over on a boat with “a cabin-full of French emigrants of quality,” though she later says the young woman was one of “the poor emigrants.”¹⁰ Among the ambiguities of the aunt’s story is whether this enigmatic emigrant is linked to French aristocrats in Paris or the tropics, an ambiguity that has much to do with the question of race, especially in light of her rumored affair with Pierre’s father and the subsequent birth of a daughter. Is that daughter, if in fact Pierre’s father’s daughter, white or Black? It’s never clear, though Melville regularly describes Isabel, the putative daughter, as dark complected. The further plot complication, in a novel subtitled *The Ambiguities*, is that long after the death of his father, Pierre falls in love with Isabel and, as suggested by a description of their coiling together, has sexual relations with her, unaware that she may be his half-sister. What happens to whiteness when we consider the United States in a larger global context of slavery in the hemisphere, or even in the local context of slavery in the Hudson River Valley? (Pierre’s grandfather was a slaveholder and there are intimations of coercive interracial sexuality in Pierre’s family history.)¹¹ These are among the many questions about race and nation raised by Melville’s bizarre domestic novel.

Like all of his nautical fictions, *White-Jacket* (1850), the novel that Melville wrote right around the same time as *Redburn*, presents a mix of native-born and emigrant seamen. As the title of *White-Jacket* suggests, this is a novel about whiteness, drawing analogies between the flogging of sailors on a naval ship and the flogging of enslaved people on the plantation—with the reformist notion that white sailors should not be treated like Black slaves (along with the reformist notion that there is much that is inhuman about the practice of slavery).¹² *Redburn* was published a year before *White-Jacket*, and the title of that novel, too,

signals an interest in race (one of the characters is linked to Andrew Jackson, who was known as an Indian killer, and the “Red” in “Redburn” also reminds us of the Native presence). But rather than examining Indian killing in the United States, which has a central place in *The Confidence-Man* (1857), Melville explores the interconnections between slavery, race, and nation in the larger transatlantic context of Irish emigration. In doing so, Melville (to look forward to where I will be going with my argument) supplies at least one possible answer to the question of what is the white American: he is a cruel American desperate to hold onto the fiction of the white sovereign nation.

* * *

And yet for all of its political engagement, *Redburn* is a fairly genial retrospective narrative about a young man, Wellingborough Redburn, making his first ocean voyage, in this case on a merchant ship, from New York to Liverpool and back again. That voyage is undertaken by a self-styled “sailor-boy” who thinks of himself as a gentleman but who is from a family (somewhat like Melville’s) in which the father, he regularly reminds us, “became a bankrupt, and died.”¹³ The young “gentlemanly son” (55) Redburn is thus motivated by financial necessity to take to sea, and the novel, by mentioning the narrator’s later voyage on a whaler (typically presented in Melville as a last resort for those who are down and out in capitalist society), suggests that financial necessity will remain an important part of his life history. There is witty, rich language throughout, and a dazzling symbolic imagination, starting at the novel’s opening, when Redburn shares his memory of looking at a miniature ship and its crew forever trapped in a glass bottle and fantasizing about smashing it. The novel is also quite funny in places, especially in the opening chapters, as Redburn the greenhorn storyteller clings to the idea that he is a gentleman while learning the bracing realities of what it means to be a seaman; and the novel becomes poignant when Redburn develops parallels between his father’s voyage to Liverpool (as an importer) in 1808 and his own travels approximately thirty-five years later. He brings along his father’s old guidebook to Liverpool, *The Picture of Liverpool* (1803), which mostly fails him (such are the limits of print), and the idea of a father who fails to lead or guide the son is a theme central to other of Melville’s works as well, most notably *Pierre*.¹⁴

Redburn also features the enigmatic, seemingly homosexual Englishman, Harry Bolton, who brings Redburn to a decadent gambling

hall in London and journeys back to New York with him, along with the dangerously ill and mean-spirited sailor named Jackson, who claims to be “a near relation of General Jackson of New Orleans” (57). A central character in the novel, Jackson, who throughout the novel is weak in body, lords over the men until he drops dead on the return voyage. With the character of Jackson, Melville may be commenting on the dangers of a demagogic democracy in which someone like Jackson (or his presidential namesake) can assume control over the masses. Jackson also has a place in the novel’s development of racial themes, for the sickly white racist Jackson, who hates the Belfast member of the crew “because of his red cheeks” (59), had earlier in his nautical career served on Portuguese slavers, “and with a diabolical relish used to tell of the *middle-passage*, where the slaves were stowed, heel and point, like logs, and the suffocated and dead were unmanacled, and weeded out from the living every morning” (57). On the return voyage to New York, Jackson will take equally diabolical pleasure in the sufferings of the Irish emigrants packed into the hold of the *Highlander* as if on a slave ship.¹⁵

Slavery and race are crucial components of *Redburn* not only for the way that Melville (and Jackson) develop connections between the Blacks and Irish but also because Liverpool was the center of the British slave trade before the abolition of slavery in the British Empire just a few years before the present of the novel. So *Redburn* is about a young man from the United States, where slavery is the law of the land, journeying to the parent country, where slavery has been abolished. Like Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and other formerly enslaved people who traveled to England during the 1840s, Redburn in Liverpool can’t help noticing that Blacks don’t face threats to their person, and in a way don’t have to think about themselves as Black (though as a minority in Liverpool, of course they still do). Redburn’s merchant ship, the *Highlander*, has a Black steward and a Black cook, and Redburn remarks on how free and *human* they feel in England, and thus how they have become “very much attached to the place and like to make voyages to it” (202). The Black steward, who is presented as something of a dandy, can even do the unthinkable in Liverpool, as Redburn observes him “walking arm in arm with a good-looking English woman” (202).¹⁶

Contemplating the Black sailors’ relative freedom in Liverpool, particularly the way that the English seem to recognize Blacks’ “claims to humanity and normal equality,” Redburn pointedly remarks that “we Americans leave to other countries the carrying out of the principle that stands at the head of our Declaration of Independence” (202). A

bold statement indeed, but Melville's treatment of slavery and race in the novel is complicated by the fact that, as Wyn Kelley observes, "Melville is breaking down racial stereotypes even as he seems to reinforce them."¹⁷ The retrospective narrator Redburn (who regularly conveys a sense of his youthful perspective) at times evinces a petty racism, such as when he says that the drinking glass he borrows from a Black sailor imparts "an ugly flavor" (25), when he states about the Black cook that "his color kept us from seeing his dirty face; I never saw him wash but once, and that was at one of his own soup pots one dark night when he thought no one saw him" (43), and when he declares that the Black steward "was a sentimental sort of a darky" (83) who enjoyed reading such novels as Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794). The narrator evinces a different sort of racism early in the novel, when he realizes he has to pawn his fowling piece to have any cash at all, describing a New York Jewish pawnbroker as "a curly-headed little man with a dark oily face, and a hooked nose, like the pictures of Judas Iscariot" (19), and another as "one of the hook-nosed men" (20). In the spirit of Crèvecoeur, the narrator presents more positive images of the "German emigrants who come on board the large New York ships," remarking that "among these sober Germans, my country counts the most orderly and valuable of her foreign population" (168).

Taking account of the different peoples that he encounters in New York and on the *Highlander*, Redburn at the midpoint of the novel offers a paeon to Americanness that would seem to be a response to the same question asked by Crèvecoeur: What is an American? For Melville, or the character Redburn, race, as in Crèvecoeur, finds its way to the center of his meditation:

Settled by the people of all nations, all nations may claim her [America] for their own. You can not spill a drop of American blood without spilling the blood of the whole world. Be he Englishman, Frenchman, German, Dane, or Scot; the European who scoffs at an American, calls his own brother *Raca* [a word of contempt from Matthew 5:22], and stands in danger of the judgment. We are not a narrow tribe of men, with a bigoted Hebrew nationality—whose blood has been debased in the attempt to ennoble it, by maintaining an exclusive succession among ourselves. No: our blood is as the flood of the Amazon, made up of a thousand noble currents all pouring into one. We are not a nation, so much as a world. (169)

In this passage, Melville offers a wider, more hemispheric view of Americanness than Crèvecoeur, even as he implicitly raises questions about the moral status of the nation by linking nationalism, as is consistent with the earlier anti-Semitic remarks, to Jewish bigotry. Still, in an anticipation of Whitman, he emphasizes that this is not a “narrow” nation but one that contains multitudes: English, French, German, Danish, and Scots. As in Crèvecoeur, those multitudes are conceived in relation to blood and race, with the optimistic notion that the mixing of blood among these various immigrants will produce something like what Crèvecoeur terms “this new man,” the American. In this respect, Melville follows in the Crèvecoeurian tradition in failing to acknowledge people of color, whether Black or Hispanic (and this despite the reference to the Amazon) as contributing to American genealogies and bloodlines. Significantly, too, and unlike in Crèvecoeur, the narrator mentions Scottish but not Irish blood. Deliberately or not, the Irish, like the Africans, have been excluded from the streams of blood flowing into the American.

That said, the novel's treatment of slavery is consistent with the antislavery tenor of much of Melville's fiction. In a much-remarked-upon passage, Redburn describes a statue in Liverpool Square commemorating the heroism of Admiral Lord Nelson, the naval leader who in 1805 led the British Royal Navy to victory over French and Spanish fleets in the Battle of Trafalgar. As Redburn gazes at what he calls the “swarthy” chained French and Spanish captives at the base of the statue—who are meant to be “emblematic of Nelson's principal victories”—he can't help seeing “four African slaves in the market-place.” That sudden vision of Black enslaved people leads him imaginatively to journey back across the ocean and contemplate slave sales in Virginia and the Carolinas, as well as “the historical fact, that the African slave-trade once constituted the principal commerce of Liverpool; and that the prosperity of the town was once supposed to have been indissolubly linked to its prosecution” (155). As Paul Giles notes, Melville in the description of the statue develops “figurative analogies between different types of slavery, juxtaposing the racial discrimination familiar to him from nineteenth-century America with the social and economic slavery he sees around him in England.” Class is indeed a vital part of the novel, and Giles is right in remarking that the statue speaks to “the oppressions of the class system as it manifests itself in Liverpool,” which become even more evident when the novel depicts the struggles of the Irish emigrants who arrived there during the 1840s.¹⁸ Still, the overall effect of the passage about the statuary is to impart a gothic feel to *Redburn* about the haunting presence of

slavery over the past several centuries of Anglo-American history. On the evils of slavery in this history, Melville strikes me as unambiguous.

* * *

Where Melville can seem more ambiguous and perhaps even conflicted (as suggested by his elision of Africa and Ireland from his account of American blood) is in the treatment of race and nation, and I want now to transition from Black-white binaries, which assume a monolithic whiteness, to whiteness as it was conceived during Melville's time, in which there were a variety of "races" that lay claim to what we now refer to as whiteness. Because of the importance of the Irish to *Redburn's* thematics of race and nation, I am particularly interested in tensions during the antebellum period between what was thought of as Anglo-Saxon whiteness and Celtic not-quite whiteness, tensions that were insisted on by racial scientists of the time, who, with their emphasis on polygenesis, argued for the possibly different racial origins of Saxon and Celtic peoples. In the writings of these "scientists," which had a huge impact on antebellum culture, the Saxons were regarded as superior to the Celts. It was precisely that sense of *racial* superiority that, at least for racial scientists, helped to explain what Crèvecoeur ultimately left unexplained: why the Scots and Germans were more "successful" as Americans than, say, the Irish and Blacks.

A good deal of this racial science writing was stimulated not only by the increasingly heated debates on slavery, but also by the sharp rise in Irish emigration to England and the United States as a result of Ireland's Great Famine. Here I deliberately use the word "emigration" over "immigration," for, as I mentioned at the outset, the famine, along with Ireland's colonial status, brought about a mass migration of peasant farmers who, as historian Kerby A. Miller insists, were emigrants and exiles "literally driven from the land" by "proprietors and strong farmers [who] seized the opportunity to evict thousands of demoralized paupers" at the failure of the potato crop. Rural Ireland itself, especially during 1847–48, "was in a state of social and moral collapse," with emigrants, or refugees, mainly trying to survive by fleeing "from death in the doomed land."¹⁹ The vast majority of the Irish who traveled to England ended up in the port city of Liverpool, and the vast majority of those emigrants sailed on to the United States. Historians estimate that during the mid-to-late 1840s approximately 300,000 Irish of the over 2 million who fled the country remained in Liverpool, while the rest made their way to the United States.

Many Americans of the time believed that the influx of such a large number of “Celtic” emigrants posed a threat to the white racial character of the nation, which is to say that nativist Americans feared that the Irish posed a threat to the nation itself. Similar concerns about their own country were expressed by Anglo-Saxonist nationalists in England. Both countries had long traditions of anti-Catholicism that worked to heighten these racial concerns.²⁰

The belief that the Irish were a lesser kind of white, or not white at all, was pervasive in England and the United States during the 1840s and 1850s. I will give just a few notable examples before considering Melville’s representations of the Irish in *Redburn*. In 1849, the year of the publication of *Redburn*, Thomas Carlyle, who saw similarities between the Irish and Blacks, stated in his notorious magazine piece “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question” that England “‘emancipated’ the West Indies into a *Black Ireland*; ‘free’ indeed, but an Ireland, and Black!” Two years earlier, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered a lecture in Manchester, England, in which he applauded what he called “the Saxon race” in England with “its commanding sense of right and wrong,—the love and devotion to that,—this is the imperial trait, which arms them with the sceptre of the globe.” Emerson reprinted that 1847 celebration of British imperialism at the end of his 1857 *English Traits*, and there he makes his racial views even more explicit when he states that any “talk of English traits . . . excludes Ireland,” and goes on to say that Ireland is populated by “an inferior or misplaced race.” Codifying the transatlantic racism that insisted on differences between Saxon and Celt was the noted Scottish physician Robert Knox, whose *Races of Men*, published in Philadelphia in 1850, asserts that “the Celtic race does not, and never could be made to comprehend the meaning of the word liberty,” and thus he concludes, “There is but *one race* whose ideas on this point are sound; that race is the Saxon. He is the only real democrat on the earth.” Not surprisingly, Knox believed that a race war between the Celts and Anglo-Saxons was inevitable, a war that Anglo-Saxons must win in order to preserve English civilization. In somewhat contradictory fashion, the American abolitionist Theodore Parker also celebrated the Anglo-Saxon as the true democrat, closing his eyes to the role that Anglo-Saxons played in the practice of slavery when declaring in an antislavery speech of 1858: “No tribe of men has done such service for Freedom as the Anglo-Saxons, in Britain and America.”²¹

The racist denigration of the Irish in Anglo-American culture was more pervasive than these few examples suggest. Richard Dyer notes

that “for much of British history, the Irish have been looked down on as black,” and that racially condescending representations of the Irish appeared in a wide range of nineteenth-century texts and illustrations. Historians Dale T. Knobel, David R. Roediger, and many others have shown how the Irish in antebellum US newspapers, magazines, and political orations were similarly depicted as Blacks. In numerous illustrations and cartoons of the period, Knobel observes, the Irish are given a “simianized face (prominent cheekbones, upturned nose, and projecting teeth.” As Roediger remarks on depictions of the Irish in popular writings of the period: “*Low-browed and savage, grovelling and bestial, lazy and wild, simian and sensual*—such were the adjectives used by many native-born Americans to describe the Catholic Irish ‘race’ in the years before the Civil War.”²² My point, in light of all this, is that we need to resist the idea that nineteenth-century Americans believed that there was a monolithic whiteness existing in clear opposition to Blackness. As historian Matthew Frye Jacobson explains, beginning in the 1840s American culture saw a “shift from one brand of bedrock racism to another—from the unquestioned hegemony of a unified race of ‘white persons’ to a contest over political ‘fitness’ among a now fragmented, hierarchically arranged series of distinct ‘white races.’” Again and again in the antebellum United States, that “superior” Anglo-Saxonism was linked to the national expansionism called Manifest Destiny, as well as, in the somewhat contradictory manner of Theodore Parker, to ideals of freedom and democracy. Like Knox, the supporters of the Mexican War believed that war was necessary to the survival of Anglo-Saxonism, and thus to the survival of the nation itself.²³

With this context in mind, we can now consider *Redburn*’s engagement with race and nation through its key scenes with Irish emigrants. The novel, as critics have noted, draws liberally on Melville’s own family history and travels to Liverpool, but, as William H. Gilman points out in his still invaluable 1951 book-length study of *Redburn*, Melville, who himself traveled to Liverpool on the merchant ship *St. Lawrence* in 1839, added fresh material about Irish emigrants to the novel, much of which came from his newspaper reading of the mid-to-late 1840s. In historical fact, there were approximately thirty people in the steerage (or hold) each way of Melville’s 1839 voyage to and from Liverpool.²⁴ In the novel, there are twenty or so people in the steerage on the voyage to Liverpool, but for the return trip Melville changes the number to around 500, makes them all Irish emigrants, and presents a nightmare vision of suffering

and death in the ship's hold that has, in many respects, the reformist aim of exposing a humanitarian crisis in shipping practices. At the time, shipping agents or brokers in Liverpool, who worked on commission, were luring desperate Irish emigrants onto US ships for a steerage fare of something equivalent to fifteen to twenty-five dollars (a steep price for the impoverished emigrants). The owners of these ships sought to maximize their profits by cramming as many emigrants as possible into the ship's hold, and they maximized profits even further by providing these emigrants with limited amounts of food.²⁵ As a result, the Irish, on what came to be termed "coffin ships," to some extent suffered their own version of a Middle Passage, and Melville in *Redburn* is quite explicit about that, stating that "the friendless emigrants [were] stowed away like bales of cotton, and packed like slaves in a slave-ship" (241).²⁶ (I would add that while Melville's intentions may have been reformist—wanting to show how outrageous it was that the Irish were being treated like enslaved people on a slave-ship—the arguably somewhat forced analogy between the Irish and slaves would have further confirmed nativist readers' beliefs that the Irish resembled Blacks; and I would also add that Jackson's earlier remark on the pleasure he took in observing the sufferings of Blacks on the Middle Passage further underscores the connections between Blacks and the Irish that Melville develops in the novel.)

Prior to the depiction of the Irish packed below deck on the *Highlander*, Melville shows how the poor (many of whom would have been Irish emigrants) are suffering in Liverpool, which is depicted as experiencing its own Great Famine. That depiction of human suffering, with an emphasis on starvation, includes Redburn's horrifying description of a mother and her two children dying of hunger in a basement stairwell. Redburn tries to alert passersby and the police to the dire situation of this family, but no one seems to care, which suggests that this mother and children were regarded not just as poor but as (probably Irish) outsiders. Redburn himself is reluctant to help, though eventually, and somewhat pitifully, he drops bread onto these people and gets them some water. But his limited efforts come too late, which leads him in somewhat self-aggrandizing moralistic fashion to lament the willful blindness of the middling and upper classes. He asks his readers, "Are we not like people sitting up with a corpse, and making merry in the house of the dead?" (184).

The wrenching scene of the dying mother and her children is hardly the only depiction of starvation in Liverpool. Redburn describes the

many hungry beggars as “scores of tattered wretches” (185). Most prominent is a male beggar who carries a sign that speaks for him, his family, and numerous others:

*I have had no food for three days;
My wife and children are dying.* (187; emphasis original)

That beggar is part of the grim scene that Redburn sees in Liverpool on a daily basis: “Old women, rather mummies, drying up with slow starving and age; young girls, incurably sick, who ought to have been in the hospital; sturdy men, with the gallows in their eyes, and a whining lie in their mouths; young boys, hollow-eyed and decrepit; and puny mothers, holding up puny babies in the glare of the sun, formed the main features of the scene” (186). To his credit, Redburn, even amid such grimness, also addresses the colonialist politics of the Great Famine when he describes the arrival at Brunswick Dock of starving Irish emigrants along with the food still coming out of Ireland for English consumption: “Here you see vast quantities of produce, imported from starving Ireland; here you see the decks turned into pens for oxen and sheep; and often, side by side with these inclosures, Irish deck-passengers, thick as they can stand, seemingly penned in just like the cattle.” In addition to the produce, English boats are daily bringing “Irish laborers . . . by thousands to help harvest the English crops” (198). But in Liverpool and its environs, there simply is no concern for the dismal situation of the starving Irish emigrants themselves.

Redburn seems to care about the emigrants, but there are limits to his reformism and sympathy, starting with the gesture of dropping pieces of bread on people who lack the energy to retrieve them. We also see, with the help of the retrospective narrator, that the young Redburn is not above regarding the Irish as subhuman. Redburn describes the Irish arriving in Liverpool as “an irruption of barbarians” (198) and as a descent of “locusts” (199). He marvels in a mean-spirited fashion at how Ireland, “though her crop of potatoes may fail, never yet failed in bringing her annual crop of men into the world” (199). Moreover, after his various encounters with the miseries of Liverpool, he decides to make an excursion into the country, where he meets “three adorable charm-ers,” young rural women who he claims so steal his heart that “to this day I live a bachelor” (215). And then the bachelor meets the charming and enigmatic Englishman Harry Bolton, whose “complexion was a mantling brunette, feminine as a girl’s” (216). “Struck” by Bolton’s

“beauty, dress, and manner” (216), Redburn joins him on a trip to a London gambling and entertainment hall called Aladdin’s Palace, where Bolton appears to lose all of his money. During the scenes with the countrywomen and Bolton, when a novel about the unstable category of race becomes as well a novel about the unstable category of sexuality, Redburn fails to give the starving emigrants a second thought. In fact, the emigrants appear to have vanished from his moral imagination until he boards the *Highlander* and realizes that he will be returning to New York with a shipload of Irish emigrants packed in the hold like slaves.

In the account of the approximately 500 Irish emigrants in the *Highlander*’s hold in the final fourth of the novel, Redburn moves between sympathy and revulsion, and no matter how great his concern about the exploitation of the Irish, he has moments when he blames the victims or presents them as of inferior stock. He condescendingly says of the shipboard Irish emigrants: “They were the most simple people I have ever seen” (260), and he later refers to them as “these ignorant people” (286). He even chides them for their “improvidence and shortsightedness” (283) in not bringing along more food, despite making it clear that the boarding agents had lied about the availability of food and had taken most if not all of their money; and he presents the Irish as nothing less than savages when he describes how, in their hunger, they devoured a young pig without cooking it. He asserts that the Irish emigrants’ “personal uncleanness” helped to bring on the “malignant fever” (286) that would kill more than twenty in the steerage. Though the novel does not indulge in the sort of outright, unambiguously Anglo-Saxonist racialism (or racism) that we see in such writers as Emerson, the young Redburn (to whom the older, authorial Redburn and, implicitly, Melville, can seem in an ironic relation) appears at least a bit aligned with the sailors and first-class passengers, who regard the Irish, if not as Blacks, as inferior forms of whites. In a novel that has a major character named after an Indian killer, the Irish in these scenes describing their “savagery” can also seem, in stereotypical terms, Indian-like. The first-class cabin passengers are so concerned about what they regard as “the barbarian incursions of the ‘wild Irish’ emigrants” (242, emphasis original) that they ask the sailors to set up ropes and other barriers that will keep the Irish in what the narrator calls their “cess-pool” (241).

This is brutal and fascinating material that most critics have ignored. Wyn Kelley is one of the few critics who has commented on Melville’s representations of the Irish emigrants, and she sees Redburn redeeming himself through sympathy and compassion. I’m a bit more mixed on that,

as I see him or Melville sometimes reinforcing racial and cultural stereotypes in the way we observed with the depiction of Black people. After all, as historian Brendan P. O' Malley observes, "many Americans viewed the mass migration" of the Irish emigrants as posing "an almost existential threat to their society, political system, and economy."²⁷

But as with the account of slavery, Melville eventually builds toward a strong statement about the mistreatment of emigrants that raises questions about racial stereotypes and, to some extent, national ideologies that have race at their center. In this respect, it is worth underscoring that the novel works in the manner of a twice-told tale in which the narrator conveys the perspective of both the younger historical participant Redburn, who is often distrustful of and even disgusted by the Irish emigrants, and the older retrospective authorial Redburn, or Melville, who is intent on depicting a social problem that needs to be addressed. (Interpretation in Melville, as in *Moby-Dick's* famous "The Doubloon" chapter, is often all about perspective.) The tensions that we see in the narrator's presentation of the emigrants culminate in a dramatic moment late in the novel, when Redburn, who has been haunted by "the steady hum of a subterranean wailing and weeping" (241) from below deck, decides to descend into the hold with several members of the crew to look at, and perhaps offer assistance to, the Irish emigrants who are "seal[ed] down in their noisome den" (286). As he connects the plaintive noises he heard above deck to the people he now views firsthand below, Redburn finds that what meets his eyes is almost too difficult to take in:

The sight that greeted us, upon entering, was wretched indeed. It was like entering a crowded jail. From the rows of rude bunks, hundreds of meager, begrimed faces were turned upon us; while seated upon the chests, were scores of unshaven men, smoking tea-leaves, and creating a suffocating vapor. But this vapor was better than the native air of the place, which from almost unbelievable causes, was foetid in the extreme. In every corner, the females were huddled together, weeping and lamenting; children were asking bread from their mothers, who had none to give; and old men, seated upon the floor, were leaning back against the heads of the water-casks, with closed eyes and fetching their breath with a gasp. (287)

The passage conveys sympathy and revulsion, concern and judgment, along with a new understanding that the conditions below deck—

“noisome confinement in so close, unventilated, and crowded a den” (286)—and not mere ignorance are what “brought on a malignant fever” (286). Still, when all is said and done, Redburn is mostly just looking, and in this case he’s not even dropping breadcrumbs on starving people. The description has a voyeuristic feel to it, and such is its sensationalism that one wonders whether Melville thought of the scene as adding to the luster, or commercialism, of a “job” that he hoped would appeal to middle-class readers. Writing about the victims of the Great Famine, Fionnghuala Sweeney remarks that starvation “produces the ghost of a subject whose plea for subsistence in the face of ecological disaster is the all but final iteration of the subjugated body biologically divested of social and cultural capacity.”²⁸ As a reformer, poor as he is, Redburn retains the social and cultural capacity of the national subject and accordingly reinforces the distance between him (and those who accompanied him down into the hold) and the starving Irish refugees before ascending to his place on the deck away from the horrors below. Shortly thereafter, Redburn learns of the deaths of four of the Irish, and others soon follow.

Jackson’s response to all of this is unnerving. While many on deck begin to panic about the possibility of fever spreading upward, the mortally ill Jackson delights in the suffering of the Irish. Not only does he have nothing to fear from a malignant fever, given that he’s close to dying anyway, but there’s pleasure to be had, at least for him, in seeing what he regards as racially inferior people suffering in this fashion. Recall that this is the man who happily told stories about the sufferings he’d seen among Blacks on slave ships en route from Africa to Portugal. Melville’s description of the Irish as experiencing their own sort of Middle Passage had guided readers to regard the Irish in relation to Blacks. In this closing section of the novel, Jackson works to further “blacken” the Irish by spreading the rumor, whenever any of the Irish appear above deck, that the captain had a plan of “selling them all for slaves” (260). In various ways, then, Melville, both through the young Redburn and Jackson, suggests that the Irish emigrants are different from the white sailors and passengers, who can be regarded as stand-ins for the middle-class reader.

At least that’s one way of reading *Redburn*’s representations of the Irish emigrants. But there are other ways to read what Melville is doing in this emigrant fiction that are more in line with the antislavery sentiments and transnational vision informing the overall novel. For Redburn’s act of actually looking at the suffering Irish, as voyeuristic and sensational as that account might be, moves him, or perhaps more accurately moves the older, more retrospective Redburn, toward anger at

the comfortable middle class that refuses to see the sufferings of the supposedly racially inferior other. After lamenting the Irish, who have lost their relatives and have virtually no money to their names, Redburn describes the first-class passengers in the cabin as “jocund . . . with their long purses and goodly portmanteaus” (290), with the sense that such jocundity in this context is a crime against humanity.

Redburn then speaks directly to his readers about the failure of current emigration policies. He does this through the perspective of the older retrospective narrator, not the younger man whose racism has to be seen as part of his greenness. The more retrospective narrator writes self-consciously about connections between his experiences on the *Highlander* and his present moment of authorial composition, remarking that “though these things happened so long ago; yet just such events, nevertheless, are perhaps taking place today. But the only account you obtain of such events, is generally contained in a newspaper paragraph, under the shipping-head” (292). The anger of the older Redburn about those who refuse to confront the reality of the Irish emigrants’ suffering, which in fact he had seen not “long ago” but just a few years earlier, builds to strong reformist statements and policy suggestions, geared to the novel’s 1849 publication date, that work against the xenophobia and racism of the time (as well as against the mean-spirited remarks of the younger Redburn). That older narrator, who sounds a lot like Melville, argues that the laws need to be changed so that fewer emigrants are packed onto ships, and that American ships need to honor England’s recently-passed law “concerning the fixed supply of food for every emigrant embarking from Liverpool” (293). Emigrants, he writes, should also be allowed access to open spaces on ships. Just as the narrator pointedly attacks the comfortable citizens of Liverpool who close their eyes to the starving people in their midst, he now writes about the failure of Americans to truly see the suffering of the Irish coming to the United States: “We are blind to the real sights of this world; deaf to its voice; and dead to its death” (293). The passage builds to a searing condemnation of those who refuse to acknowledge the failure of US emigration policy: “We talk of the Turks, and abhor the cannibals; but may not some of *them* go to heaven, before some of *us*? We may have civilized bodies and yet barbarous souls . . . And not till we know, that one grief outweighs ten thousand joys, will we become what Christianity is striving to make us” (293). As part of its reformist strategy, the novel attempts to make its readers see and hear those who are literally and metaphorically in the hold.

And there is clearly much more at stake than immediate social reform. As racist and xenophobic as *Redburn* can sometimes appear to be because of the descriptions of the younger narrator, Melville takes the reader to a new level of awareness and social critique as he moves from the mistreatment of the emigrants on board the *Highlander* to a peroration on Americanness that raises questions about the very legitimacy of the white, bordered nation. The older, retrospective narrator proclaims to the reader:

Let us waive that agitated national topic, as to whether such multitudes of foreign poor should be landed on our American shores; let us waive it, with the one only thought, that if they can get here, they have God's right to come; though they bring all Ireland and her miseries with them. For the whole world is the patrimony of the whole world; there is no telling who does not own a stone in the Great Wall of China. But we waive all this; and will only consider, how best the emigrants can come hither, since come they do, and come they must and will. (292–93)

This is an extraordinary passage on emigration in Melville's time, as well as a forward-looking commentary on issues that would continue to inform nationalist debate on such matters as a border wall. Here Melville imagines the Great Wall, initially constructed to keep out foreign peoples, as something more like a metaphorical wall—a wall that contains multitudes and thus is not really much of a border wall, after all. With the assertion that the brave Irish emigrants own a stone in this wall, we see a turn against the notion of a hermetically sealed or excluding nation, and with the assertion that the Irish emigrants “must and will” come to America, we see a turn against the notion of an Anglo-Saxonist, white supremacist United States. To draw on Agamben, this resonant passage provides a compelling depiction of the emigrant, or migrant, or refugee as a figure who “radically calls into question the principles of the nation-state,” particularly when those principles are about exclusion based on race.²⁹ Forced to flee their country because of the Great Famine and colonialists' racist (mis)management of the crisis, the Irish as refugees pose the same kinds of challenges to US natal or blood-based nationalism, in this case an Anglo-Saxon or white nationalism, that Agamben and others working in what has come to be called “refugee studies” regard as, in effect, the critical function of the refugee.

In *Redburn*, Melville anticipated the critical work of these theorists, and (as noted in the discussion of *Pierre*), he would continue to explore the idea of the refugee in his subsequent fiction. He calls the eponymous hero of his 1855 *Israel Potter*, a novel that raises all kinds of questions about the white nationalism sponsored by American Revolutionary rhetoric, “The Refugee,” and such is the force of Melville’s conception of the protagonist as refugee that the publisher who purchased the plates of the novel from Putnam’s retitled the novel (without Melville’s permission) *The Refugee*. Given Melville’s interest in race, it should be noted that the term “refugee” was often deployed by fugitives from slavery who came to think of themselves as domestic refugees, and that this was particularly true after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. William Wells Brown, in the autobiographical preface to *Clotel* (1853), remarks on how he had “heard so much about Canada, where a number of his acquaintances had found a refuge and a home.” In 1856, the white abolitionist Benjamin Drew published *The Refugee, or The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* so that readers might “hear from the refugees themselves, their own opinions of their condition and their wants.” As Drew remarks on Black Canadians of the time, a “large majority of the adult colored people are refugees from the South.” William and Ellen Craft wrote the following at the end of their *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860): “May God ever smile upon England and upon England’s good, much-beloved, and deservedly-honoured Queen, for the generous protection that is given to unfortunate refugees of every rank, and of every colour and clime.” As critics have pointed out, Melville in *Israel Potter* picks up on antislavery and refugee rhetoric by describing the patriot-hero as a kind of fugitive from slavery.³⁰

As we have seen, *Redburn* itself works with some of the tropes and language of abolitionist writing. Much is at stake in this complex political novel. And yet the novel concludes somewhat anticlimactically with Redburn returning to his family in New York, still uncertain about what to do with his life. This is a bildungsroman in search of its telos. Redburn reveals that he will later go on a whaling voyage, during which time he will learn that Harry Bolton had died on another whaler. Prior to this forward-looking reminiscence, he describes the eerie moment after the *Highlander* arrives in New York harbor. The ship’s officers had held off on decontamination while the Irish were in the hold, but now the captain orders the Irish themselves to undertake this work in order to avoid being quarantined. Here again, we see how the emigrant is linked to disease. Redburn describes the scene: “The emigrants . . .

muster their forces, and give the steerage a final, thorough cleaning with sand and water . . . The place was then fumigated, and dried with pans of coals from the galley; so that by evening, no stranger would have imagined, from her appearance, that the Highlander had made otherwise than a tidy and prosperous voyage" (299). The old saying "out of sight, out of mind" seems relevant here; and though the narrator has much to contribute about the need for emigration reform, the final pages of the novel refocus our attention on the younger Redburn, who is still trying to find his vocation. The tension between the narrator's personal story and the larger story of the nation remains an informing tension of the novel. What *Redburn* fails to explore is what happens to the Irish after arriving in New York City. One of the large ironies of American cultural history is that many of the Irish emigrants, who had been linked to African Americans in the white racist popular imagination, came to adopt the anti-Black racist practices of labor groups and the Democratic Party in order to secure their place in what the historian Noel Ignatiev calls "the White Republic."³¹ According to Ignatiev, that is how the Irish managed to become white Americans.

In the relatively neglected *Redburn*, Melville helps us to see the racial and nationalist practices of his and our own world with greater clarity. Melville may not be our contemporary (he was not writing about Trump or a Mexican border wall), but such is the persistence of the issues that Melville explored in a wide range of his writings that his works remain in dialogue with US culture in all kinds of ways.³² In my reading of Irish emigration in *Redburn* in particular, I have been focusing on the figure of the refugee in the imagination of the white social reformer. I don't see Melville as transcending some of the limits of his historical moment. His narrator, after all, displays a petty racism toward the African Americans, Jews, and Irish of the novel, and a sense of cultural superiority is inevitably built into the narrator's philanthropic perspective. All this said, there is something visionary and prescient about the novel's treatment of race, emigration, and nation, interrelated topics that Melville would continue to take up in his later fiction. But for its trenchant study of the limits and even brutality of the white nation, *Redburn* is the Melville novel we should be reading right now.

Notes

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1. Herman Melville to Lemuel Shaw, October 6, 1849, Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1993), 138, 139 (emphases original).

2. For instance, the United Nations during its 1951 Refugee Convention for the first time legally defined refugees as people facing threats to their life and freedom from their home nations. The convention established the principle, signed by 145 nations, that such people would not be returned to the countries where they faced such threats.

3. Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), qt. 292; Mae M. Ngai, "Immigration and Ethnic History," *American History Now*, ed. Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 359. On the cruel colonialist politics of the Irish famine, see Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 114–19. Nail writes, "While the Irish starved, three thousand tons of Indian corn remained in [English] government warehouses," with the concern being that giving the corn to the Irish would crash the British economy (118). Nail also supplies chilling demographic information: "The Irish Famine was perhaps one of the largest, per capita, demographic catastrophes of the modern period. Between the years of 1846 and 1848, Ireland lost 2.5 million of its population of 9 million—half due to emigration and half from famine-related deaths" (117). See also Oliver MacDonagh, "Irish Emigration to the United States of America and the British Colonies during the Famine," in *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History*, ed. R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams (New York: New York University Press, 1957), 317–88; and Patrick Fitzgerald and Brian Lambkin, *Migration in Irish History, 1607–2007* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 163–76.

4. Giorgio Agamben, "We Refugees," *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literature* 49, no. 2 (1995): 117. See also Viet Thanh Nguyen, introduction to *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, ed. Nguyen (New York: Abrams Press, 2018), 11–22; and Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees" (1943), in Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 264–74. For a useful collection on the literary implications of migrancy and statelessness for Anglo-American writers of Melville's time and before, see *Migration and Modernities: The State of Being Stateless, 1750–1850*, ed. JoEllen DeLucia and Juliet Shields (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

5. On Melville's prescience about national and cultural matters, see Robert S. Levine, "Melville and Americanness: A Problem," *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 16, no. 3 (2014): 5–20.

6. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, ed. Dennis D. Moore (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 31.

7. Crèvecoeur, *Letters*, 29, 47; for the statistics about which emigrants will succeed in America, see 44. For more on the Enlightenment notion of "transformable race," see Katy L. Chiles's excellent discussion of Crèvecoeur in *Transformable Race: Surprising Metamorphoses in the Literature of Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 111–21.

8. See Carrie Hyde, *Civic Longing: The Speculative Origins of U.S. Citizenship* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); and Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018). My quotations from the 1790 naturalization act come from Hyde, *Civic Longing*, 28. As Chiles points out, Crèvecoeur, with his commitment to Great Britain, had no real interest in the notion of US citizenship as we currently understand it; see *Transformable Race*, 115.

9. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1988), 121; Melville, *Redburn: His First Voyage; Being the Sailor-boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son-of-a-Gentlemen, in the Merchant Service*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1969), 79.

10. Melville, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, ed. Robert S. Levine and Cindy Weinstein (New York: Norton, 2017), 81, 82.

11. See Robert S. Levine, "Pierre's Blackened Hand," *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 1, no. 1 (1999): 23–44.

12. On the complexities of race in *White-Jacket*, see Jeannine DeLombard, "White-Jacket: Telling Who Is—and Aint—a Slave," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 51–67.

13. Melville, *Redburn*, 36. All further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text.

14. On the autobiographical sources of the father-son relationship in *Redburn*, see Neal Tolchin, *Mourning, Gender, and Creativity in the Art of Herman Melville* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 85–105.

15. Though an anti-Black and anti-white racist, Jackson, ironically enough, is presented, in the stereotypical and racist terms of mid-nineteenth-century culture, as something like a Black person himself. *Redburn* describes him as “like a baboon” (60), and when inspecting the teeth of a fellow sailor, Jackson seems like Babo of Melville’s 1855 “Benito Cereno,” for *Redburn* sees Jackson resembling “a crazy barber, making signs to cut his [the sailor’s] throat” (60).

16. By contrast, Frederick Douglass writes in a column in the May 25, 1849, *North Star* that when he walked through New York City with two white women, white observers went into an angry panic, suffering from the “disease,” “never more malignant,” of “colorphobia.” “On Being Seen Walking with Two White Women,” in *The Narrative and Selected Writings*, ed. Michael Meyer (New York: Modern Library, 1984), 294.

17. Wyn Kelley, *Melville’s City: Literary and Urban Form in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 121.

18. Paul Giles, “‘Bewildering Intertanglement’: Melville’s Engagement with British Culture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 231. For incisive readings of Melville’s depiction of the Nelson statue, see Elisa Tamarkin, “The Ethics of Impertinence: Douglass and Melville on England,” in *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*, ed. Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 189–90; and Sterling Stuckey, *African Culture and Melville’s Art: The Creative Process in “Benito Cereno” and “Moby-Dick”* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 28–29, 37–38. For an iconoclastic reading of the statue as about “the threat of same-sex desire in the novel” (2), see David Greven, “American Shudders: Race, Representation, and Sodomy in *Redburn*,” *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 16, no. 2 (2014): 1–22. On slavery in *Redburn*, see Carolyn Karcher, *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville’s America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 28–39.

19. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 280, 291, 299.

20. On Anglo-American anti-Catholicism, see Susan M. Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

21. Thomas Carlyle, “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 40 (December 1849): 672; Ralph Waldo Emerson, *English Traits* (1857), in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 935, 794, 795; Robert Knox, *The Races of Men: A Fragment* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1850), 26, 250; and Theodore Parker, “The Present Aspect of Slavery in America, and the Immediate Duty of the North: A Speech Delivered in the Hall of the State House, before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Convention, on Friday, January 29, 1858,” in *The Collected Works of Theodore Parker*, ed. Frances Power Cobbe (London: Trübner, 1864), 6:294. Thomas F. Gossett writes that the thesis of Knox’s *The Races of Men* “is that the Saxon must win the inevitable war which impends against the Celt.” *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 95.

22. Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 52; Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 121; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), 133. As Roediger notes, “Some suggested that the Irish were part of a separate caste or a ‘dark’ race, possibly originally African” (133).

23. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 42–43. For a provocative reading of *Redburn* in relation to the expansionism of the time, see Christopher Hager, “Melville in the Customhouse Attic,” *American Literature* 82, no. 2 (2010): 305–25; and see also Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 70–73. For a standard study of connections between expansionism and race, see Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). On the young America movement, expansionism, and the coming-of-age plot in *Redburn*, see Sari Edelstein, “‘May I Never Be a Man’: Melville’s *Redburn* and the Failure to Come of Age in Young America,” *ESQ* 59, no. 4 (2013): 553–84.

24. See William H. Gilman, *Melville’s Early Life and Redburn* (New York: New York University Press, 1951), esp. 201–2. Shipping records, Gilman reports, show that there were thirty-two passengers in the steeage of the *St. Lawrence* on the return trip to New York City, none of whom died.

25. For an excellent account of these shipping practices, see Brendan P. O'Malley, "Lickspittles and Land Sharks: The Immigrant Exploitation Business in Antebellum New York," in *Capitalism by Gaslight: Illuminating the Economy of Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Brian P. Luskey and Wendy A. Woloson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 93–108. (My thanks to Richard Bell for calling this chapter to my attention.) Interestingly, it was the British more than the American reviewers who picked up on the reformist aims of the novel. See, for example, the reviews in the October 27, 1849, London *Spectator* and the October 29, 1846, London *Morning Post*, repr. in *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 258, 260. The reviewer in the London *Spectator*, for instance, writes, "The evils resulting from the indifferent regulations of emigration-ships, and the practical disregard at sea of such regulations as exist, are exhibited in a scarcity among the poor emigrants, the effect of a slow passage, and in a fever produced by the scantiness and quality of the diet" (258).

26. Nail, *Figure of the Migrant*, 119.

27. O'Malley, "Lickspittles and Land Sharks," 96. See also Kelley, *Melville's City*, 133. For a discussion of what he terms Redburn's occasional "obnoxious and naïve nationalist rhetoric" (7), see Christian Reed, "The Bachelor and the Orphan," *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 17, no. 1 (2015): esp. 6–12.

28. Fionnghuala Sweeney, "Common Ground: Positioning Ireland within Studies of Slavery, Anti-Slavery, and Empire," *Slavery & Abolition* 37, no. 3 (2016): 506.

29. Agamben, "We Refugees," 117.

30. William Wells Brown, *Clotel, or The President's Daughter*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2011), 59; Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: or The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada, Related by Themselves* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1856), vi, 95; William and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (London: William Tweedie, 1860), 94. On Israel Potter as a patriot-hero who is also a kind of fugitive from slavery, see, for example, Anne Baker, "What to Israel Potter Is the Fourth of July? Melville, Douglass, and the Agency of Words," *Leviathan* 10, no. 2 (2008): 9–22.

In 1866, the Philadelphia publisher T. B. Peterson & Brothers brought out a novel by Melville called *The Refugee*, and the firm's publication lists suggest they kept it in print until at least 1876. In a letter of April 7, 1888, to a British admirer named Charles James Billson, Melville disavowed a book of that title, referring to "a book of mine—'Israel Potter' which was republished by a Philadelphia house some time ago under the unwarrantably altered title of 'The Refugee'" (*Correspondence*, 512; for details about Melville, Peterson & Brothers, and *Israel Potter*, I am indebted to Horth's notes in *Correspondence*, 511–12, 538). I don't want to weigh in on the morality of Peterson & Brothers' publication practices, beyond noting that unauthorized reprints were common before an international copyright agreement later in the century. And this reprint wasn't entirely unauthorized, as Peterson & Brothers had purchased the plates of the novel from Putnam's in 1855. The point that I want to make is that the Peterson & Brothers' retitling of the novel was actually an astute act of literary interpretation and criticism, calling attention to the status of Israel Potter as a refugee at a time when the concept was given enhanced importance in response to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. On Israel Potter as refugee, see also Rodrigo Lazo, "Israel Potter Deported," *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* (forthcoming).

31. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 148.

32. To take just one instance Melville's continuing presence in US culture, the Occupy Wall Street movement adopted Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) as its sacred text, sponsoring group readings and including Bartleby's enigmatic "I would prefer not to" on many of its posters. For an illuminating discussion of this appropriation, see Russ Castronovo, "Occupy Bartleby," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 2, no. 2 (2014): 253–72.