“Shifting Boundaries and Unfixing Fixities”: Boundary Crossing in Pauline Melville’s *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*

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**Abstract**

A central theme in Pauline Melville’s novel, *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, is the question of endogamy and exogamy, with the opposing alternatives embodied in Melville’s characters. This theme has received much attention in the critical commentaries generated by the novel, with a prevailing number of critics claiming that Melville proposes endogamy as the only option for indigenous communities to remain intact. However, such an argument overlooks the significant fact that Melville’s characters are always already the offspring of exogamous encounters, through which a multiplicity of boundaries have been permeated. Furthermore, the spatial motifs developed in the novel can be seen to undermine commonly accepted delimitations of supposedly homogenous groups, the nation-state constituting the prime example, and this in turn profoundly alters the notion of mixing. Consequently, contending that Melville even enters a debate on endogamy and exogamy stems from a predisposition to see the world in other terms than those Melville sets out in her novel. The nature of boundaries and borders in Melville’s fictitious world are therefore explored using Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* as a framework. This examination shows that the novel undermines the notion of the nation-state as a homogenous entity and reveals a global structure that dictates and drives interaction on a global scale. Consequently, instead of a debate on exogamy, we see in the novel an exploration and dismantling of notions of borders, boundaries and barriers between individuals and groups of people.

**Key words**

Nationalism, globalization, boundaries, borders
Displaced from her native savannahs of the Rupununi, Beatrice McKinnon, a central character in Pauline Melville’s *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, reflects over the polemic “if it was better for her own people to preserve themselves within their own traditions or to allow change” (Melville 281). This question points to one of the central themes of the novel, and different standpoints on the issue are embodied in a number of juxtaposed characters. For example, Beatrice’s nephews Tenga and Chofy argue the point, Tenga despondently observing: “We’re destroyed if we mix. And we’re destroyed if we don’t” (54), while Chofy argues, “I think we have to mix. Otherwise we have no future” (54).

Similarly, the intrusive anthropologist Michael Wormoal’s belief in the “purity of the nation” (79) is countered by literary academic Rosa Mendelson who considers herself an “internationalist” with a belief “in a mixture of the races” (78). However, as the daughter of a Scotsman and an Amerindian woman with both Wapisiana and Macusi roots, Beatrice may seem an unlikely figure to pose the question: it would appear that mixing is not so much an issue to debate, as an inevitable state of affairs. Nevertheless, throughout the novel the issue of crossing boundaries is repeatedly addressed in an almost obtrusive manner. An exploration of boundaries, borders and crossroads is therefore in order to reveal the theme’s possible motivation.

The question of endogamy or exogamy has extended and escalated in the critical commentaries generated by the novel. It appears to preoccupy and perturb a number of critics who have explored Melville’s text, not so much as a concern for the issue per se, but as a kind of territorial instinct focused on what they understand Melville’s position to be on the matter. A prevailing number appear surprised and even dismayed by their conclusions that Melville proposes endogamy, at the same time as they sense a number of markers that tell them to expect her to advocate the opposite. My contention is, however, that such suppositions are somehow missing the point, and that clarity may be found in examining and exploring the sense of place, space and displacement in the novel with a view to revealing how or even whether different groups are in fact separated.

A useful springboard to initiate the exploration of boundaries and boundary crossings in the novel is to recapitulate the positions taken by Melville’s critics. Such a review reveals the way in which preconceptions of homogenous groups and definable boundaries are unquestionably accepted and perpetuated in textual form. Accordingly, critics have approached *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* by exploring primarily representations and issues pertaining to the “indigenous” or “Amerindian” culture. What many seem to overlook, however, is the significant point that Melville has centred her novel around characters that do not exactly match the title “indigenous” or even “Amerindian” and in fact, she may be seen instead to be set on undermining precisely such categorizations.

Sarah Lawson Welsh, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Lee M Jenkins investigate the manner in which the cultural core imposes its creeds on what they term the “indigenous” or “Amerindian peoples.” All three critics are thus concerned with the separation between different cultures, but at no point do they acknowledge the fact that the boundaries for these homogenous groups are already permeated in the novel. Other critics address the issue of exogamy more directly. April Shemak places the focus of the novel on representations of the Amerindians, and she sees in the many manifestations of the indigenous creation myths different embodiments of the narrator, Macunaíma, thereby enabling the “destabilization of the notion of a fixed indigeneity” (354). Shemak relates the ambiguous identity of

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I shall take as my tutelary spirits Legba, Exu and Hermes, the gods of boundaries, borders and crossroads.

– Pauline Melville
Macunaima and his role as an informant to the discussion of the possibility or impossibility of cross-cultural contact: “At times, the incarnation of Macunaima seems to reflect endogamy, withdrawal inside a culture’s borders, while at other points in the novel Macunaima is incarnated as a proponent of exogamy,” (355), but one who finds it impossible “to reconcile the question of tribalism versus cosmopolitanism” (368). Shemak observes that Danny and Beatrice’s incestuous relationship may be seen as a representation of endogamy, although ironically it is this example of endogamy that results in Danny and Beatrice being compelled to leave their community (361) and that the fact that “Bla-Bla is injured in the interior but dies in the exterior suggests that exogamy will result in the eclipsing of an indigenous future” (367). Shemak argues that “as if in response to the danger posed to the indigenous by exogamy, the realist narrative ends with a return to the tribe, withdrawal from the nation, and from internationalism” (367). In short, Shemak finds Melville advocating a separation of cultures as the only means of preserving the indigenous culture she has so effectively captured in her novel.

The discussion of whether indigenous cultures should or should not mix, and moreover, whether or not Melville advocates cross-cultural mixing becomes a recurrent issue in other articles on the novel. Like Welsh, Pierre François recognizes how the novel dramatizes the imposition of both scientific and literary “western discourses” on the periphery. Francois also finds an underlying tension in the issue of cultural mixing:

Paradoxically in a paean to cultural polyphony, there is, however, a bewildered, anguished ring in the ventriloquist’s peals of laughter. Wapisiana wisdom is indeed threatened by the worldwide spread of star-spangled vacuity and by the late-positivist reduction of myths to algebraic formulas. (37)

While Francois, like Shemak, infers from the death of Bla Bla and what he perceives to be the central motif of the book, incest, “a metaphor for ethnic self-containment” (47), that Melville appears to advocate endogamy, he nevertheless argues that “The Ventriloquist’s Tale strikes a balanced line on the relations between traditional cultures and the modern world” (47) since we are clearly not intended to share Wormoal’s beliefs: “Melville’s obvious distaste for Wormoalian fascism and her contrapuntal appreciation of Rosa Mendelson’s passionate endorsement of multiculturalism indicate a degree of authorial indeterminacy” (47). Francois contends that Melville gives “the impression of refusing to commit herself to either ‘roots’ or ‘mixing’” (47) finding further evidence for this in the narrator’s flight to the stars, as the narrator realizes he is unable to resolve the problem on earth.

Albert Braz also finds in The Ventriloquist’s Tale an affirmation that in order to survive, ethnic groups need to remain isolated. Braz argues that Melville “does not seem to believe in the cultural and racial multiplicity embodied by her trickster” (1) and concludes that “the only course of action open to the people of the savannah appears to be stasis and isolation” (8). However, he finds this conclusion in some ways incongruous. Like Francois, Braz supposes that in locating the belief in “the purity of races and cultures” in the arrogant character of Wormoal, Melville quite obviously aims to distance herself from this way of thinking (2). He further points out that Melville, in her article “Beyond the Pale,” claims to be “a champion of mixtures and hybrids” (742). These reservations notwithstanding, Braz remains unconvinced that Melville is really advocating cross-cultural contact:

Throughout her novel, Melville distances herself from one of her characters, a European anthropologist who believes in the purity of races and cultures. Yet, by the end, she creates the ineluctable impression that cultural and biological mingling poses a major danger to the people of the savannah. (2)
In conclusion, Braz argues that “the overriding impression one gets from *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* is that Amerindian cultures have a much better chance of succeeding if they do not interact with other cultures than if they do” and cites the death of Bla Bla as an example showing how interracial contact results in devastating consequences (9). Consequently, Braz suggests that in spite of Melville’s own claims in “Beyond the Pale,” “it does not seem by accident that endogamy is favoured over exogamy in most of *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*” (9).

Finally, in spite of the fact that Tanya Liesel Shields’s chapter title, “At the edge of hope: Globalization and the Collapse of the Guyanese Nation-state in Pauline Melville’s *The Ventriloquist’s Tale,*” promises an exploration of the nation-state, Shields focuses instead to a large extent on the argument of whether different groups should mix or not: “The essence of survival for Melville is posed in the simple question of exogamy or endogamy—which?” (73). She also makes the claim that “the novel does not explicitly answer these questions and Melville confesses that she, too, is ambivalent about the possibilities” (87). It is possible, however, to argue that it is Melville who instead reveals the ambivalence and/or polarization of her critics on the issue.

To summarize the critical approaches, there exists a common concern about Melville’s standpoint on exogamy or endogamy. The obnoxious character Wormoal who represents endogamy is problematical for those who claim the novel proposes confining cultures strictly within their own borders. On the other hand, the case for exogamy is complicated and possibly undermined by what critics see as the devastating effects of cross-cultural contact, for example, the death of Bla Bla as a direct result of Chofy’s contact with Rosa. However, Melville’s heritage, as that of the characters in the novel, undermines the discussion from the start. As Shields observes: “Chofy and his family,” like Melville herself, “are products of mixing fostered by colonization and globalization. Retreat for them is, if nothing else, genetically impossible” (97).

There is reason to argue, however, that the theme of mixing serves quite a different purpose than merely stoking the debate. The theme’s anomalies in fact prompt the reader to negotiate the boundaries that emerge in the novel. For an argument for endogamy or exogamy to actually get underway, it would seem imperative to be able to define the borders and barriers that separate as well as determine and delimit different spaces where interaction across borders may be seen to occur. But the novel, it can be claimed, does not support a world picture in which the argument for or against endogamy is pertinent, where different groups are definable as hermetically separated and distinguishable as homogenous. Consequently, the argument the novel generates on endogamy or exogamy results from the reader’s preconceptions of borders, which are then superimposed on the fictitious world inhabited by Melville’s characters. The spatial motifs developed in the novel can be seen to undermine commonly accepted delimitations of supposedly homogenous groups, the nation-state constituting the prime example, and this, in turn, profoundly alters the notion of mixing. My contention is that the arguments on endogamy both within and without the novel are symptomatic of a world picture that sees the world neatly subdivided and classified, similarly to Wormoalian structuralism, and it is this world picture that is eclipsed by an exploration of the nature of boundaries in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale.*

A particularly suitable framework for the exploration of the concept of the border as well as the nation-state portrayed in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* is provided by Benedict Anderson’s argument in *Imagined Communities.* Here the nation is shown to be a construct resulting from global power struggles over the past few centuries and to a large extent facilitated by developments in print technology that allowed dissemination and consolidation of a particular world picture. Anderson’s observations on the role of the written word, the map and the census, for example, are all locatable in
Melville’s novel, making Anderson’s theories appropriate to an interpretation of Melville’s fictitious world. From this perspective, alternative boundaries emerge at the same time as conventional borders are permeated and the issue of mixing necessarily takes on quite a new meaning. Furthermore, having explored the boundaries that emerge in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* the contours of this world are given further substance when set against the observations of Aijaz Ahmad, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said.

An exploration of the fictitious world that evolves in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* suitably commences with the reflections of its narrator, who introduces and closes the tale. There are in fact a number of intriguing similarities between the prologue and epilogue of *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* and “Beyond the Pale,” an essay written by Melville after she was requested to contribute to an anthology of black women’s literature, *Daughters of Africa*. The essay is very much concerned with the issue of definitions and permeations of boundaries and therefore serves as a useful resource when analysing the spatial motifs in these sections of the novel. Some phrases are repeated word for word in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, both texts refer to Darwin, and the style and tone of the Ventriloquist’s preamble echoes familiarly when read against the background of Melville’s essay. As a result, it is easy to sense that there are notions shared between the two texts. For example, referring to heritage, Melville’s narrator in the Prologue to *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* recounts how “according to my grandmother, Charles Darwin without so much as a by-your-leave parked his behind on my ancestors and wrote the first line of *Origin of Species*, declaring that we were descended from monkeys” (3), while Melville amusingly quips in “Beyond the Pale”: “According to Darwin, I was a fish once” (742).

Both the narrator and the speaker in the essay introduce themselves with descriptions that reveal elusive elements in their identity: focusing on disparity between appearance and definition, Melville claims that while she may appear “white,” she may also be defined as “black” as a result of “overlapping definitions of race: race is what you look like; race is your genetic heritage, whatever you may look like, race is a cultural concept that might or might not coincide with what you look like” (“Beyond” 740). The ambivalence of identity appears to lie in the fact that we attempt to give definition to concepts that have no clear borders, as Melville’s genetic and cultural heritage clearly illustrate. As Melville observes in regard of her own identity: “White present, black past, a good position for breaking down preconceptions, stirring up doubt, rattling judgements, shifting boundaries and unfixing fixities. I am also well-placed to survey the ludicrous” (“Beyond” 740). Regarding family photographs she observes “a genetic bouquet of African, Amerindian and European features” (740).

The narrator of *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, introducing himself as “Rumbustious, irrepressible, adorable me” (1) is quick to point out the importance of dark glasses to his appearance, one may assume, for their connotations of disguise: “But dark glasses are appropriate. My name translated means ‘one who works in the dark’”, continuing with the comment: “Where I come from it’s not done to give your real name too easily” (1). A name can serve as a label, framing its owner in a specific identity; or it may be misinterpreted, with devastating consequences, as we see in the novel. The narrator’s subsequent commentary on his background appears bent on eluding precise definition: his claim that he is “descended from a group of stones in Ecuador” (2) is notably incompatible with conventional classification, and is further modified by the fact that his grandmother, while swearing “by the story of the stones in Ecuador…might say Mexico or Venezuela for variety’s sake – variety being so much more important than truth in her opinion” (3). Her comment: “Truth changes. Variety remains constant” (3), may be taken as a reflection on the impossibility of defining truths and classifying identities. Again, if it is really impossible to separate identities by definable borders, although as Melville points out “bureaucrats, civil-servants and form-fillers” attempt to do so, how then can we
even enter into the discussion as to whether borders can be crossed? (“Beyond” 741) Melville certainly seems quite content with her hybrid identity: “In my interior landscape, the South American jaguar and the English chaffinch live easily together” (“Beyond” 742).

Writing on the illusiveness of identity in “Beyond the Pale” Melville suggests: “Race, gender, class, species and divinity are all in the melting-pot, and I am a champion of mixtures and hybrids. Carnival plays with identity. It is a masquerade where disguise is the only truth” (742); this is echoed by the narrator in The Ventriloquist’s Tale: “Ah, secrecy, camouflage and treachery. What blessings to us all. Where I come from, disguise is the only truth and desire the only true measure of time” (7). Also commenting on the impossibility of defining identity, the ventriloquist narrator asks: “Do you think a man’s life is slung between two dates like a hammock? Slung in the middle of history with no visible means of support? It takes more than one life to make a person” (2). In other words, an identity is essentially indefinable; parameters that would make this possible do not exist. This notion is further repeated in our narrator’s apparent dislike for Charles Darwin who, he claims, attempted to classify everything, wandering “through the region with the slow-motion frenzy of a sloth, measuring and collecting” (3). The ventriloquist adds: “No one round here likes measurers, collectors or enumerators” (3). As will be discussed further on, a propensity to classify, in for example the form of the census, is, according to Anderson, symptomatic of the imperialist’s need to justify borders established during the power struggle over territories.

Comparing these passages there is a sense that it is the same voice giving its view on identity, and similarities may be perceived in the speaker’s viewpoint as expressed in “Beyond the Pale” and the themes of the novel, regardless of how invisible the narrator may claim to be: the appearance of the narrator in the prologue and epilogue serve to establish his position of authority in this respect. Greta Olson takes on the issue of a narrator’s reliability in her article “Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators,” in which she makes the concluding observation that it is through textual signs that the reader is able to “decide whether the narrator is fallible or untrustworthy” (105).

Our trust in the ventriloquist may to a certain extent remain ambivalent, since a number of his statements, such as his claim that he is “descended from a group of stones in Ecuador” (2), clearly challenge Western epistemology. However, the narrator simultaneously takes the reader into his confidence, generously exposing his viewpoints in such a way that the reader is inevitably enticed to share his standpoint and view the world from a new perspective. Since they come to blows over the issue, the ventriloquist does not appear to share his grandmother Koko’s belief that “we Indians should keep ourselves to ourselves, retreating from the modern world like the contracting stars” (Ventriloquist’s Tale 9). Instead we may see that the ventriloquist follows Melville’s line. Referring to the imposition of the police as they descend on the celebrants of the carnival in Liverpool Melville claims: “Death comes in the guise of uniformity, mono-cultural purity, the externals of the state as opposed to the riot of the imagination” (“Beyond” 743). Melville sees a world characterized by diversity, and advocates using the imagination to see across construed borders, since the imagination “is where boundaries are crossed and hybrids fertilized. This is where everything is possible as there is a shuttle service between the imagination and the real world, they influence each other, and this is where things can begin to change” (“Beyond” 743). And this is why Melville claims, “I shall take as my tutelary spirits Legba, Exu and Hermes, the gods of boundaries, borders and crossroads” (743). Inevitably then, the motif of mixing is recurrent throughout the novel, but this arises out of the continuous encounters of the characters with a myriad of different boundaries that interweave but also shape their lives and identities. As a result boundaries are more characterized by their permeability than by any property that would exclude one group or individual from another.
The depiction of space within the central sections of the novel expands our perception of boundaries. As the concept of the nation-state establishes borders between commonly recognised differentiated homogenous spaces, Melville’s treatment of the national space in the novel is of particular interest, especially when set within the framework of Anderson’s theories about the nation-state as outlined in *Imagined Communities*.

Anderson discusses the way in which printed matter in the form of newspapers and novels appearing in the eighteenth century was intrinsic to the formation of the concept of the nation, explaining that “these forms provided the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation” (24). This is a claim that is also made by Said who identifies as a primary purpose and accomplishment of the “great European realistic novel” its role in “unnoticeably sustaining the society’s consent in overseas expansion” (Said 12). Melville can certainly be seen to illustrate Anderson’s position in her novel. One way of looking at the novel is as an exploration of Anderson’s claim, testing the concept of borders and the nation from the perspective of the former colony and its inhabitants. In the “Prologue” the narrator suggests that documenting things in writing detracts from our knowledge of them, as if putting events into text relieves us of the responsibility of really knowing, the text assuming authority simply because events have been documented in language: “Writing things down has made you forget everything” (2). Developing this contention further the narrator refers to his grandmother who “distrusts writing. She says all writing is fiction. Even writing that purports to be factual, that puts down the date of a man’s birth and the date of his death, is some sort of fabrication” (2). There is double irony in the fact that this viewpoint is here recorded in print.

The notion that a written text assumes the authority of presenting something as fact is further explored in the novel as Melville introduces the reader to a number of individuals, who come to Guyana from North American and European locations in the economic and cultural core of the world system, all intent on imposing their interpretations through textualization. As Shemak argues, Melville employs her novel to “challenge previous (mis)translations of indigeneity which became fixtures of modern discourse” (354). Rosa Mendelson may appear as a fairly innocuous participant in the process of textualization as she attempts to amass information for her paper on Evelyn Waugh, but her attempts at research reveal that whatever she writes will be an incomplete appraisal, capturing in text a version of events that not only is bound to deviate from the exact truth, but is premised on a key omission.

The tendency of the writer to present a distorted version of an actual situation is effectively captured in the episode where Melville portrays the novelist Evelyn Waugh apparently experiencing the event that would later inspire him to write a short story, “The Man Who Loved Dickens” and a novel, *A Handful of Dust*, showing clearly that the reader has little reason to trust the written word (Melville 286-9). As this is fiction we may well question whether we should be concerned over the veracity of a story, but it is, to a considerable extent, on novelists’ renditions of the world, Anderson claims, the world system has been established. Even as fiction, the written word has a power to persuade. Values sketched in fictional worlds are established without question because they are captured in ink. More sinister, in this regard, is perhaps the anthropologist Michael Wormal, who in his research incidentally bears a marked resemblance to Claude Lévi-Strauss and whose academic paper “The Structural Elements of Myth” (Melville 81) appears to be an intentionally poorly camouflaged plagiarism of Lévi-Strauss’s own “The Structural Study of Myth.” Wormal contends, “I probably know more about the Amerindian peoples than they know themselves” (78) and although a seemingly mythical torrent succeeds in preventing him from presenting his paper at the Georgetown University (308), he remains confident of his superior knowledge, which is furthermore textualized and consolidated in written form: “‘I think I know as much as it’s possible to know about the eclipse mythology in these parts.’ He
patted his briefcase triumphantly and returned to reading some papers” (351). Here again, that the Machiavellian nature of the written text is revealed itself in written language is satisfyingly ironic.

According to Anderson, the printed map has also been used in similar fashion to the written word to consolidate the concept of the nation. Anderson cites Thai historian Winichakul Thongchai: “a map was a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent,” (qtd. in Anderson 173), claiming that the map was used to establish borders rather than naturally existent borders defining the map. An interesting claim Shields makes is that “Amerindians, who horizontally construct themselves across the borders of Venezuela, Guyana, and Brazil, rupture Guyana’s vertical territorial space” (74). Shields proposes that the established borders of the map of Guyana become fluid since Amerindian territories do not observe such demarcations. Naturally, it is possible to see that this is an example where the concept of the Guyanese nation-state as a physically delimited area is undermined.

Unfortunately, Shields attributes this phenomenon to treaties signed by colonial powers providing indigenous people with this freedom, and seems therefore to overlook the fact that the extensions of the indigenous territories have a far longer history than that, and significantly pre-date any notion of the Guyanese nation-state.

Rosa Mendelson contemplates Guyana as a space portrayed as a map, but this representation reveals nothing of the characteristics of the area: “To pass time, she looked at a map and tried to find the Rupununi. Her eyes wandered from the mapped interior to the coast. Villages and plantations had names which reminded her of The Pilgrim’s Progress” (51). Similarly, Beatrice’s husband, Horatio Sands, is unable to conceive of what Guiana, at this point in time a colony, is like from its portrayal in map form, he “could never remember where the Guianas were, even after she had shown him on a map…He found he could never keep the geography of the place in his head. It somehow slipped away from him” (278), while Beatrice bears with her a clear sense of place. She reflects while lying in bed beside Horatio that her head is “still full of forest and savannah” (280). And bearing Anderson’s observation in mind, we may note Wormoal’s claim: “I have the entire map of this country in my head. I know about the history and movements of the indigenous peoples here, their kinship structures, occupations, philosophies, cosmologies, labour pattern, languages. We Europeans have access to all the books and documentation that they lack” (79).

For a novel that has been seen to support endogamy, it is also interesting to see that even the groups that tend to fall under the title indigenous are exogamous over the boundaries they themselves perceive as separating their different groups. As Melville’s inhabitants of the savannahs cross the landscape, following the narrow trails in single file or paddling along the rivers, there is a sense that they are stitching together this space and erasing borders. The different tribes clearly perceive borders separating their territories, but these borders may to a large extent appear to be founded on mutual suspicion, in part grounded in their different languages. Having heard reports of Father Napier’s activities from a Macusi, a Wapisiana woman comments: “I don’t trust Macusis…You can’t believe a word they say” (115). Similarly, Father Napier’s guides from different tribes do not appear to trust each other: “As they plunged into the gloom of the forest, Father Napier noticed that the Taruma men seemed to cheer up. It turned out that they did not entirely trust the Wapisiana through whose territory they were travelling” (184). However, these suspicions and assumptions of barriers between communities may in fact be little more than wariness born out of distrust, however misplaced, in being judged by others, similar to the way in which Danny perceives a barrier to his entering the Wai-Wai settlement: “When they came right up close to the next Wai-Wai settlement in Brazil, Danny suddenly lost his nerve and refused to go on. He felt as though there was an invisible barrier round the village, a magnetic field keeping him out” (200). No doubt this reluctance is due to the fact that he is perturbed
by the way he expects people to judge his relationship with Beatrice, in itself representative of a boundary that has been breached, rather than to differences between different tribes that would potentially isolate them from each other as homogenous entities. A parallel may be drawn here between the borders that emerge out of mutual suspicion and gain substance as the borders become commonly accepted, and the way in which, according to Anderson, notions of nation-states and their borders are nurtured in printed matter. The barriers separating different groups in the Rupununi are shown to be continuously permeated as the travellers come into contact with each other, learn each other’s languages, share their myths and settle in territories supposedly belonging to other tribes, forming new constellations within the expanse of the Rupununi. Wifreda, for example, marries Sam Deershanks, “part Sioux Indian from Texas” (177), and settles in Macusi territory, where she “had felt odd at first, living in Macusi territory, but after the first two of her sons were born there, she began to feel more relaxed” (249).

If the intention of the novel is to see the concept of the nation-state as a construct emerging from and installed to maintain the global hierarchy, this helps to explain why we cannot find a Guyanese identity in the novel. In using the term “imagined communities,” Anderson’s claim is that the nation is a contrived concept that has emerged during the past couple of centuries from the power struggles over the different geographic regions of the world. The division of the world space into nations conveniently delimits the different power units that structure the world system, but, as Bill Ashcroft observes, “nations are not ‘natural’ entities, and the instability of the nation is the inevitable consequence of its nature as a social construction” (150). Importantly, we may observe that while the borders of the nation are essential to its definition, borders are not natural delimiters. Often the bold lines on the map that sever one nation from another are not impenetrable mountain ranges or water-courses, have no representation on the ground whatsoever, and in fact are little more than the result of lines drawn with pen and ruler at the conference table. Indeed, the lines can equally encompass areas characterized by vastly heterogeneous social groups, sharing neither language nor culture, or divide a homogenous region, the bold lines of the map having no representation on the ground. As Nuala C. Johnson observes in “The Renaissance of Nationalism,” in the case of postcolonial Africa “the construction of unified nation-states has proved difficult: linguistic, religious and ethnic tensions have persisted” (132).

However, in movements for independence, the map proclaiming clearly defined and unquestionable borders became a powerful emblem in symbolizing the aspirations of an independent identity of peoples hitherto governed by imperial powers:

In this shape, the map entered an infinitely reproducible series, available for transfer to posters, official seals, letterheads, magazine and textbook covers, tablecloths, and hotel walls. Instantly recognizable, everywhere visible, the logo-map penetrated deep into the popular imagination, forming a powerful emblem for the anticolonial nationalisms being born. (Anderson 175).

But the nation-state is from the start a construct of the core, and herein lies the irony of the situation. In claiming independence, these nation-states are committed to re-establishing themselves within the identity the core has first established for them. The various nations of the core have established these boundaries in order to administer the world according to its own intents and purposes: as such, Guyana is initially a construct of colonial powers, borders drawn on the map as a result of global power play that divided the world into convenient blocks on the map. As Helen Scott argues, independence “installed national bourgeoisies whose task was to manage capitalism, while the world’s superpowers developed new systems to maintain their influence over strategically significant regions” (9). It is from this perspective we should view the fictitious world portrayed in The Ventriloquist’s Tale.
In Melville’s representation of the savannahs and the rainforest, the Rupununi and Georgetown, the paraphernalia that supports the concept of the nation is scaled away: A sense of the nation Guyana is completely absent from the novel. This of course also supports Anderson’s argument that the nation is a convenient construct. The reader may know that most of the story is situated within a space that is defined in textbooks and on the map as Guyana, but its borders and homogeneity as a delimited space are nowhere apparent. On the contrary, it appears that Melville is intent on undermining the notion of nationality or of a sense of Guyana as a nation and, notably, reference to Guyana is remarkable for its near absence.

Arguing the importance for peripheral nation-states to find a means to assert their position, Shields, on the other hand, claims that through Tenga is voiced the need to focus on the Wapisiana culture in order to generate a sense of the Guyanese nation-state (113). The problem here is that Melville introduces the reader to at least five different tribes, (apart from the Wapisiana she names the Macusi, Wai-wai, Taruma and Arawak), which are shown to distance themselves from each other in language and suspicion, and while the main group portrayed in the novel are Amerindians, we are very much aware of the fact that the larger part of the population that may be termed Guyanese have widely diasporic roots, African, Indian, East Indian and Chinese, to name a few. Somewhat surprisingly, Shields also argues that the novel “relates to the rights of indigenous peoples in a development context” (73). The reader may envisage issues existing over land rights in the case of concessions that must have been granted the Hawk Oil Company to survey for oil in the Rupununi, but these are not issues that are directly addressed in the novel. In fact, it may be possible to claim, on the contrary, that the discussion of the rights of indigenous peoples is moreover notable for its absence. Indeed, while Shields discusses the Rupununi uprising at some length, there is no mention of this event at all in Melville’s novel. Neither is there any mention of the movement for independence, which might otherwise constitute a centralizing drive to rally otherwise disparate groups in the establishment of a national identity.

In addition to the map, Anderson attributes the make-up of the nation-state to the census and its perpetuation to the museum, which together “profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion – the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry” (163-4). Writing of South East Asia, Anderson notes that identification of different ethnic groups was largely a construct of the census, and these groups were probably not recognised by their members as being homogenous: “It is extremely unlikely that, in 1911, more than a tiny fraction of those categorized and subcategorised would have recognized themselves under such labels” (165). The census textualizes a supposed categorization of the population with a view to establishing borders between communities, although often it may seem that such categorization is unrealistically delimiting, since populations are characterized by genealogies far more complex than it is possible to reconstruct in census form: “The fiction of the census is that everyone is in it, and that everyone has one – and only one – extremely clear place. No fractions” (166). The characters in Melville’s novel, for example “Henri the cabinet-maker who claimed French, Amerindian, Bajan and Spanish blood” (Melville 65) as well as Melville herself clearly exemplify Anderson’s point.

Notably, the only two characters in the novel who are referred to, by Rosa Mendelson, as Guyanese are characterized by the very fact that they do not actually live there: Rosa meets Arthur Singh, the “balding Guyanese musician, based in Trinidad, who returned to Georgetown once a year to teach classical guitar at Queen’s College” (43); and she visits “Miss Nancy Freeman, a Guyanese woman living in London” (47) in her quest for information about Evelyn Waugh. Moreover, we are aware, given Arthur Singh’s name and the note that Nancy Freeman has “light-skinned African features,” (47) of their diasporic origins. Likewise, when introducing characters in Georgetown, Melville is
meticulous in giving each a specific identifying tag, showing that they are not classifiable under one all-encompassing categorization, Guyanese: Chofy rents a room from the “East Indian landlord, Rohit Persaud” (29), his boss, Carmella de Pereira, is “a large, operatic woman of African and Portuguese descent” (38), and working at the Mynheer Nicklaus Lodge are “Anita the cook”, “Cuthbert” who “was a mechanic who had jumped ship” and “Mr Aristotle Crane, the chief carpenter” (64). Built into these tags is both a sense that identity has little to do with nationality as well as a sense of the diasporic nature of the population in Georgetown, which inevitably implies that any number of borders have been permeated and crossed to produce such a heterogeneous populace.

Melville furthermore appears meticulous in defining space in terms that have nothing to do with national limitations and borders. While professing to possess a chameleon’s ability to blend into any background (355), the narrator claims as his own not a national identity but “the endless savannah and bush of my own region” (2). His homeland is not contained by politically defined borders but is a topographically defined space, “my homeland, the parched savannahs that belong to the Indians on either side of the Kanaku Mountains north of the Amazon” (9). In other places, he talks of “the geography of the region” (4) or of the people “in this part of the world” (3).

At the same time there are references to the entire South American continent, making this a greater homogeneous space that brackets divisions and borders within it. When the narrator dredges up a word from one of the many lakes in “my part of the world”, “throngs of words” in the form of skeletons emerge from the landscape, “streaming down the Pan-American highway” (5) to roar “with one massive voice that could be heard from Mahaica Creek to Quito City” (6), uniting the continent in language. And putting the notion of space into yet another dimension, within the same passage, having focused on the region and the continent, our narrator includes a reference to the universe and its origin, “that faint echo of the Big Bang that has spread through the universe over the aeons,” explaining: “We have always been crazy about astronomy” (8).

A further example where the local is juxtaposed with the universal to test the sense of space and distance between geographical points comes in the form of people in two locations observing the same stars. These people, distanced both geographically and culturally, are united by simultaneously observing a point millions of miles distant:

And so it came about that, at the same time, although for very different reasons, one constellation, the Hyades, also known as part of Tamukang, came under the simultaneous gaze of a group of European scientists and a few Amerindians in the south savannahs and the southern bush of Guiana.

(182).

Interweaving these variations in scale occurs as an effective antidote to the notion of the fixed border that defines national space. In juxtaposition to the sense of space within the universe, the notion of the national border may seem not only absurd but also irrelevant.

The novel’s notion of borders and boundaries is also manifested in the sense of place and the extent of the sense of belonging shown by the characters in Melville’s novel. Chofy, for example, like our narrator, “belonged to the savannahs. His existence was tied into the landscape and seasons, rainy or dry” (14). In this way, we sense that beyond the boundary of the savannah, Chofy will not experience a sense of belonging. His domain, however, has no political or administrative borders but is defined instead by the extent of the biome. There is furthermore a sense of inevitability in the savannahs, that there is a natural order that governs the passing of time, for example, in the way that the appearance of a particular beetle heralds the rains: “The rains would begin with drizzle and showers, winds and isolated storms. Then the frogs would start to sing and rising headwaters fill the tributaries and
streams” (15). There is a sense here that time passes regardless of what happens elsewhere; it is a force that persists in spite of legislation, political decisions and administration. Indeed, natural forces determine the time for Chofy’s departure for the city: “The fact that the rainy season was beginning hastened the decision. It was agreed that Chofy should stay for the planting which had to be done before the rains set in properly. Then he would leave for Georgetown straight away in case flooding made the journey impossible” (26).

Similarly, McKinnon’s position as representative of a centralized, colonial authority is shown to be superfluous. Supposedly on the grounds of his European background, McKinnon was made “travelling magistrate for the district – a post which he largely ignored, having always been impressed by the Indians’ ability to keep order without government” (267). What is evident here is the fact that centralized administration imposed to unify disparate regions is an absurd intrusion into the daily life of the inhabitants.

National institutions are also undermined. Melville takes the opportunity to ridicule such major national institutions as parliaments and judiciary bodies, satirizing them as the “Parliament of the Lodge” which is “the most venerable of institutions, a parliament uncorrupted by power” (65), and the “Judiciary” formed by the female employees at the Mynheer Nicklaus Lodge (66). More seriously, when Chofy is robbed at the market in Georgetown it is revealed that he “dreaded becoming involved with the police or the courts in any way,” (34) indicating that the legal and regulatory framework set up for the nation is also an alien concept for the inhabitant of the interior, in the present as in the past. As Nancy Freeman reflects, “the Rupununi was so remote, the law didn’t really reach there” (49). Shields, on the other hand, argues that “Chofy’s stay in the city…underscores his transnationality” (104) because he “sees himself as both Wapisiana and Guyanese” (104). We may connect his identity to the Wapisiana through his language and his cultural roots, but it seems to me that any indication that Chofy sees himself as Guyanese is quite absent, and Shields provides us with no further explanation. Moreover, Shields’ contention completely misses the fact that Chofy is also part Scottish, a point which Melville can hardly have intended that we should overlook.

Another means of disrupting the sense of a Guyanese national space is achieved by juxtaposing the characters’ sense of displacement in certain environments against their sense of belonging in others. The characteristic manner of traversing the savannahs that Beatrice, Wifreda and Alice maintain even when at the convent in Georgetown appears incongruous in this foreign environment: “The nuns watched bemused as the three sisters walked, always in single file, through the grounds, a habit from following the narrow trails of the savannahs” (138). And conversely, while coastlanders do make the journey to the Rupununi, bringing with them jazz, thus introducing new cultural elements into the settlement, they do not remain because they do not feel that they belong: “Life was not comfortable. They sometimes felt awkward in the community, as if they did not quite belong, and they began to miss Georgetown…” (172). Their decision not to stay is not so much born out of not being able to cross barriers, but out of a strong sense of belonging somewhere else.

Furthermore, when Chofy travels to Georgetown he appears completely displaced: the city made him uneasy. It was not just the geometrical grid of the Georgetown streets, the parallels, squares and rectangles which disorientated him after the meandering Indian trails of his own region, but as he walked over the dry brown clumps of grass along the verges, he experienced the unaccountable sense of loss that hung in the spaces between buildings renowned for their symmetry and Dutch orderliness. (Melville 34).
Similarly, when sent to the convent in Georgetown to be educated, Beatrice, Wifreda and Alice find themselves in a state of exile in an unfamiliar and hostile environment, where their strategy for survival is to see themselves as “warriors who had been sent there in order to infiltrate and learn how to pretend to live like the enemy. They must merge in with their surroundings, copy the coastlanders while somehow keeping themselves intact” (138). And even the years spent in this new environment cannot dismantle the hierarchies that divide the population: “Behind the natural friendships that sprang up at school lay the poisoned knowledge of who was ‘high yellow’, ‘high-brown’, ‘red’ or ‘black’” (139), while Beatrice remains as an anomaly since she does not fit into any of the accepted classifications: Beatrice “caused confusion. She was not black and she was not white. People circled her warily, not certain where to place her, proffering friendship and then arbitrarily withdrawing it” (139).

At the same time as the inhabitants of the Rupununi seem to find themselves alienated in Georgetown, the city space is further fragmented by the disparate impulses of the diasporic population manifested, for example, in the struggle of the “tingalinga tingalinga sound of a steel band [that] fought to gain ascendancy over the tireless thump of reggae” (31). Conversely, the inhabitants of the city seem to find the interior equally alien: “the capital city seemed to have been stretched out beyond its ideal size to keep at bay the citizens’ terror of the land mass at its back. And so it smiled out to sea, believing that its future lay beyond the horizon, and ignored the lands behind it and the peoples who lived there” (36). Consequently, the novel repeatedly informs the reader in this manner that there is no cohesion within the space that is defined by one singular colour on the map as Guyana.

Simultaneously as the national space is fragmented, Melville draws our attention to a global structure that at once obscures the importance of the nation. Juxtaposed with the construed borders of the map, which divide space into nation-states clearly distinguished by complementary colour coding, are the borders that separate people from different locations within the world structure, borders that are invisible on the printed map. While people such as the High Commissioner and his wife and the executives from Hawk Oil may occupy, as visitors, the same geographical space as the inhabitants of Georgetown or the Rupununi, boundaries and barriers exist that divide the residents of the higher echelons of the world system from the members of the periphery. Although the Hawk Oil executives are from the United States, Chofy observes them “relaxing in easy chairs, drinking beer and gazing out over the city as if it belongs to them” (309). The existence of these greater barriers undermines the significance of national borders, the global power structure emerging through the presence of the affluent, trans-national characters. These barriers also account for Chofy’s reluctance to attend the dinner at the High Commissioner’s residence: “I feel out of place. I don’ know what to say to those people” (Melville 309). He does not want to partake of their alien world, although he shows that he is perfectly capable of playing the part at the dinner table. Chofy can cross these borders by playing a role, although he does not and can never belong in the realm of the globally affluent.

Consequently, we see that mixing is always already embodied in characters such as Chofy, who is a mixture by heritage, and who is compelled to mix as a result of circumstance. In his performance at the High Commissioner’s wife’s dinner party Chofy, chameleon-like, adapts to circumstances and fits neatly into the environment, although this does not mean to say that he can thrive here. What Melville demonstrates in The Ventriloquist’s Tale is not that borders should not be crossed, but that borders are constructs and although we may perceive them as real, they are not natural delimiters. Furthermore, she shows that boundaries are internal to her characters, the result of previous encounters and interactions. Borders are, in Benedict Anderson’s terms, “imaginary”. They have been generated by the demands of the capitalist global drive and substantiated by texts that consolidate the ideas and
values of the populations of the global core nations. Borders in these terms are therefore an imposition that serves to maintain a certain order and Melville’s fictitious world succinctly reveals its global structure.

An examination of the different expanses of space and the boundaries in Melville’s fictitious world therefore undermines the notion of homogenous groups with clearly defined boundaries. It can also be argued that the novel simultaneously challenges the notion of the nation in particular, as the description of space in the novel dissolves the legitimacy of borders at the same time as it fragments space that is contrived as homogenous. In *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* Melville defines a world where mixing is not only inevitable, but also always already a fact of life, although the consequences of mixing are not always celebratory, which may explain why so many have taken Melville’s standpoint as being one opposed to mixing. There is little doubt, for example, that Melville does not condone the type of mixing Napier perpetrates when he invades the interior, seeking to impose his belief. Napier’s variety of mixing is intrusion, a one-way boundary crossing in which the perpetrator seeks to exert his way of thinking on others. Similarly, the Hawk Oil employees’ form of mixing is better termed exploitation.

In creating a fictitious world that continually undermines the notion of the nation Melville reveals the absurdity of imposed and construed borders, but not only does she reveal the myth that is the nation, she simultaneously reveals by introducing and juxtaposing characters that represent other areas of the world, the greater global structure into which the notion of the nation fits. Having undermined the notion of the nation and thereby the possibility of assimilating a sense of local identity in connection with a sense of nationhood, Melville has furthermore revealed a world structure which overrides the importance of the nation and undermines the myth of independence.

This is the system Olly Samson poignantly ponders withdrawal from in the speech he has practiced in his imagination:

Ladies and Gentlemen, I should like to inform you, on behalf of the nation state of Guyana, that we are going to resign from being a country. We can’t make it work. We have tried. We have done our best. It is not possible. The problems are insoluble. From midnight tonight, we shall cease trading. The country is now disbanded. We will voluntarily liquidate ourselves. The nation will disperse quietly, a little shamefaced but so what. We had a go.

Different people have suggested different solutions. Do it this way. Try that. Let me have a go. Nothing works. We are at the mercy of the rich countries. A team of management consultants from the United States could not find the answer, and for not finding the answer, we had to pay them an amount that substantially increased our national debt. We give in, gracefully, but we give in.

(Melville 325)

His reasoning is so clearly rational, which is set in juxtaposition to the irrational absurdity of the idea of being able to withdraw from the world system, and it is this that frames the problematic facing peripheral regions. Johnson places the central impetus to nationalist politics in “the insecurity generated by capitalist globalization,” explaining further that whether “this insecurity may be more perceived than real, the appeal of the place-based national identities in the face of rapid economic transformations endures” (130, 131). To play a part in the global system it is necessary to create a participating player: the nation-state. But “independence” and the subsequent emergence of a new nation-state in most cases would appear to have achieved little other than consolidating the divisions between the different regions in the world that imperialism set out to establish to facilitate its own
purposes. This is the arena for the newly constituted states that have emerged as the imperial powers have relinquished, at least in terms of administration, their hold on former colonial territories. As Edward Said observes, “Westerners may have physically left their old colonies in Africa and Asia, but they retained them not only as markets but as locales on the ideological map over which they continued to rule morally and intentionally” (27). In the context of The Ventriloquist’s Tale, Monica Bevan, the High Commissioner’s wife, can easily represent Said’s “prevailing Western consensus that has come to regard the Third World as an atrocious nuisance, a culturally and politically inferior place” (Said 31).

Other critics are concerned with the misrepresentation of actual geopolitical relations. Writing in response to Fredric Jameson’s “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” Aijaz Ahmad frames the world picture we perceive in The Ventriloquist’s Tale most succinctly. Essentially, Ahmad sees the world as united “by the global operation of a single mode of production, namely the capitalist one, and the global resistance to this mode, a resistance which is itself unevenly developed in different parts of the globe,” concluding that what “gives the world its unity, then, is not a humanist ideology but the ferocious struggle of capital and labor which is now strictly fundamentally global in character” (10). And if this is the case, the so-called independence of the newly established nation is revealed to be little more than a chimera, for what could the new nation possibly have become independent from? As Jameson points out,

none of these cultures can be conceived as anthropologically independent or autonomous, rather, they are all in various distinct ways locked in a life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism – a cultural struggle that is itself a reflexion of the economic situation of such areas in their penetration by various stages of capital. (68).

Said nurtures the same viewpoint: “The nations of contemporary Asia, Latin America, and Africa are politically independent but in many ways are as dominated and dependent as they were when ruled directly by European powers” (Said 20). In this regard, the nation is revealed very much to be a construct, its borders emerging from geopolitical and economic power struggles. In the case of the post-colonial states the post-colonial nation can be seen as an entity contrived in order to continue to fulfil a role on the periphery of the world structure, which is, according to Ahmad, powered by the force of capitalism. Against this world picture, the issue of mixing or not mixing is already determined: mixing, or exogamy, is a fact of life, although the manner of border crossings and the nature of boundaries are infinitesimally varied for different groups of people.

Perceiving the contours of the global structure in these terms allows the reader to discern boundaries other than those traditionally represented on the map. And simultaneously as she dismantles the notion of the nation as a homogenous space, Melville sketches in a global structure that further undermines its credibility. Apart from allowing her characters to voice the notion that, for example, the world is “one enormous capitalist market” (45), or to reveal the implications of the IMF for the periphery, “designed to keep the rich rich and the poor even poorer” (325), Melville demonstrates the world structure in the manner in which her characters traverse space within her novel. Juxtaposed with the inhabitants of the Rupununi who are distanced from the city by a long and hazardous journey, representatives of the more powerful strata in the world structure cover such distances in a fraction of the time, displaying their dominance. Nancy Freeman recalls her journey to the interior when “half the bloody horses died on the journey. We had to light fires at night because of the tigers…Sometimes we walked through mud from ankle to knee” (48), and there is little to suggest that conditions are much better for Chofy who makes the trip to look for work, while Bill Bevan is able to see the Rupununi as a sort of recreational area. In contrast to the harsh journey its inhabitants have to make, he can fly in for
the weekend: “‘I must say I like your part of the world. I like to go to the Rupununi for a little sport at weekends’” he comments to Chofy over the dinner table (326).

The contentions voiced by Ahmad, Jameson and Said also explain why while temporally set both in colonial Guiana and post independence Guyana, there is no mention in The Ventriloquist’s Tale of the movement for independence, despite the fact that the novel may be seen to touch on and explore the concept of nationhood and national identity. This absence signifies that the movement from pre- to post-independence lacks any real substance. Scott acknowledges what she terms as “the continuity between the colonial past and the supposedly postcolonial present,” (118), arguing that there is no essential difference between the colonial and the postcolonial state for the nations on the periphery, since these countries are equally governed by the global capitalist system:

In the Ventriloquist’s Tale the very structure of the novel highlights the continuity of imperialism, through the juxtaposition of the two stories: the first set in the opening decades of the twentieth century, when life is circumscribed by European landowners and missionaries; the second in the last decade, in a Guyana now dominated by North American corporations and financial agencies. (Scott 120-121).

In showing both pre- and post-colonial Guyana, Melville hints that there is no great change for the inhabitants, as the “old defunct electricity post near the house, relic of some long-forgotten scheme to bring electricity to the area” may bear witness (26). McKinnon’s questionable jurisdiction over the savannahs and Napier’s sinister attempts to colonize the region are replaced by the attempts of Wormoal to textualize and rationalize the mythology of the region and such global enterprises as the Hawk Oil Company that will exploit the country for its natural resources. Significant in this regard is the fact that not only does Chofy’s dislocation to the city in order to find work reflect reality in peripheral countries, but the work Chofy anticipates in Georgetown is within mining or logging (Melville 24), enterprises where global corporations win large profits from extracting the poorer country’s resources.

Returning to the first steps of the discussion and the response of critics to what they perceive as a tension in the novel, generated by opposing views on endogamy and exogamy, it may be proposed that their bewilderment stems from a predisposition to see the world in other terms than Melville actually sets out in her novel. The main characters in the novel are notably offspring of exogamous encounters, and their interplay further discloses the extent of permeability of boundaries that distance people from each other. If it is suggested that Sonny as the offspring of an incestuous relationship should represent the endogamous, it is easily countered by the fact that his parents are already representative of exogamy, their father being the Scotsman McKinnon and their mother being of both Wapisiana and Macusi heritage. Naturally, it is possible to perceive boundaries in differences in culture, power, affluence or language, but there are always instances where these boundaries are transgressed.

Consequently, the argument for or against mixing presumes a world that is in fact divided as the census may have us believe, into definable entities: the indigenous, the Amerindians, the Europeans or even the academics. Without these perceived distinctions, the argument for or against exogamy or endogamy becomes derailed and the fictitious world in The Ventriloquist’s Tale provides us with an alternative perspective for viewing distinctions. It is possible to see in Melville’s novel a process that explores and dismantles notions of borders, boundaries and barriers between individuals and groups of people. In this regard Anderson’s proposal that the nation is a construct with boundaries marked up by power play between the more powerful nations and established in literature is played out in The
Ventriloquist's Tale. While tracing interaction between individuals on a local level, where the local environment largely steers day-to-day existence, and where mixing is a fact of life, Melville simultaneously sketches a global structure that dictates and drives interaction on a global scale. For the reader it is revealed that perceived borders, such as those that define the nation-state, are permeable and traversable, while the capitalist drive of the global structure undermines the concept of the nation-state and establishes boundaries that are invisible on the map.
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