Teaching What You're Not

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Available in all the major anthologies of American literature, Melville's novella "Benito Cereno" (1855) has emerged as one of the most widely read and taught of his works. In large part, the relatively recent popularity of the text has to do with the fact that critics have come to recognize, over the past thirty years or so, that the novella powerfully and problematically addresses the politics of slavery and race in antebellum America; arguably, it is the pre-Civil War antislavery masterpiece. What I want to do here is discuss some of the problems I have encountered in teaching the novella, and to use this discussion as a way of addressing the debate on multiculturalism and the politics of identity. It needs to be emphasized that virtually every attack on multiculturalism, or on teachers who supposedly teach "political correctness," works with synchronic models. These polemicists have little to say about how the vast majority of college professors have wrestled, and will continue to wrestle, with pedagogical issues over time. Thus Dinesh D'Souza, the best-known of these polemicists, in his chapter "Teaching Race and Gender" in *Illiberal Education*, simply calls attention, through the use of anecdotal examples, to what seem to be particularly egregious instances of misguided teaching by a group of unreflective, unselﬁsh professors. (An emphasis on the synchronic is evident as well in attacks on multiculturalism in
Paul Berman's *Debating P.C.*, Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals*, and Richard Bernstein's *Dictatorship of Virtue.*) All D'Souza's anecdotes (many of which are lifted from the *Wall Street Journal*) are drawn from a very short period of time, and all present a cartoonish picture of "representative" professors who, presumably for the rest of their careers, have locked themselves into a militant 1960s radical authoritarianism, a new form of McCarthyism from the Left.¹

In this essay I want to complicate such a perspective through a diachronic account of one professor's teaching practices, focusing on my shifting responses to teaching (and reading) "Benito Cereno" over a nearly twenty-year period. By locating my discussion of multiculturalism in the specific context of my attempts to make sense of and teach Melville's novella, I hope to provide a more concrete account of the implications of the curricular, pedagogical, and demographic changes that the academy has witnessed over the past two decades. The sorts of classroom negotiations I will be describing, though based on my personal struggles with a recalcitrant text (and students), are, I believe, much more truly representative of how the vast majority of the professoriate operates from day to day, from year to year, than the crowd-pleasing tales dished up by the monoculturalist polemists.

Not all that long ago, a mad, word-drunken reading and rereading of Melville's *Moby-Dick* propelled me to apply to graduate school with the hope of teaching Melville's masterpiece to similarly intoxicated souls. But the Melville text that came to obsess and haunt me—as a graduate student, critic, and teacher—was the more spartan and austere "Benito Cereno." Looking back now on this change in energies and sympathies, I can understand how, as an undergraduate, Melville's novella of a slave revolt had had no great impact on my literary (or political) consciousness. I had read the novella only once, as a brief and exotic excursion away from the more spectacular novels of Stendhal, Dickens, Tolstoy, and others, in an honors seminar called
Colloquium on the History, Language, Literature and Philosophy of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, taught by two of Columbia University's very best literature professors to a group of twelve students who knew, with that special self-regard of the "honors" undergraduate, that we were among Columbia's best and brightest. As I recall the thirty-and-some-odd-minute segment of the class devoted to "Benito Cereno," before we turned to the weightier matters of Conrad's *Lord Jim*, slavery was barely mentioned during the discussion—a discussion that was, as always, boisterously propelled by an unrestrained imbibing of hearty burgundy. Instead, we all agreed—we happy white males who, about ten minutes into our evening seminar, would pass through the gates of what Melville in 1855 called "the paradise of bachelors"—that in "Benito Cereno," Melville, metaphysical as ever, was using black and white symbolism to confront the reader with a universal truth: the reality of evil in the world. Certain of our interpretation, as we were certain of all our interpretations that year, we moved on to address Conrad's universal/metaphysical vision. The year was 1973, more than thirty years after F. O. Matthiessen had offered a similarly allegorical interpretation of "Benito Cereno" and about ten years after serious revisionist work on the novella had begun.²

It wasn't until graduate school that I began my own revisionary reconsideration of the novella, and I connect that reconsideration to a very central discovery that I made during my graduate years (a discovery lots of graduate students raised on the New Criticism and various other formalisms were making at that time): the historicity of literary texts. Soon after my late 1970s "fall" into history came my early 1980s discovery of the historicity—or the cultural embeddedness—of the teaching of literature. That discovery, or second fall, generated a series of reconsiderations of "Benito Cereno" as a classroom text—reconsiderations that continue to make teaching "Benito Cereno" one of the most difficult, but in many ways one of the most satisfying, things I do as a professor of American literature.
Like many critics of "Benito Cereno," I read Melville's novella as an antislavery narrative that, by presenting us with the limited perceptions of a sea captain in the midst of a slave revolt, attempts to implicate its readers in the racist worldview of Delano only to expose the mendacity, immorality, and dangers of that worldview. And I'd go one step further to suggest that the novella, through its implicating narrative strategies, possesses transhistorical power as a work of cultural criticism in the way it challenges us to consider our own implication in dominant modes of cultural power. The text's ability to implicate readers in Delano's blindness and thus to remind us of our own analogous forms of complicitous blindness is what I try to get across in the classroom (in addition to the novella's more explicit antiracist and antislavery themes).

But in light of recent debates on multiculturalism and the politics of identity, we might ask, "Who is us?" Does such a unified body of readers exist? Aren't there risks in this sort of consensual interpretation, particularly when applied to a novella that seems to expose Delano's "consensus" reading of the rebellious slaves as a form of cultural blindness? As I've found myself teaching the novella to an increasingly diverse student population, these large questions have necessarily complicated my teaching, and understanding, of Melville's text.

When I first taught the novella at Stanford University, however, not many "problems" arose with my particular reading of "Benito Cereno," at least none that I could see. My students, for the most part economically well off, and all white, were initially fooled by the text (most were unaware that Delano was in the midst of a slave revolt), were then surprised by the revelation of the plot, and then were "educated" by the ironies newly detected in their rereading of the novella. Good students that they were, they readily accepted their instructor's transhistorical reading of the novella, which, in the late 1970s, made the very Palo Alto point that just as Delano was blind to slavery's evil and the blacks' humanity, so these elite white liberals
(and students at Stanford were mostly liberal in those days) were blind to the ways their happy idyll at Stanford depended on the existence of the black ghetto in East Palo Alto, conveniently out of sight and mind on the other side of Route 101. It was just the sort of feel-good consciousness-raising about inequality that we all needed before our late afternoon swim or tennis game.

Things became less easy at the University of Maryland. For one, there were now African American students in my classroom; for another, many of my students, particularly the white students, were more ignorant of the history of slavery than my Stanford students; and for another yet, some of my students, white and black, were working-class people who worked twenty to thirty hours a week while taking a full load of courses. What this meant in practical terms was the following: First, given that African American readers had entered into the equation, there was a greater variety of response in the first-time readings of “Benito Cereno” (blacks more than whites were able to detect the slaves’ conspiracy early on). Second, given that many of the white students were less subtle readers than my Stanford students, they showed a greater willingness to accept Delano’s (and the narrator’s) racist views, and thus I faced greater difficulties in convincing students of Melville’s ironic, educative, and implicating purposes. Third, because some of the students, black and white, could legitimately claim to be at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, I was perhaps irresponsibly self-righteous in trying to teach these students about their implication in the dominant power structure. Let me now be more specific about these various problems, conflating five years of problems into a paragraph—one that will suggest greater disarray than there actually was (I think)—before I describe my efforts to address these problems.

Generally, I like to teach the novella over two classes, cutting off the reading and discussion just before that point in the novella when Babo and his fellow Africans are explicitly revealed as rebels and conspirators. In this way I can foreground interpretive issues: What
is going on aboard the San Dominick? To what extent should we trust Delano’s perceptions of the blacks and Spanish? What are we to make of the narrator? Because we’ve not yet read to the point of revelation, nothing can really be said about the novella with any certainty. And so most students will confess to being relatively confused about who is in power, or about what’s going on, say, with Atufal’s ritual refusal of apology, or, most crucially, about the role of the narrator in the novella—an especially pivotal problem in that the narrator seems regularly to espouse racist generalizations about blacks, telling us, for example, that they’re natural servants, perpetually happy, and dog-like. Interestingly, depressingly, while teaching the novella at Maryland I’ve had numerous white students voice their agreement, during this first class, with the basic tenor of the narrator’s racist sentiments, and I’ve even had some white students eager to don the cap of “authority” to tell us about blacks’ relative happiness as slaves. I have to confess that on occasion, when confronted with such remarks, I solicited the responses of the African American students with the hopes that they would counter such ignorance, which, of course, only made matters worse: now the black students in the class, in addition to trying to learn something about American literature and get a decent grade, were charged as well with combating racism among Maryland’s undergraduates. Some were willing to do this work for me; others, in the spirit of Babo, preferred to adopt an angry silence. (Or, after class, in my office, would angrily ask why I was teaching such a racist text, to which I could only feebly respond, “Wait until you finish reading the novella before condemning me and Melville.”) What made things especially difficult for the African American students, of course, was that they were a decided minority in the classroom (usually two or three students in a class of thirty). Already self-conscious about their minority status, they must have been pained to see that their suspicions of white ignorance of, and even hostility toward, blacks were in some ways justified. And it must then have been additionally infuriating for them to return to class on the second
day, when we could talk more knowledgeably about Melville’s narrative tactics and racial politics, to learn from their Delano-like professor about their complicitous blindness to cultural forms of power.

Arguably, though, I was not so Delano-like, in that I did have a sense that there was something wrong with the way I was teaching the novella. Particularly troubling to me was the way I was letting the novella, or my way of teaching it, reproduce in the classroom precisely the kinds of racial divisions that the novella was critically representing and (I quixotically continue to believe) prompting its readers to overcome. And so in the late 1980s, in the hope of defusing the potential for racial confrontation in the classroom, I began to reconsider my pedagogical strategies. First, I asked students to read the novella in its entirety, with the hope that they would see on their own that Melville’s seemingly racist narrator is in fact an ironic narrator who deviously presents Delano’s racist perspective as “objective” truth in order to expose its limitations. To some extent this was a helpful solution, though far too many students, ill equipped to detect irony, continued to buy into the narrator’s racism, and, more specifically, the authority of the proslavery Spanish deposition, which, after all, the narrator seemingly presents as the key to the “true history” of what happened aboard the _San Dominick_. So I tried another tack: Like the Spanish authorities with regard to Babo, I silenced my students, choosing one semester simply to lecture on the novella—to tell them what it was all about, how it implicated them, how it educated them, and so on in an exercise of the worst sort of imperialistic reader-response criticism.

Not surprisingly, problems remained, for I had not yet come to terms with the fact that central to my teaching (and reading) of the novella was an assumption, based on the historical fact of the novella’s 1855 publication in _Putnam’s_, that Melville’s reader was (and always would be) a complicitous, albeit educable, white. To cling to this assumption while at the same time arguing (as I did in the classroom and in my scholarship) for the transhistorical power of the no-
vella inevitably meant that I would have to elide the politics of identity from a text that, in many respects, is about the politics of identity. In short, my way of reading, dependent on coming to terms with "blindness" to a black conspiracy without coming to terms with blindness to issues of racial identity, helped perpetuate the very blindness that the novella seeks to critique and expose.

These thoughts, I like to think, were in the back of my mind when I participated, during the summer of 1990, in a University of Maryland faculty seminar, The Curriculum Transformation Project: Thinking about Women. Taught by Professor Deborah Rosenfelt, chair of women's studies, to approximately fifteen faculty from different departments throughout the university, the seminar focused on the ways feminist criticism in various disciplinary fields could help us reconceive our syllabi, our approach to material, our pedagogical styles, and our critical writing. While I went into the seminar with the intention of reading as much as I could by and about nineteenth-century American women writers, I found that "Benito Cereno" remained on my mind as the text I most wanted to learn how to teach better. As the seminar proceeded, and broadened to consider related issues of race and class, I became convinced that one of the reasons "Benito Cereno" posed such a pedagogical problem in my courses was that it was bearing too much weight as a "representative" text—which is to say that I was using the novella not only to introduce students to Melville but also to represent the black experience under slavery. Leaving aside the large question of whether a white writer can adequately represent slavery (like Frederick Douglass I think she can), I came to realize during my summer in the faculty seminar that my reading list failed to do justice to Melville's knowledge of, indeed his indebtedness to, African American representations of slavery. Whatever the specific publishing circumstances of "Benito Cereno," the novella came into being and eventually circulated in a complex discursive field of antislavery writings by whites and blacks alike, and inevitably would have been interpreted in different ways by dif-
ferent readers. Indeed, it could be argued that the very multiplicity of interpretations the novella was capable of generating was what made it such a powerful and discomfiting text. Some of that discomfiting power, I sensed, could be restored through curricular revision that brought African American texts into my classroom.

Now, I don’t want to portray myself as utterly naive, in the summer of 1990, on the issue of canon revision—like many I had read Paul Lauter’s essays, Jane Tompkins, the syllabi in Reconstructing American Literature, the prospectus of The Heath Anthology of American Literature, among other things, and over the years I had added to my reading lists writers like Catharine Sedgwick, Fanny Fern, and of course Frederick Douglass. Still, vis-à-vis “Benito Cereno,” much more, I realized, could be done: From the new Heath Anthology I could add David Walker’s Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World (1829) and Henry Highland Garnet’s Address to the Slaves of the United States (1843)—two texts published prior to “Benito Cereno,” and texts that, more than Douglass’s Narrative, advocate violent resistance to slavery and represent black rage at enslavers. I could also add T. W. Higginson’s account of the Nat Turner rebellion (1861) in order to help students see that not every white writer was paranoid about black revolt; and I could add selections from Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig (1859) and Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), which, at the very least, would work to undermine Delano’s stereotypical idealization of black women slaves as “unsophisti-
cated.” And so in the fall of 1990 I added these texts to my reading list, and I sensed then, as I continue to sense, a marked improvement in my teaching of “Benito Cereno.” Reading these texts in conjunction with “Benito Cereno,” students find it much more difficult to accept uncritically the narrator’s paternalistic dismissals of the possibility of black intelligence or rage, and they have a speedier and more genuinely sympathetic responsiveness to Babo’s artful plottings. Armed with their knowledge of black texts and perspectives, students can also more authoritatively resist or question Melville’s representa-
tional strategies, and they feel more confident in resisting and questioning my own admittedly liberal reading of the text. No longer can white students speak so knowingly of the "benign" nature of slavery; and no longer must black students feel that the burden is on them to rebut such ignorance. And of course an added benefit of such curricular revision is that these newly added texts are interesting in and of themselves, and have helped us address different sorts of issues than those raised by "Benito Cereno" about the practice and representation of slavery in America.

Convinced, therefore, that I had made some major strides in reconsidering my teaching of "Benito Cereno," in large part because of my work in the Curriculum Transformation Project, I was eager to speak as part of a panel on Teaching about Inequality that Professor Rosenfelt arranged at the University of Maryland. I could offer a glorious presentation, I thought, on how I had come to "see" what had gone wrong with my teaching of "Benito Cereno," and I could talk, again quite gloriously, about how I had skillfully addressed the problem. However, at our planning session I made a startling discovery that reminded me once again of my Delano-like perceptual blindnesses: one of the two African American faculty who had participated in the summer seminar confessed at this meeting that she had come very close to dropping out of the seminar, in part because of her perception of my racial insensitivity. What had happened to generate her response was this: a dean had visited the seminar to talk about the need for faculty to develop a greater sensitivity to multicultural issues in the classroom. She showed us a short film, in which a very stupid English professor, during a class on Uncle Tom's Cabin, called on his one black student to ask what an "Uncle Tom" was. The point was obvious: the professor, assuming that all blacks would know such things, had singled out, and thus embarrassed, a student who probably already felt highly uncomfortable with the subject matter. At the end of the film I launched into a tirade on how exaggerated such a depiction was, that there was no one on our faculty that obtuse, and
so on. What I hadn’t considered at the time was just how similar were my own actions, when teaching “Benito Cereno,” of calling on the one or two black students in my class to “refute” the racism of the white students, nor did I know that over the past five years black students had been complaining to people outside the English department about their perception of, and dismay at, racist moments in English classes. Significantly, this dean, against whom I and others in the seminar had so vociferously turned, had been the only African American administrator to visit our summer seminar. Of all the visiting administrators, she had probably made the most helpful presentation. What the two African American participants could see, therefore, in ways that I and many of the white participants could not, was that there was an ugly racial dynamic at work in our protestations of innocence and our subsequently mean-spirited efforts to demean the bearer of bad news. The administrator clearly had hit a nerve, which we sought to mute through intellectual browbeating. The revelation, then, at the planning seminar, of my blindness to such a dynamic took the glitter out of my proposed talk, though it convinced me, if I really needed convincing, of the continuing vitality of “Benito Cereno” as a text that speaks to the difficulty of seeing one’s way past such blindness.

All of which leads me to some final remarks on “Benito Cereno,” multiculturalism, and the politics of identity. While much of what I’ve been describing emerges out of my wrestling with the complexities of teaching “Benito Cereno” in a multiracial classroom, and my sense that this sort of wrestling must continue, it’s difficult, as a teacher of “Benito Cereno,” not to have some doubts about multiculturalism (or “political correctness”) as a pedagogical agenda, particularly when it brings with it the smug assurances that I brought into my planning session. After all, one could argue that Captain Amasa Delano himself—blind, naive, loathsome—is a kind of multiculturalist. At the island of St. Maria off the coast of Chile in 1799, a wonderfully multicultural and multiracial setting, Delano must make sense of Spanish, Catholics, and blacks, and he proceeds to do so in ways that,
for his time (and for Melville's), could be called intellectually advanced. Like many Northern advocates of the virtues of "free labor," he regards the Spanish suspiciously as a slave power; like these same "free labor" advocates, and many intelligent Protestants of the time, he regards Roman Catholicism, hierarchical and imperialistic, as a vestige of the past. And like some of the seemingly more scientifically advanced white thinkers of the mid-nineteenth century, he has a "scientific" view of racial differences—hence his belief that the more white blood a slave has, the more rebellious he or she will become. Additionally, with his reference to the explorer John Ledyard, we learn that Delano has been reading the new texts of African exploration, most likely Mungo Park's 1799 _Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa_ (which refers to Ledyard), in an effort, so such a 1790s "liberal" might declare, to better understand, and so to think well of, black people and their cultures. Thus when Delano views the African slave women with their children, he thinks of them fondly, in terms of the "anthropological" and "empirical" discourses of the day, not as subjects to be dominated, but as models of maternal devotion: "Unsophisticated as leopardesses; loving as doves. Ah! . . . these, perhaps, are some of the very women whom Ledyard saw in Africa, and gave such a noble account of."

Can we draw analogies between Delano's smug "multiculturalism" of the late eighteenth century and the multiculturalism, particularly of liberal white male professors, of the late twentieth century? Perhaps. For I worry about how the desire to be multicultural occasionally can tempt white professors in particular to adopt toward their minority students a colonizing perspective disturbingly like Delano's—a perspective in which we feel too confident of our knowledge of where, say, our African American students are coming from and what they want out of our classes, too comfortable, in short, that we "know" the other and thus can teach the other in predetermined ways. Such confidence, I think, in which group identity takes precedence over individual identity, will almost always work against good teaching.
Yet it can be difficult, in the current political context, not to view individuals in relation to a group identity. I will cite one final personal example. Last year, in a course on Melville, I quickly took note of the fact that there was one African American student in the class; I decided that because he was the only African American student he must feel marginal and uncomfortable. When, in discussing Typee, I suggested that Melville’s presentation of the French colonization of the Marquesas Islands could be read as an antislavery allegory, I happily concluded that, in powerful ways, I had made the text relevant for the student most likely (I somehow had decided) to find it irrelevant. About halfway through the class, this particular student raised his hand and demanded to know why I had “ruined” the text for him by offering such a predictably “leftist” reading of such an enjoyable and escapist work. His comment, of course, was welcome and it helped initiate a vigorous discussion of Melville’s politics in Typee; but unbeknownst to my students I was thinking, mortified and ashamed, “Benito Cereno.”

Bad identity politics of this sort are not just something that professors do to students. When my black students would complain to me about my choice of teaching what they initially regarded as a racist text, I could sense, among some, that what added to their frustration was their belief that it is ultimately the case that white teachers teach white texts that reflect a “white” point of view. When I added African American texts to my reading list, I sensed additionally that some of my black students associated the white-authored texts (and characters like Delano and Cereno) with me and the black-authored texts with themselves. This was not an entirely unhealthy development, for it helped empower students who might otherwise have remained silent and apathetic. Yet assumptions about the kinship among, say, white authors and white professors and students, or black authors and black professors and students, are based on reified notions of racial identity that pay scant attention to the varied historical experiences of groups and individuals.12 Recently, in an effort to personalize my reading of
the text, and to encourage my black students in particular not to link me historically with Melville’s white racists, I’ve spoken of my family’s nineteenth-century history as victims of Russian pogroms. My autobiographical remarks were not meant to equate my family’s history under anti-Semitic rule with the family histories of African Americans under slavery. But to float the (admittedly) false analogy is to disrupt totalized assumptions about the persistence of a monolithic whiteness from Melville’s time to the present, and to suggest that there is nothing about my whiteness that ineluctably makes “Benito Cereno” my text. When I am teaching “Benito Cereno,” as when I’m teaching Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin or Douglass’s Narrative, I am teaching what I am not. Unless we begin to assign only our own critical writings, literature professors will always be teaching what we are not. Our job is to teach the other (texts) to the other (our students) and in doing so, as Michael Bérubé and Cary Nelson have recently (and bravely) pointed out, “we cannot do otherwise than to speak for others.”13 This essay on reconsidering “Benito Cereno” is an effort to show how one professor has attempted to do just that without presuming to be the other.

Had the monoculturalist polemicists attended any one of my classes on Melville over the past ten years, they surely would have had no problem in pointing out, for those who take pleasure in such things, a number of intellectually limited or even ludicrous moments in my teaching. Because they are so unwilling to grant to professors who displease them a self-critical and evolving consciousness about their pedagogical practices, I would imagine that in pointing out these moments they would have presumed, as Kimball and Bernstein seem to presume when describing such moments in their books, that my teaching methods simply reflect the unreflected-upon leftist agenda of a pitiable dupe of current academic fashion. Moreover, I have no doubt that, were monoculturalist polemicists to stumble across this essay, they would type it as just another breast-beating confession of guilt by someone out to win his liberal spurs. Nevertheless, I will
continue to worry over the misprisions and gropings so central to my pedagogical experiences, for I remain convinced that the kinds of issues, problems, and questions I've been discussing are enabled by multicultural and multiracial approaches to literary study and pedagogical practice, and provide teachers and students with a more capacious knowledge of the cultural engagements and work of literary texts. (I am by no means calling for a return to the "certainties" of my undergraduate reading experiences.) As long as the revisionary multicultural project can help us ask interesting and troubling questions, and can help us be aware of the challenges facing us when teaching different texts in different classroom settings, it's a project worth pursuing and taking seriously. And though I'm not yet convinced of the direct causal influence of what we do in the classroom on what goes on in the world outside the classroom, if multiculturalism can help us make America into a better nation where there's less inequality, less domination, less blindness, then so much the better.

NOTES

A somewhat different version of this essay, "Teaching in the Multicultural Classroom: Reconsidering Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" first appeared in MELUS 19 (spring 1994): 111-20. My thanks to the editors for permission to reprint. I first presented some of the material in the essay at the 1991 meeting of the Modern Language Association in San Francisco. I am grateful to Professor Deborah Rosenfelt for inviting me to speak on her panel on Curriculum Transformation Projects and for her helpful comments on the paper.


2. See, for example, Sidney Kaplan, "Herman Melville and the American National Sin: The Meaning of Benito Cereno," Journal of Negro History 41 (October 1956): 311-38; 42 (January 1957): 11-37; H. Bruce Franklin, The Wake of the


6. During the 1850s Frederick Douglass defended Harriet Beecher Stowe from attacks by Martin Delany, who thought a white writer could not properly represent the experience of slaves. See Robert S. Levine, "Uncle Tom's Cabin in Frederick Douglass' Paper: An Analysis of Reception," American Literature 64 (March 1992): 71-93.


10. Of course from our 1990s perspective it's not too difficult to see that Northern liberals like Delano read Mungo Park and others in order to reaffirm their sense of cultural superiority and to justify practices of domination. But the disjunction between Delano's idealizing beliefs and his participation in the social practices of the dominant culture is precisely what Melville wants to convey about self-satisfied white liberal New Englanders, whether they be sea captains of the 1790s, merchants of the 1850s, or even (I'd go so far to say) abolitionists who displayed a paternalistic "love" of black people. On the "scientific" racism of the time, see William Stanton, The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes towards Race in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). For a discussion of racism among antebellum abolitionists, see Leon F.


12. Not everyone (perhaps no one) has a “pure” racial identity. As Carla Peterson has argued, it might be more productive to focus on the ways texts, and the reading of texts, can help us construct and deconstruct “ethnic/racial boundaries.” “Borderlands in the Classroom,” American Quarterly 45 (June 1993): 298. In my view, no text more profoundly involves, or implicates, the reader in this process than “Benito Cereno.”


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