

Billy Budd: Chubby Mature Gay Seeks Handsome Black Sailor

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I was reading the recent posts in a category of Craigslist queer personal ads called “Miscellaneous Romances.” In this section Craigslist organizes ads that are most likely to offer something out of one’s own ordinary experience or obedient to one’s specific sexual preferences. Sometimes these advertise a search for, or a desire to be sought after because of, one’s sexualized racial or physical attributes. Sometimes they describe a desired affect, appearance, or consensual power relationship. On this occasion, I was hoping these ads could display evidence to me and my friend Esme that there were female-identified people who actually preferred hooking up with men like me or lesbians like her.

In many ways we were both confident people, but in these particular bodies, in this particular place, we shared recurring uncertainty about our sexual legibility to the kinds of people we found attractive. We are both your average transsexuals who became friends working in the stables at an equestrian stud ranch that employed an assortment of queers on the outskirts of a small Northeastern fishing town. We were an unlikely population in New England. Esme referred to our apartment above a local chowder house as a coastal island—an island of giant Latina women and tiny white men. That day, cruising the queer personal ads, we came across this one:

“Billy Budd: chubby mature gay seeks handsome black sailor.”

A screenshot of a Craigslist personal ad. The text is in a bold, black, sans-serif font on a light background. The ad title is "re: billy budd: chubby mature gay seeks handsome black sailor - 50 (bay area)".

Craigslist personal ad, 2006

Although it didn't deliver what we were looking for, I kept a copy of the posting for several years. I was curious about the reference to the opening passage of *Billy Budd*, a novella left incomplete by Herman Melville upon his death in 1891, and now a staple of American curricula from middle school to college. I had read *Billy Budd* once and remained haunted by its awkward visualizations of racial, gender, and sexual categories—allusions to the 19th-century development of American social typology. Melville's narrative seemed to linger too long and too often on the visual forms of idealized male function and deviancy alike, which I read as suppressed transracial and homosexual desire.

The iconicity of handsome sailors in soft cotton uniforms was a recognizable theme of gay masculinity in the ad we read on the internet. At the same time, the recurrence of the eroticized specter of American racialization from Melville's story caught my attention. The Craigslist ad used a language of racial types to tell us what, if not who, we would see in person if we showed up for that hookup. It captured and repeated the general component of my current investigation: the eroticized order of race in the United States. More specifically, my project interrogates the practice of centralizing unnamed, but visibly coded, whiteness that circulates in the homosexual text of the personal ad, in *Billy Budd*, and in its queer reiterations in mass media.

The ideas in this essay began in an Introduction to Western Philosophy course, where I began noticing that the opening pages of the novel exemplified the terms by which whiteness as social currency has been pictured as a physiological American norm. Neither the homosexual subtext nor the African sailor in the opening pages figured into the syllabus. Outside the foundation course in which I read the novel, *Billy Budd* had already become absorbed into parts of queer culture. What

persisted, however, were the vocal and textual absences of naming whiteness in queer discourses that were reconceptualizing gender and sexuality as unfixed objects of knowledge and social power. These discourses continued to theorize race as identity and both the intellectual property and the political responsibility of nonwhite people that are pictured in fiction, art, and sites of sexual exchange. The handsome black sailor of Melville's novel and the construction of race that invents and invests whiteness with capital remain outside of the historical activity by which queer masculinities and homosexuality are traced to *Billy Budd*.

The circulation of Billy Budd as racial trope from the original pages of the novel through contemporary queer writing, popular media, and current social networking displays the persistence of economic principles in queer sexual and gender variant identification. During this era, Melville's work narrativized a colonial shift in social classification that was met with ambivalence and produced complicated effects. In Europe and America, the 19th-century invention of sociology generated a dramatic epistemological shift. What was once considered deviant human behavior began to be grouped as deviant human types. For instance, people performing same-sex acts became known and classified as homosexuals, inverts, pedophiles, perverts, and masturbators. Simultaneously, racial categories were legally and scientifically produced and regulated according to visual and descriptive tools.¹ Deviancy, or even variance, was organized around pictures of normalcy. While its terms shift in intensities and style, an authentic American citizen was invented as an entity who was, by visual definition, white, male, and heterosexual.

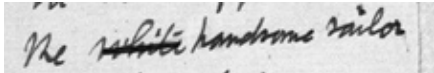
The writer of the personal ad recalls what many literary historians have ignored for most of the last century, namely the fleeting but significant presence of the African man in Melville's *Billy Budd*. In the Craigslist ad, the writer describes a handsome black sailor, specifically solicited for his handsomeness, his blackness, and his being or appearing to be a sailor. In the book, Melville introduces readers to the perfect chemistry of seafaring fitness, charismatic leadership, and compelling handsomeness through his recollection of an African sailor he had seen some years prior. For readers of Melville, this sailor epitomizes the ideal characteristics of the common but memorable crewman, a central figure aboard merchant and navy warships of Melville's Atlantic. The anonymous narrator recounts this particularly memorable sailor like so:

[The] signal object was the Handsome Sailor . . . with no perceptible trace of the vainglorious about him, rather with the off-hand unaffectedness of natural regality, he seemed to accept the spontaneous homage of his shipmates. . . . a common sailor, so intensely black that he must needs have been a native African.

. . . A symmetrical figure, much above the average in height . . .
 two ends of a gay silk handkerchief thrown loose about his neck
 danced upon the displayed ebony of his chest: in his ears were big
 hoops of gold, . . . a Scotch Highland bonnet with a tartan band set
 off his shapely head.²

After the opening pages, however, the “exemplary” sailor is not mentioned again. The plot develops on a ship that sails without him and his ideal qualities reappear in the central character, the young, presumably white, Billy Budd. The writer of the personal ad clearly imagines himself as an older Budd, no longer the slender, 21-year-old, sexually unavailable seafarer but now a chubby, grown, mature, openly gay man soliciting sexual companionship. While the ad’s author writes the potential object of his affection a sort of love letter for his visible skin color, the writer’s own white skin is implied, and seems to go without saying. He repeats the practice of naming blackness and not naming, but assuming, whiteness.

In an archive of drafts and letters, the pages of the original *Billy Budd* manuscript show that Melville wrote and then crossed out the word “white” when he introduced Billy Budd as a handsome, exemplary sailor.³ How is the visuality of the novel shaped by applying two instead of three terms to describe Billy Budd, none of



Herman Melville, Page 5 from the *Billy Budd* manuscript, 1888
 Houghton Library, Harvard University

which are neutral? “Handsome Sailor.” “Handsome White Sailor.” The question brings to mind the differential force of absence and words, which locate and advance the sexual and social mobility of some white queer bodies. Both the Craigslist ad and the book

manuscript depend on the visual program by which race privileges and then writes “whiteness” out of the language of classification; as if by being unnamed, whiteness is an unmarked quality of generic, nonracial manliness. White racial visibility posing as a nonracial norm⁴ reserves a place at the table of national culture for some sexual- and gender-variant people that resemble or vaguely gesture toward the model characteristics of the handsome sailor, Billy Budd. The self-conscious adjustment of Melville’s manuscript and the rhetoric of cruising as Billy Budd point to what the theorist Kalpana Seshadri Crooks describes as the “capacity of visibility to secure much deeper investments in identity . . . and the racial categorization of human beings.”⁵

If Melville clearly intended to abandon the black character, to watch him walk down the docks and out of the picture, and most literary historians fail to mention him in their analyses of the book, how did he become such an icon of queer desire, one that can be clearly recognized through a personal ad on Craigslist? When

he is not removed altogether from critical readings of *Billy Budd*, the African sailor is described as a pure embodiment of African, masculine particularity.

While African American Studies scholars have consistently included these passages in their engagement with *Billy Budd*, most representations of the novel since its publication in 1924—most notably Benjamin Britten's 1951 all-male operatic production—consistently avoid the African sailor but do reproduce the book's inexplicit homosexual narrative. Commentators, film adaptations, and queer literary analyses report on and fetishize the main object of desire in the novel: the white sailor, Budd.

Although embedded homosexual meanings have been contested or ignored by many experts in what I have come to call the Melville Industry, a few such experts, such as the literary critic James Creech, have argued that “only willful denial can purge Melville's novels of the yearning gazes and subtle glancings of homoerotic sexuality.”⁶ In queer cultural studies, the handsome white sailor has long been canonized as an emblem of model American gay manhood. *Billy Budd* in opera, film, and mass media has become performative shorthand for all-male utopic spaces. The critic E. L. Grant Watson was the first to associate the novel with suppressed homosexual longing; other literary critics such as Leslie Feidler and Michel Sarotte have subsequently made more contemporary and pointed arguments about how gay *Billy Budd* is.

While nonwhite people and non-Western spaces in canonical American fiction often problematically connote the building momentum of untamed desires, central white characters often represent the forces of order and social organization. Although many homosexual and racial characterizations are consistent in readings of *Billy Budd* and Melville's work in general, not all queer visual tropes are male, masculine, or sailors, and not all sailors and seafarers in queer culture are Billy Budd. While his physical style has changed since the 19th century, the resilience of the handsome sailor as an icon of desire and fraternity repeatedly invokes the history and stakes of white racial identity, even as identification with manhood and heteronormativity are rigorously interrogated.

Among his canonical functions in comparative literature, the handsome sailor motif gave queers and mainstream culture an image to mythologize and position within a margin of American aesthetic history and personhood. Melville's Budd materialized, embodied, and racialized a historical moment when queer experience could claim and enter American consciousness as a desirable member of national culture rather than an agent of perverse behavior. While the iterations of Budd as a queer icon in contemporary mass media appear to have no connection to race,⁷ this absent relationship opens discussion about the way we have sometimes



radically queered social traditions in the United States while naturalizing whiteness within otherwise transgressive gender and sexual movements.

To reconsider modern sexual definition in *Billy Budd*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick chose to reflect on the fictions of the same historical period in which the “modern homosexual identity and a modern problematic of sexual orientation could be said to date.” With the publishing of *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Gender Trouble* in 1990, Sedgwick and Judith Butler, respectively, produced two foundational texts in the logics of queer theory and the inauguration of “queer” as a term of belonging. The civil rights framework of Sedgwick’s queer theory has come to mean, if not to guarantee, that hetero/homosexual categorization cannot be treated as a done deal, a biologically determined and socially fixed assignment.⁸ While Sedgwick acknowledged her indebtedness to civil rights theory and black feminist thought, her anti-homophobic methodology was performed outside of racial formations presumably because she believed the effects of homophobia were not parallel to racisms, and the literary analysis centered on white male characters, bodies, and people. One by-product however, is that Sedgwick seems to write as if men, lovers, and sailors who can be counted as white do not do so because of racial formations; it’s as if the classification of white is anywhere but central to the logic of race.

I have some concerns about an analysis of nonnormative gender and sexualities using racial analogies without at least a cursory test of the critical apparatus on a racial analysis of her sexualized subjects. The time has come to revise queer textual analyses of *Billy Budd*.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick describes the beginning of all novels as sites that establish “a chain of perceptual angles.”⁹ The opening scenes of any fiction write an “inexplicit compact by which readers voluntarily accept the organizing eye of the narrator and plunge into identification with categories ascribed to them.”¹⁰ In other words, readers were giving it up to the visuality of fiction long before they ever escaped through cinema, television, or the web. At these sites, readers are “invented as subjects in relation to the world of the novel.”¹¹ The charge underlying Sedgwick’s reading of *Billy Budd* in *Epistemology of the Closet* is that “fundamental social formations are at the center of every form of literature.”¹²

In her analysis of *Billy Budd*, Sedgwick invokes the opening passages, inaccurately applying the description of the black sailor to describe the character Billy Budd. Her essay describes Budd using Melville’s elaboration of the African sailor’s qualities: “Aldabaran among the lesser lights of his constellation” and “a superb figure, tossed up as by the horns of Taurus against the thunderous sky.”¹³ In the process of describing Billy Budd as a model or prototype, Sedgwick conflates one character in the story with another. In doing this, she glosses over the switch in focus

from one sailor to another. Sedgwick positions Budd as the character who is cast “in the generic role of the ‘Handsome Sailor’”¹⁴ and bypasses the brief appearance of the handsome African sailor.

For Sedgwick’s project, these qualities are the sensual material that naturally entice and threaten Billy’s life and tie him to the perverse desire of the closeted, innate homosexual depicted in the novel. Therefore, Budd is not so much privileged by being cast in the generic role of the “Handsome Sailor” as alienated from his own personhood and dehumanized by such “ocular consumability.” If being the cynosure is so dangerous, we might think it’s a relief that the African seafarer is left out of Sedgwick’s discussion, out of the analysis. However, his displacement in Sedgwick’s text resembles his short-lived appearance and evacuation from the beginning of Melville’s *Billy Budd*. What if this removal is as much a queer iconic gesture as Billy Budd seems like a queer iconic figure? The movement of the African sailor in the space of the novel, and the conflation of Billy Budd with his characteristics, lead me to ask how homoerotic iterations of *Billy Budd* perform the investments of both the novel and queer cultural identity in national logics of race.

Sedgwick’s reading also omits discussion of the importance of Billy’s whiteness to his consumability. Instead she offers a theorization on the centrality of the generalized homosexual male classification in the late 19th century. It is my contention that one cannot talk about the history of sexual classification in the United States without talking about racial power dynamics and the history of sociological classification. In her later reflections, Sedgwick wrote:

*Our need to be exemplary bodies sprang from the histories of radical denial of exemplary function to black gay bodies at the intersection of two kinds of community that seem so often to carve each other out of perceptual existence: a tacitly racist white gay community for whom a black queer body, however eroticized, might stand as a representation of blackness but could never seem to embody queerness itself.*¹⁵

The visual reiterations of Melville’s *Billy Budd* in contemporary media reflect the way we sexualize our submission to American citizenship and racial practices that naturalize whiteness. Often this occurs within supposedly radical sexual and gender-based movements: feminist, dominant queer, and white transgender subcultures. Cataloguing the proliferation of images that reference this text, several films can be linked to Billy Budd as raw material. In the next section, I will look at the films *Beau Travail* (1999) directed by Claire Denis and *Maggots and Men* (2009) directed by Cary Cronenwett. Referencing *Billy Budd*, both films open up discussion about how race as a system of classification shapes queer sexual styles and how we want to be desired.

Beau Travail and the Craigslist personal ad could be seen as two kinds of contemporary sequels to Melville's 19th-century novel that demythologize homosexuality. The author of the personal ad writes about homosexuality according to race-based desire for a "handsome black sailor," but reifies the practice of inferring a normative whiteness through its rhetorical absence in his description of himself: as a Billy Budd type that is chubby, mature, and gay. Denis, on the other hand, using the homosexual narrative invoked from *Billy Budd*, critiques politicized identities and practices such as homosexuality that, once demythologized, have ceased to be politically critical and active.

The translator and film scholar Justin Vicari invokes the common pitfalls of film sequels that shape their reputations as commercial "Leftovers, retreads, proofs of formula, and 'sure-thing' bankability, sequels throw nothing into question and, whatever improbable shapes they do take, are rarely new departures."¹⁶

If the personal ad was a sequel to *Billy Budd* and a very short video, the first scene would open with the veteran sailor's fair, muscular hands typing on a laptop keyboard. He writes his name, a colon, and a few words describing himself as a middle-aged, husky, and openly gay Caucasian man. He doesn't write "Caucasian" but viewers could make the connection. The computer screen would show that he was cruising Craigslist "Miscellaneous Romances" and writing his own ad. His voiceover would melancholically describe a missed encounter with the handsome black sailor that he describes in his ad, and which has motivated his sex life since he saw him . . . 150 years ago in Liverpool.

Beau Travail, as a work of "high art," seems peculiar and unlikely as a sequel. As a filmic critique of contemporary filmmaking and the cheapness of recurring "colonial fictions" masquerading as community, *Beau Travail* is either a brilliant use of "sequel" as a filmic paradigm, or the film is vague enough to be a palimpsest for all the right critical material I am looking for. The first thing depicted in *Beau Travail* is cinema and its techniques. In the opening scenes we see a long shot, a medium shot, another long shot, and a pan. An immobile military tank is the first body encountered. The soundtrack, taken from Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd*, is a heaving choir, and the first human population perceived. A group of French foreign legionnaires appear in the desert, standing, arms raised, eyes shut, unnaturally calm.

In an essay about colonial fictions and film, Vicari writes that *Beau Travail* critiques colonial myths of masculinity that have matured (like the personal ad author), have integrated politically radical aesthetics, and have outlived artistic and political practices that stagnate.¹⁷ While Denis's film is a reference to *Billy Budd* and its circulation of iconic types and colonial narratives, it performs the idea of the

film sequel as a critical gesture. Using the sequel conceptually, it castigates the tired reproducibility and persistence of white racial sovereignty and masculinity that eventually domesticated the politics of the French film avant garde.

"*Beau Travail* is a kind of sequel, nearly 40 years later, to Jean-Luc Godard's *Le petit soldat*," writes Vicari. "Denis borrows the hero of Godard's film, Bruno Forestier.

These two French films from

disparate decades enter into a conversation with each other through the common link of this recurring character, who is even played by the same actor, Michel Subor."¹⁸

Assembled into an adaptation of *Billy Budd*, *Beau Travail* presents a series of disjointed visual impressions that engage the themes of Melville's text that persist through France's occupation of North Africa: the absurdity of colonial social order. Melville's novel critiqued visually regulated social categorization. In the opening scenes of *Billy Budd*, Melville established a narrative pulling readers into one viewing position, and he hosted a form of cruising an African sailor. Denis also invites viewers into a sequence of scenes about watching but *Beau Travail* uses the idea of the sequel, *Billy Budd*, and Godard's film to watch political interactions among cinema, desire, and transcultural relationships.

In *Beau Travail*, Denis interrogates a fetishistic desire to watch race-based dominance and submission from a comfortable academic or artistic position. To do this she refuses narrative conventions of cause and effect, and her collaborator and cinematographer, Agnes Godard, avoids using macro lenses to guarantee distance. One doesn't get the distance for proper voyeurism or the narrative structures for proper epistemologies. All of these sites are easy to watch but frustrating to visually and erotically enter because they are actually not offering the tension or the money shot that voyeurism banks on.

Like Melville writing *Billy Budd* as a critique of burgeoning systems of visual classification, Denis establishes her social critique in techniques governed by the terms that she opposes. She offers spectacles and taboo icons of colonial mythologies and makes their movements banal and anticlimactic. There is no moral tragedy or heroism to queering the canon when the queerness attending *Billy Budd* has already become canonical.



Claire Denis, Still from *Beau Travail*, 1999

In *Billy Budd*, Melville's strategy was to expose and hasten to its inevitable ruin the Western narrative conventions of distance, disavowal, and naturalization that parallel the logic of white racial centrality and French avant garde cinema. Denis's critique is internal. It centers on vision, cinema, and voyeurism that authorize the language of racial formation, which have eroticized both narrative access and visual remove. Through the deadpan affect of the actors in this opening scene this character, Rahel, begins lip-synching the opening kiss of a nightclub song as she and the women around her begin to dance. Barely interested, they seem aware of being watched and look rather bored by it. As the viewer, I almost take this boredom personally.

Any homoerotic subjects, idealized figures, and utopic transcultural integrationism of the French foreign legion becomes banal, old hat, and habitual. In scene after scene, Denis makes the activity of the legion, ritual activity of colonial occupation, repression, envy, and homosexual desire ceremonial rather than personal. The dancing of the women of Djibouti is routinized without offering either intimacy or the best distance for watching. As if unimpressed with my insights into the problematic spectatorship of reading the opening pages of *Billy Budd* and the translations of the text to film, Denis shows everything worth staring at for its beauty or strangeness. She gives viewers everything that I complain about. Tonight, her movie says, what's so dangerous about looking?

Only one character in the film seems to struggle to find a way into what is forbidden him, and that is Galoup. He gives gifts to sleeping, disinterested Rahel, he competes for the affection of his superior, he loathes the man that he both desires and envies. Later, Galoup irrationally attempts to kill him by sending Sentain into the salt desert with a broken compass. In every way, Galoup's desire to be exemplary through isolation is the only drama.

In the end Galoup is kicked out of the legion, though the legion remains unchanged. In a strange and awkward dance Galoup harnesses the sliver of time left after the credits run to do some dance moves at a local club that show something energetic if not immanent. If not innate. This is memorable as itself and not *Billy Budd*. Here the film seems to be asking: What does it take to picture outside of this narrative recitation of mythologies like *Billy Budd*? The unending sequels to rehearsed mythologies that are like an old record skipping on a tired player. Maybe here, in this weird disco, the bodies and stories codified in visual iterations of Melville's novel get another break by dropping out of the revisionist impulse or the iconic lexicon. Maybe Beau Travail is annoying enough by its artistic affect to get art fags like us off of our big gay sectionals, where we bring kettle corn and tissues to watch politics for the pleasure of violence.

Review after review of *Beau Travail* describes the end as the instance where Galoup's heartbeat, captured in the pulsing vein of his arm, alludes to his impending, remorseful suicide. But while we are looking, we don't see him kill himself, we see the sequel to his capitulation to masculinist drama. We see him lay around in a new apartment with his old military pistol and then ironing his shirt. We don't actually see Sentain die in the salt desert. While we are looking, Sentain is rescued by some local people in a minivan: matter-of-factly collected from the ground, rehydrated, and transported. Living an uneventful civilian life, Galoup goes out dancing by himself. He is awkward, plus legible, plus overly energetic. Which equals: white butch queen, first time out. Maybe nothing happens. Maybe the usual.

Thoroughly investigating the visible but naturalized whiteness in French queer cinema does not mean that this will reveal a smarter overarching epistemology of sexuality bound to race. Nor am I promising a tactical means by which racist practice is undone by the radical new way that some queers will be coming out of the closet as white. Then why exhume *Billy Budd* from Sedgwick's queer analysis? Or what kind of political efficacy do I really think a visual analysis of white sailors in cotton uniforms will jumpstart? I'm just saying that sexuality, like Wayne Koestenbaum wrote in *The Queen's Throat*, "does not arrive only once."¹⁹



Cary Cronenwett, Stills from *Maggots and Men*, 2009

Maggots and Men both reifies and transforms the dialogic terms of Western queer masculinities, mobilizing an archive of historical and literary symbolism that has encoded men that look like Billy Budd into the queer visual trope. Five years in the making, *Maggots and Men* is the result of a Bay Area commitment to community and gender anarchy allegorized by the ideological struggles in Russian history between Communism and Bolshevik rule. The casting call below invigorated the film process itself and fostered collaboration and performative gender transgressions:

There is a strong emphasis on the filmmaking process to be a positive, affirming experience and an opportunity for people in the trans community to meet each other and work together. For the group scenes we will be recruiting large numbers of people, documenting as many trans folks on film as possible.



Cary Cronenwett, Still from *Maggots and Men*, 2009

Maggots and Men is set in the all-male environment of a Russian naval base then cast with actors from a range of masculine gender expressions, thus redefining male, challenging the binary gender construct, and intentionally creating confusion. This film comes out of an ongoing dialogue surrounding the hierarchy of “maleness” that exists and the longing for our genders to be inconsequential to our acceptance. We will bring these dialogues into the filmmaking process and together produce a film that makes a strong anti-war

statement with the actors representing themselves as sexy, politicized, and beautiful heroes defending themselves against a corrupt government.

GET INVOLVED

CASTING CALL: We are looking for all FTM and gender queer actors we can find (and a few bio boys) to play sailors. We are also looking for actors of all genders to play civilians / striking factory workers. All races, all ages, all sizes, guys over thirty a plus.²⁰

With a transmale and gender queer cast the film is linked to a tradition of cinema that frames maritime life as a homosocial space, but undermines cinematic and social conventions that seek to connect the Russian nationalist body to visibly coded and biologically fixed genders.

Exquisitely crafted, the story is set during the 1921 revolt of Russian sailors stationed on the island of Kronstadt, in support of a labor uprising. It is primarily a reenactment of Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 silent film *Battleship Potemkin*. *Maggots and Men*, however, also references European and American films and texts that make homosexuality explicit in their adaptations of Billy Budd, such as Jean Genet's 1947 novel *Querelle de Brest* and Rainer Fassbinder's 1982 film *Querelle*.



Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Still from *Querelle*, 1982

Attentive to the formality of historical references, *Maggots and Men* is shot in black and white in 16-millimeter and Super-8. The drama emphasizes the pleasure of looking at the handsome sailors in an all-male naval environment. But *Maggots and Men* also depicts ambivalent and contesting styles of European manhood, and dramatizes in propaganda film-fashion the sailors' growing and profound doubt about the promise of the Russian Revolution and the disloyalty of national systems of power to both politics and romance. Many scenes feature handsome sailors in an all-male naval environment, but I am focusing on a subtext in the film that portrays the production and regulation of male youth.

This sequence is interlaced throughout the primary plot and develops its own climax. In the first segment, “Lenin” inspects an assembly of “young pioneers.” When his assistant presents the youths to him “Lenin” distinguishes a boyish, soft-kneed prodigy from the lineup of young scouts. Later, “Lenin” replaces his assistant with the new prodigy, who is blonder, paler, and more gender-ambiguous. This short subtext comes to a head when the discarded scout stands in the street outside the building before a solitary gun, holding a canning jar full of milk, his body clenched and seemingly fragile. From the edge of the screen, a disembodied hand aims the Russian pistol. Against the stone exterior wall, the boy is shot. The bullet penetrates the glass jar and the boy falls lifeless to the ground. Milk, rather than blood, spills and spreads across the cobblestones, the road, and the city sidewalk.

Rather than analyzing dynamics of power and subordination through scenes where racial difference is visible in the transgender cast, this scene from *Maggots and Men* depicts contesting styles of whiteness and masculinity. It emphasizes the ruling powers’ disloyalty to politics and romance. The film seems to ask: If affection from the state is so fragile, then what is the essence of the bond among men? How will these men ever know for sure that “we are all citizens” if they are asked to enlist in ways of belonging which will ultimately betray them? My question is: How does *Maggots and Men* propose a radical disruption of an entrenched hierarchy of gender while the masculinities performed in it are predominantly white?

At first viewing, the erotic terms of the all-male narrative in *Maggots and Men* seems largely dependent on white racial visibility. While the transgendered actors of color appear in central positions of importance to the textual narrative, I noticed that none of these actors have “lines” in this subtitled, silent film. The mission of the film process was to disrupt hierarchies of masculinity. To some extent, however, it relies on a few transmen of color in the cast to represent gender variance as the political alliance that has the potential to transcend race.

The structure of these scenes compromises the film’s critique of masculinities produced or regulated by white racial sovereignty by visually placing transgender actors of color in labor scenes but failing to cast them in erotic lead roles. While the film heavily relies on and promises the hot gay maleness of gender variance, transgender sailors of color are decentralized, desexualized, and it kind of slides right in there, seemingly natural. *Maggots and Men* “critiques the utopian underpinnings of privileged same-sex space” while actively exploring the fulfillment of its erotic terms that I argue are dependent on white visibility.²¹ I read *Maggots and Men* in the service of a critique of masculine gender appearance that makes white masculinity seem compulsory in many homoerotic and transmale narratives.

What persists when 19th-century literary narratives repeat in contemporary queer visual culture? More specifically, what are the perceptions of national belonging that codify whiteness as the signature for queer publics that can be characterized as All-American?

Taking a cue from Robyn Weigman, this project is “less a recovery of 19th-century social formations in literature than an excavation of the historical present, of our own (queer) *mise-en-scène*.”²² Both the Craigslist ad and the original manuscript for *Billy Budd* make visible the racializing principle in queer subcultures that whiteness is a nonracial norm that makes us absolutely human.

Esme and I were hoping we were absolutely human—just as likely to be desired along with, rather than desired only for or in spite of, our respectively racial, gendered, and sexual particularities. What if I'm the man who shows up for this hookup after passing on the internet as the handsome African sailor or Billy Budd: implicitly white, openly gay, grown into maturity, and chubby? If I was the writer of the personal ad, who would I need to be in order to be authentic and desired in close contact? And who would I be writing to if I used “Billy Budd: chubby, mature, gay” as a euphemism for my appearance, code for my sexual style, gender, genealogy, skin color, or fantasy cyber-identity?

The promiscuity of images in art, advertisements, and film that are linked to tropes operating in *Billy Budd* exhibit the traces of vested but unnamed whiteness that infuse queer erotics and visibility. I'm not interested here in vilifying the visibility of white queers and transpeople, or denying my position. Like the aforementioned literary theorist Kalpana Seshadri Crooks, I'm throwing whiteness into relief to consider its suppression in dominant queer studies and confront its relationship to visual power and our obedience to those conditions.

Notes

1. See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
2. Herman Melville, *Billy Budd: Foretopman*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962): 1043.
3. Susan Misruchi, *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998): 384.
4. Martin Berger, *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2005): 7.
5. Kalpana Seshadri Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (London: Routledge, 2000): 2.
6. James Creech, as quoted in David Greven, "Flesh in the Word: Billy Budd, Sailor, Compulsory Homosexuality, and the Uses of Queer Desire," *Genders Journal*, <http://www.genders.org/g37/g37greven.html>.
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