Herman Melville returned home in October of 1844 from four years at sea, he came back to a different reality than he had left behind. In May of 1844, Samuel Morse displayed his “American telegraph” before Congress and the American people, an event that suddenly made it possible for the country to imagine a mode of communication that was both instantaneous and disembodied. By the early months of 1846, as the telegraph was rapidly becoming a fixture on the top of news columns in New York papers, Melville had written and published his first book, *Typee*. The book, which was based on the author’s experience on a Marquesan island after he and a shipmate had jumped overboard, has long been read as a relativistic critique of Western culture. Given the popular obsession with Morse’s newly established invention at the time Melville was writing *Typee*, it comes as little surprise that among the various aspects of American culture he transposed to the island was the telegraph.

What is more surprising, in light of the technology’s prominence in public discourse at the time Melville was writing, is that the text’s symbolic use of the telegraph has received little critical attention—even as scholars have long recognized the book’s preoccupation with the political dimensions of information exchange. Over the course of this chapter, I want to trace Melville’s use of telegraphic symbolism in *Typee* to reveal how his embrace of narrative indeterminacy as both a political and artistic ideal spoke to the information culture from which *Typee* borrowed one of its most compelling, and least interrogated, metaphors. As I have already shown, American journalists and commentators began praising Morse’s
invention in the second half of 1844 with an unprecedented enthusiasm and an almost unrestrained imagination. Thus Melville’s invocation of the telegraph as a crucial narrative symbol invites us to explore his first book’s preoccupation with the problem of information exchange in light of the rapid emergence of the technology-fueled myth of informational omniscience and reliability. In juxtaposing the philosophical assumptions of Pierre Glendinning alongside the cultural preoccupations of Melville’s “Old Zack” sketches, I have suggested that the author’s conception of artistic truth-telling was shaped by the status of authenticity as a powerful, and highly unstable, ideal of American mass culture. In this chapter I take a sustained look at Melville’s first book in order to examine how it reflects the same preoccupation with the slippery nature of information that connects Melville to the America of Barnum and the telegraph.

So many excellent postcolonial readings of Typee are founded on the question of how Tommo, Melville’s autobiographical narrator, problematizes his quest for authentic information about the Typee. If the most obvious example of such questing is the narrative suspense that circulates in the book regarding whether or not the Typee are cannibals, it seems that almost every chapter contains some narrative mystery: Have Tommo and his companion, Toby, wandered into the valley of the friendly Happar or the dreaded Typee? Whatever happens to Toby when he departs for the coastline to get medical supplies for his ailing friend? What is the “strange meaning” of the religious feasts and rituals that Tommo witnesses during his time with the Typee? While some questions are clearly answered, and while others are clearly not, there are some that we simply cannot be sure about. As Geoffrey Sanborn reminds us, two readers of Typee might conclude the book with two entirely different opinions about whether or not Tommo has indeed found evidence of cannibalism on the island.

In my own reading, Melville’s concern with information in Typee—Tommo’s individual search for authentic information, the intracultural transmission of information among the Typee, the role of information exchange as a vehicle of intercultural oppression—is meaningful not as evidence of the book’s colonialist or anticolonialist thinking but for the way in which this conspicuous attention to the cultural meaning of information resonated in the earliest days of telegraphy. Situating the text in the discourse surrounding the question of information exchange in 1844–46 reveals that Melville’s reliance on the contemporaneous status of the telegraph signified his own autonomy from the production of national identity on a mass scale. The subject matter of Typee afforded a singularly valuable means for such a self-invention: by carving out a critical distance from what we might call “information culture”—that is, from
the role of information exchange within both Typee and American societies—Melville verbalizes Tommo’s independence from the collective logic of cultural identity by claiming a position for his textual persona between two cultures of information.

Critics such as John Samson have highlighted for us how Melville constantly fought in his work against the strictly informational type of writing his writers expected of him. But the assumption of this line of inquiry has been that Melville’s refusal to neatly narrate facts was the product of an ethical conscientiousness that separated him from the myopic racism of the information-hungry masses. The discussion that follows approaches Melville’s “Art of Telling the Truth” in Typee not as the morally well-intentioned antidote to the shallowness of the American reader but as a by-product of the reality-obsessed information culture in which Melville lived and wrote; for his own preoccupation with (what he considers) inauthentic accounts of Typee culture emerged alongside an informational discourse in which the production and consumption of “authentic” facts signified as a nationalizing characteristic. In Typee Melville at once exposes information as a political and economic fiction and depicts the cultural reality of the Typee as a realm of performance and masquerade, carving out for Melville alone an apparently transcultural identity by deconstructing what mass culture considers the real.

To understand Melville’s use of telegraphic symbolism in Typee, one must recognize that the telegraph is, in Melville’s reworking of it, a conspicuously slippery symbol. In fact, it is its very slipperiness that defines the telegraphic metaphor in Typee against the technology’s symbolic meaning in the popular imagination. As I have already revealed, though the telegraph was seen as something of a conjuring trick in the days before it established itself as a viable technology, American commentators in the months and years following the successful installation of Morse’s technology were nearly unanimous in their sense of a new telegraphic age. As a symbol of national connectedness, informational timeliness and reliability, omniscience and objectivity, the telegraph was a popular phenomenon whose symbolic meaning allowed commentators to rhetorically efface the myriad contingencies that threatened national cohesiveness and consensus. In the very act of making the telegraph a symbol, after all, antebellum commentators visualized and verbalized the nation as a unified signifier. At the same time, the cartoons and parodies that ran in Yankee Doodle (including Melville’s “Old Zack” sketches) imagined a space outside of this mythic realm of the authentic nation; and so it was there that Irish and German immigrants appeared, laughably unsavvy about the implications of the new technology.
In much the same way, Melville’s use of the telegraph in *Typee* exposes it for what it was—a symbol—relying on its instability to redefine the ideal of telegraphic connectedness as a culturally specific myth, one that empowered far-reaching and consequential acts of cultural storytelling. Far from an escape from the assumptions of his own information culture, though, Melville’s rhetorical transposition of the telegraph projected onto the Typee the Western view that sees specific modes of transmitting and circulating information as defining cultural practices. The value of assessing the text’s use of telegraphic symbolism, then, is that the very prominence of the telegraph in *Typee* suggests that Melville’s salient preoccupation with information exchange was an imposition of a culturally specific story about the “nature” of reality onto what he claimed was a social and cultural setting that had been largely uncorrupted by Western life. In *Typee*, I am arguing, Melville portrays his own view of information as a textual, political, and economic fiction, his own understanding of culture as a surface-oriented realm of spectacle and performance, as a transcultural insight.

Melville’s first use of the telegraphic metaphor occurs soon after Tommo and Toby discover that they have indeed wandered into the valley of the Typee. At this relatively early point in the narrative, Tommo witnesses the “telegraph” from the perspective of a white, Western outsider. Even more significantly, his use of the telegraphic metaphor subtly relies on the technology’s status in the Western world as a guarantor of an unprecedented kind of authenticity:

Deterred by the frightful stories related of its inhabitants, ships never enter this bay, while their hostile relations with the tribes in the adjoining valleys prevent the Typees from visiting that section of the island where vessels occasionally lie. At long intervals, however, some intrepid captain will touch on the skirts of the bay, with two or three armed boats’ crews, and accompanied by an interpreter. The natives who live near the sea desery the strangers long before they reach their waters, and aware of the purpose for which they come, proclaim loudly the news of their approach. By a species of vocal telegraph the intelligence reaches the inmost recesses of the vale in an inconceivably short space of time, drawing nearly its whole population down to the beach laden with every variety of fruit.  

When read in light of the technology’s triumphant rise to prominence in 1844, the inconceivability of the metaphorical telegraph’s efficiency
expressed here appears as an echo of the contemporaneous view that Morse’s technology was a near miracle. But Melville’s careful description of the inaccessibility of the harbor is perhaps more meaningful: as a symbolic link to the uncorrupted, authentic Typee culture, the telegraph functions in Melville’s text much as it was then functioning in the popular imagination. Indeed, in the very next paragraph, Melville writes, “I have no doubt that we were the first white men who ever penetrated thus far back into their territories, or at least the first who had ever descended from the head of the vale” (74). By projecting the logic of telegraphy onto the island, Tommo defines the value of the narrative that will follow according to the criteria of American information culture. The reader, Tommo promises, will be connected to an authentic reality that has been heretofore unreachable.

Even before the chapter ends, however, Melville begins to disrupt his own promise of telegraphic omniscience. Upon receiving Tommo and Toby, the Typee attempt to get information from their visitors: “They then plied us with a thousand questions, of which we could understand nothing more than they had reference to the recent movements of the French, against whom they seemed to cherish the most fierce hatred. So eager were they to obtain information on this point, that they still continued to propound their queries long after we had shown that we were utterly unable to answer them. . . . In the end they looked at us despairingly, as if we were the receptacles of invaluable information; but how to come at it they knew not” (75). Though this chapter begins with Tommo and Toby’s own quest for invaluable information—“Typee or Hapar? A frightful death at the hands of the fiercest of cannibals, or a kindly reception from a gentler race of savages?” (66)—by the end they are confronted with an information culture that is entirely alien to them, one in which they embody an unknown but profound value. If we read the telegraphic metaphor when it first appears as evidence of the text’s subtle promise of unprecedented authenticity, the chapter’s clash of two cultures of information suggests that the American imagination that sees the Typee through the lens of telegraphic thinking will have to ultimately recalibrate its very understanding of information exchange.

And indeed, in the second appearance of the vocal telegraph, Melville transforms his symbol from a guarantor of authenticity to a vehicle for cultural domination. Near the beginning of the fourteenth chapter of his narrative, Tommo, already suffering from a mysterious illness, is “plunged in melancholy reverie” after realizing that he was “cut off. . . . from all intercourse with the civilized world. . . . [and] knowing too, that so long as I remained in my present condition, it would be impossible for me to
leave the valley” (104). Soon, however, Tommo and the reader learn that boats have appeared in the bay. Here is how Melville shares the information with us:

The word “botee! botee!” was vociferated in all directions; and shouts were heard in the distance, at first feebly and faintly; but growing louder and nearer at each successive repetition, until they were caught up by a fellow in a cocoa-nut tree a few yards off, who sounding them in turn, they were reiterated from a neighboring grove, and so died away gradually from point to point, as the intelligence penetrated into the farthest recesses of the valley. This was the vocal telegraph of the islanders; by means of which condensed items of information could be carried in a very few minutes from the sea to their remotest habitation, a distance of at least eight or nine miles. On the present occasion it was in active operation; one piece of information following another with inconceivable rapidity. (105)

Melville’s juxtaposition here of a conspicuously Western, even urbane narrative voice with the notably exotic setting (the two discourses merge into formulations such as, “they were caught up by a fellow in a cocoa-nut tree”) is typical of the book’s interest in highlighting the distance between Western ways of seeing and the inscrutable lives of the islanders. And the telegraph serves an analogous function: its scientific authority is replaced with the quaintness of the islanders’ vocal telegraph. Tommo calling it a “telegraph” is meaningful, of course, because it ironically underscores the island’s status as undeveloped, uncivilized. While a typical mid-1840s description of the electromagnetic telegraph portrayed the technology as a way of connecting, and thus defining, “the civilized world,” Melville’s invocation of telegraphy would seem to echo his novel’s larger concern with the irrelevance of Western progress to the world of the Typee.

And yet I would argue that Melville is up to something far more complex here—for the vocal telegraph is at the very center of the novel’s narrative and epistemological complexity. After all, Tommo tells us (in consecutive paragraphs, no less) first that he is “cut off from all intercourse” with the outside world and then that his inward spot on the island is connected by “telegraph” to the coast (where European and American boats regularly appear). This “telegraph,” rapid and reliable as it might be for the islanders, thus is recast as a technology by which the Typee appear to extend their cultural and physical dominion over our narrator. Indeed, later in the same chapter Tommo and his American companion, Toby, lose contact with one another. Because Tommo is Melville’s narrator, the reader, too, is left to wonder why Toby fails to return with those islanders he
accompanied to greet a group of recently anchored boats. Of course, the only link between the inland Typee and the happenings of the shore is the “telegraph” that sends information inland through human conduits—and therefore it is the “telegraph” that fails to keep our narrator connected to those events that lead to Toby’s final departure from the island and his disappearance from Melville’s narrative.

At the very moment when Melville was writing Typee, the telegraph allowed American commentators and readers to conceive of “America” as a collective and cohesive body. Such an act of national imagining, I have argued, saw in the technology’s promise of disembodied communication the divorce of information from the individual bodies that constituted the nation, thus envisioning a realm of informational purity beyond the reach of commercial or political duplicity. In referring to an “infallible telegraph” capable of correcting both human error and corruption, these writers used the technology to efface the social, political, and economic agendas that were rapidly defining the information culture of antebellum America. In other words, as American culture was increasingly shaped by the merging of information and market capitalism, an alternative, mythic “America” was taking shape—one that was defined against the very idea of information as commodity. Significantly, Melville’s metaphor of the “vocal telegraph” reintroduced to telegraphic symbolism precisely what the contemporary popular imagination sought to efface: the presence of actual human bodies in the act of information exchange. As important, it is at the very moment when telegraphy becomes recorporealized by Melville that the technology emerges as a vehicle for cultural oppression: Melville’s Western narrator becomes foreign when he invokes the telegraphic metaphor. To think in the terms of connectivity, Melville implies, is not (as antebellum commentators argued) to unite humans in some mythical realm of perfect connectedness; it is to carve out a particular kind of cultural identity.

This use of the telegraph as metaphor recasts one of antebellum America’s most powerful myths—the idea that information could be exchanged in a realm untainted by human fallibility—as a by-product of the Western impulse to draw racial and national boundaries. And so Melville’s oft-cited interest in foregrounding Tommo’s particular difficulties penetrating the mysteries of Typee culture can be understood not only in light of what Mary Louise Pratt calls the “imperial eyes” through which the Western travel writer sees her nonwestern subject but also in the context of the telegraphic promise of disembodied, omniscient information exchange. By invoking this telegraphic promise only to reveal it as a culturally specific ideal, and by continually acknowledging narrative omniscience as an
impossible promise, *Typee* quietly claims a global, bird’s-eye view on the meaning of information within and between cultures—at the very moment when Melville’s own information culture was being defined by the ideals his work invokes and rejects.

The key to this invocation and rejection of the journalistic ideals of the emerging telegraphic age is the careful use of narrative indeterminacy in the face of the readerly quest for omniscience. When the islanders return from the beach without Toby, our narrator is “filled with a thousand alarms” (107). After earnestly asking the natives about his friend, Tommo finally is told that Toby departed with the ships that had anchored in the harbor, promising to return after three days. As readers of the novel will recall, Toby never returns, and Tommo is unable to close this narrative thread: “no tidings of Toby ever reached me; he had gone never to return” (109). It is, of course, a meaningful indeterminacy. Other critics have taken up the subject of cannibalism in the novel, and so it is not my goal here to interpret the cultural implications of Melville’s manipulation of “the sign of the cannibal.” Instead, I wish to connect the symbolic meaning of cannibalism in the book with Melville’s invocation of the telegraph as symbol. As Morse’s invention, with its compelling promise of communal connectedness, was claiming a place in the American popular imagination, Melville employs telegraphy as a symbol defined by its conspicuous slipperiness: while the island “telegraph” initially promises a rapid and reliable link to the coast, it soon comes to represent the impenetrability of Typee society to Tommo’s eyes. Ultimately, the metaphorical telegraph recasts technologies of communication as nothing more than symbols.

And yet to say “nothing more” is not quite right—for the telegraph as symbol carried with it (in *Typee* and, only months later, in the U.S.-Mexican War) profound and violent cultural implications. While Tommo claims to be haunted by the specter of cannibalism (that oft-invoked marker of the most depraved form of savagery), he is ultimately a victim of his own unconscious manner of erecting racial and cultural boundaries: Typee or Happar? Cannibal or noncannibal? And if the telegraph, with its implicit promise of omniscient and inviolable information, is not the source of Tommo’s malaise, it is undoubtedly one of his mind’s readiest and most potent symbols. Fittingly, Melville formulated his telegraphic metaphor at a moment at which the telegraph, having not transmitted more than a few pieces of information of any consequence at all, had already brought with it a “new species of consciousness.” In the years leading up to the installation of the telegraph as a viable journalistic and economic tool, then, the technology was meaningful in the very way in which
Melville’s fiction uses it: as a symbol within the Western imagination. By merging telegraphy and the threat of cannibalism, Melville (in a move that adumbrates the racialized production of Mexican identity in American papers only months later) foregrounds the Western logic of telegraphic connectedness as a force that empowers cultural mythmaking. Tommo is most preoccupied with the danger of cannibalism when he understands reality through the logic of telegraphy: to believe that the other end of the telegraph wire contains a neat resolution to his drama is to impose a narrative shape onto the world; and to impose narrativity is always to impose a certain type of story, one built from the materials of one’s cultural milieu. Thus Tommo imposes upon the Typee his culture’s most soul-shuddering myth, the myth by which savagery and civilization are alike defined.

Melville asks his audience to recognize their own complicity in such mythmaking by inviting the reader to apply the logic of telegraphic connectedness to his story and then subverting such an expectation. At the conclusion of the first edition of Typee, Melville’s narrator and the reader are left together to wait for a telegraphic message that never comes. Having depicted Tommo, earlier in the narrative, at the receiving end of a “vocal telegraph” he is incapable of interpreting, Melville concluded Typee by informing his audience, “The mystery which hung over the fate of my friend and companion has never been cleared up. I still remain ignorant whether he succeeded in leaving the valley, or perished at the hands of the islanders” (253). This insistence on keeping the unconcluded narrative of Toby’s disappearance before the audience deepens the meaning of the telegraphic metaphor: his linking of the metaphor to this example of narrative unknowability unified the reader and Tommo into a collective perspective defined by their inability to complete the story of Toby’s disappearance and thus subverted the popular conception of the telegraph in the mid-1840s as an omniscient and infallible means of unifying the nation. While Melville’s “vocal telegraph” united the Western reader and narrator into a shared perspective regarding this “mystery,” it is a profoundly unprivileged perspective that they share, one that is best defined as the very antithesis of the popular claims that the telegraph would allow Americans to sit around a virtual table in a realm of informational omniscience. Melville here redefines the telegraph from an informational technology to an epistemological one: Tommo and the Western reader are defined entirely by a narrative perspective that comprehends the Typee as outsiders. And so the authorial decision to end with an unresolved narrative thread at once confronted the reader of the first edition with a conspicuous distance between the closure of Melville’s novel and the unconcluded story of Toby’s disappearance, and used this rhetorical dis-
tance to expose telegraphic symbolism as both source and symptom of Western taxonomizing.

As those familiar with the fate of *Typee* will recall, Melville’s English and American readers participated in solving the mystery regarding Toby’s disappearance. When the book was first published, some readers were highly suspicious of the truth of Melville’s account and demanded authenticating evidence that the author had actually lived abroad. The public debates over the authenticity of *Typee* culminated in the emergence of Richard Tobias Greene (a.k.a. “Toby”), a housepainter living in Buffalo, New York, who publicly attested to the veracity of Melville’s narrative. As a result, the second American edition of *Typee* concluded with “The Story of Toby,” which, in laying out what happened to Toby after he said good-bye to Tommo, neatly resolved for the reader one of the central indeterminacies of Melville’s narrative. The public’s hunger for authentication of Melville’s account thus reshaped the narrative ambiguity of his first edition into the totalizing narrative of the second, essentially reconnecting the first edition’s broken telegraph wire.

Even more interesting than the demands of Melville’s evidence-seeking readers, I would argue, is the way in which these demands defused the political agenda of the first edition. In the second American edition, “The Story of Toby” took the place of the original appendix, a brief account of European imperialism in the Pacific. The reader of the first edition was left with the obvious suggestion that Toby could have been killed and cannibalized by the Typee people. From there, the first edition moved to the appendix, which opened with Melville’s arrival at Tahiti, on “the very day that the iniquitous designs of the French were consummated by inducing the subordinate chiefs, during the absence of their queen, to ratify an artfully drawn treaty, by which she was virtually deposed” (254). In the original appendix, Melville subtly connected the artful writing utilized by the French with the equally deceptive rhetoric through which their imperialist activities were reported in American newspapers. In comparing the harsh journalistic treatment of England’s exploits in the Sandwich Islands to the more sympathetic depictions of the French in Tahiti, Melville argued that “with all the woe and desolation which resulted” from France’s “piratical seizure of Tahiti,” it “created not half so great a sensation, at least in America, as was caused by the proceedings of the English at the Sandwich Islands” (254). Defending the English against charges that they sought to annex the islands, Melville writes: “During a residence of four months at Honolulu, the metropolis of the group, the author was in the confidence of an Englishman who was much employed by [Lord George Paulet]; and great was the author’s astonishment on his arrival at Boston, in the
autumn of 1844, to read the distorted accounts and fabrications which had produced in the United States so violent an outbreak of indignation against the English. He deems it, therefore, a mere act of justice towards a gallant officer briefly to state the leading circumstances connected with the event in question” (254). The original Typee thus concluded with a reminder to the readers of their own inability to know what happened to Toby, and then with a brief account of European activities in the Pacific that Melville tells us have been distorted and fabricated by missionary and newspaper writers. While Melville’s account is decidedly pro-England, the deeper argument of the appendix was that imperialism had become a battle over who controlled the representation of such exploits published in newspapers and travel books back home. As with the island telegraph, information exchange more broadly is recast in Typee (or was recast, in the first edition) as both a source and function of intercultural domination.

That the popular reader’s demand for authentication of Typee resulted in the resolution of the first edition’s indeterminacy regarding Toby’s disappearance suggests the profound connection between the public’s need to authenticate Melville’s story and its appetite for narrative closure. The mystery that ended the first edition was an important rhetorical device for Melville, one that was at the heart of his book’s notorious attack on missionary writing. The first edition exposed both the rhetorical means by which missionary writers had created their misleading accounts of Typee culture and the unsightly realities that such rhetoric sought to keep veiled. By transforming their own experiences of foreign cultures into the omniscient, objective-sounding rhetoric of ethnographic description, these authors were claiming to describe for their Western audiences what such cultures looked like with and without a missionary presence. As John Carlos Rowe writes, “Melville’s anthropological gesture in Typee destabilizes our very processes of understanding ‘other’ people.” Against what Rowe calls “the prevailing ethnographic models of its time,” Melville’s narrator accepts, even foregrounds his own inability to render Typee culture so perfectly. By juxtaposing, for example, Tommo’s repeated confessions of ignorance regarding Typee religion beside missionary accounts claiming to understand (and thus condemn) this aspect of Typee culture, Melville’s concessions to indeterminacy combat the rhetoric on which the political agenda of missionary writing relied. And so the author’s decision to end with the unresolved mystery of Toby’s disappearance reasserted Melville’s rejection of the assumptions and expectations of popular reading.

But did Melville seek to complicate the American and British reader’s sense of what it means for Western eyes to gaze upon foreign people, as Rowe suggests, out of a principled stance that perfectly echoes our own
critical and ethical priorities? Or does such a reading of the author’s narrative idiosyncrasies betray our own critical eagerness to understand the ways in which a text problematizes the act of narrating primarily as a marker of an author’s moral self-awareness? After all, Melville clearly understood that his first book (as well as its sequel, *Omoo*) owed its success largely to the access it afforded its audience to a distant, exotic culture. As Stephen Railton says of the author’s first two books, “Melville wrote both of these books from the outside in: he was clearly less interested in expressing himself than in establishing a career as a writer.” Even if Melville repeatedly foregrounds the attempt to narrativize a society that he portrays as inscrutable, such a strategy was essentially an alternative manner of presenting the *Typee* to Western eyes, one that seems to have answered the contemporaneous demand for transparency, omniscience, and closure. Though Melville’s book (especially the American first edition) rejects the totalizing narratives published by those writers more obviously driven by political agendas, such moments shaped an idiom in which he could still place the *Typee* before his audience, even as he kept popular readerly expectations at arm’s length. Indeed, Melville’s rhetorical use of telegraphy and journalism in *Typee* suggests that his idiosyncratic art of telling the truth portrayed reality as something that can only be defined by invoking the unreal world of information exchange. More than simply a prophetic adumbration of postmodern thinking, *Typee* echoes the priorities of the antebellum media age by peddling authenticity, albeit one defined by the acknowledgment that information is a kind of capital.

Critics such as David Spurr have revealed for us how works like *Typee* exhibit the “fundamental characteristics of Western thinking” by placing foreign cultures on display as “the dream of [the capitalist West’s] own opposite.” In lieu of merely reiterating such a reading by attending to Melville’s belief in the “simplicity” and “purity” of the uncivilized world, I want to point out how Melville’s theories of foreign travel ultimately uphold the broader logic of antebellum information culture, even as a text like *Typee* rejects the premises of narrative omniscience and transparency. Consider the following moment from one of Melville’s travel lectures in the late 1850s, in which he tells his audience that “the modern progress in some of these islands is seen in the publication there of newspapers; but on close inspection I have often found them to be conducted by Americans, English, or French. I have recently met with a Honolulu paper, the Honolulu ‘Advertiser,’ which is a mark of the prosperity of the Sandwich Islands, being almost a counterpart of the London ‘Times’ with its advertisements, arrivals, and departures of vessels, and so on—and that, too, where not long since the inhabitants were
cannibals.” As in Typee, the above moment invokes the presence of the newspaper as evidence of the colonial “progress” made in the Sandwich Islands. But even as he links the commercial nature of the Honolulu paper with Western journalism, and then to the economic exploitation of the islands, Melville’s description of the newspaper appears to simultaneously critique colonial notions of “progress” and uphold journalism as a marker of civilization. For Melville’s implication seems to be that if these newspapers were native-run, they would indeed be a welcome sign of progress (without quotation marks); the problem, he implies, is that these papers are run by foreigners.

I would argue that such a claim echoes the paradoxical narrative approach of Typee, in which Melville deconstructs the truth-telling of previous Western writers while upholding the broader question of information exchange as a defining marker of cultural identity. In seeing the Hawaiian newspaper as inauthentic, after all, he quietly privileges the ideal of a localized (yet still Western) newspaper culture over the urban-based and increasingly global journalism of the 1840s and 1850s. In a sense, he wants the Sandwich Islands to look not like mid-nineteenth-century London or New York, but like a late eighteenth-century New England town before the advent of mass journalism. The lecture goes on to mention a report in a recent newspaper suggesting that Americans and other foreigners have proposed abolishing the Hawaiian language in Hawaiian schools and expelling all those students who speak it. Here is how he registers his opposition: “I threw down the paper on reading this, exclaiming, ‘Are they to give up all that binds them together as a nation or race—their language? Then are they indeed blotted out as a people’” (420). Though concerned with the broader process of imperialism, Melville depicts himself in the act of reading the proposal and throwing down his American newspaper, placing the author somewhere between American and Hawaiian print cultures—a rhetorical space that cannot be considered simply anti-imperialist or postcolonial. Rather, in equating Hawaiian autonomy with an ideal of nineteenth-century Western journalism, Melville uses the example of the Sandwich Islands to offset the commercial artifice of modern journalistic culture.

Melville’s travel lectures provide a useful context for comprehending the narrative strategies of Typee because they remind us that Melville’s ideological critique of the political exploitation of his subjects was not also a rejection of writing as a way of placing the Typee on display. Justin Edwards and Douglas Ivison (each of whom relies on the theoretical arguments of Mary Louise Pratt, David Spurr, and Edward Said) have unveiled the myriad ways in which Melville’s “anti-imperial critique is
ultimately imbricated with imperial hegemony.” And Wai Chee Dimock has highlighted how in Melville’s narrative each islander “exists only as a key to a communal phenomenon” and each of the author’s descriptions “leads to a generalized view of the Typees as a whole.” Such work makes it possible, in talking about a book such as *Typee*, to consider the work’s narrative approach as a particular manner of exploitation, one in which Melville’s way of seeing (and often not seeing) the truth of his subject allowed the author to contrast the mass exploitation of the Pacific (which his work rejected) with the individual exploitation of the Typee as an object of Melville’s own epistemological and artistic drama. As he would tell his audience in his lecture on “Travel,” one virtue of encountering foreign cultures is to discover the singularity of one’s own mind: for “every individual sees differently according to his idiosyncrasies” (in *Piazza Tales*, 423). In this way, exposing the neat narrativizing of an alien culture as disingenuous or otherwise problematic was a two-tiered representational strategy, allowing Melville to place an exotic subject before his reader while also placing on display the idiosyncratic mind of the author-artist—a rhetorical reading that complicates the scholarly view that celebrates Melville’s understanding of the constructed and performative aspects of culture.

Again and again in *Typee*, Melville depicts an alien culture while replacing perfect transparency with a foregrounding of that which is too alien for Western eyes, making the impossible idea of narrative transparency a constant presence in his work. Describing the Typee’s Feast of Calabashes, for example, Melville’s Tommo “questioned Kory-Kory and others of the natives, as to the meaning of the strange things that were going on; all of their explanations were conveyed in such a mass of outlandish gibberish and gesticulation that I gave up the attempt in despair” (168). In the beginning of the very next chapter, “still baffled in my attempts to learn the origin of the Feast of Calabashes,” Tommo turns from seeking to make meaning of the festival to complicating other visitors’ accounts of the same rituals: “As a religious solemnity . . . it had not at all corresponded with the horrible descriptions of Polynesian worship which we have received in some published narratives, and especially in those accounts of the evangelized islands with which the missionaries have favored us. Did not the sacred character of these persons render the purity of their intentions unquestionable, I should certainly be led to suppose that they had exaggerated the evils of Paganism, in order to enhance the merit of their own disinterested labors” (169). Melville’s ironic stance regarding the missionary narrator’s disinterestedness anticipates the mock correspondent of the Old Zack anecdotes. But even more interestingly,
Melville’s specific analysis of these published accounts adumbrates the *Yankee Doodle* sketches’ concern with the means by which all reporters necessarily construct a fictional persona in making their narrative adhere to the postures of reportage.

In referring to missionary accounts of Polynesian religion, Tommo continues: “In certain work incidentally treating of the ‘Washington, or Northern Marquesas Islands,’ I have seen the frequent immolation of human victims upon the altars of their gods, positively and repeatedly charged upon the inhabitants. . . . These accounts are likewise calculated to leave upon the reader’s mind an impression that human victims are daily cooked and served up upon the altars; that heathenish cruelties of every description are continually practised; and that these ignorant Pagans are in a state of the extremest wretchedness in consequence of the grossness of their superstitions” (169–70). Melville’s readerly stance in the first of the above lines (“I have seen”) critiques not simply what is depicted but the way in which writing attempts to operate in such texts—that is, the missionary writer seeks to make his narrative perfectly transparent, to replace the act of reading with the act of seeing. Melville begins with this realist ideal and quickly replaces it with the more fitting description of such text as a text, one that is “calculated to leave upon the reader’s mind” not a specific picture of Marquesan culture but a sense of the reality of Marquesan life as a product of Western storytelling. Melville immediately reveals that behind such a linguistic portrait—behind any written narrative—looms the writer. In this case, we are told, “all this information is given by a man who, according to his own statement, was only at one of the islands and remained there but two weeks, sleeping every night on board his ship, and taking little kid-glove excursions ashore in the daytime attended by an armed party” (170). In stark contrast to such a writer, Tommo’s mode of descriptive storytelling acknowledges his own epistemological limits, rejecting realist portraiture in the interest of locating a higher mode of truth-telling.

While describing those missionary authors who do make it ashore, Melville turns both to the language of supply and demand and to the conventions of a Barnumesque museum culture. Finally, these seem to be the only facts underlying such published narratives:

The fact is, that there is a vast deal of unintentional humbuggery in some of the accounts we have from scientific men concerning the religious institutions of Polynesia. These learned tourists generally obtain the greater part of their information from the retired old South-Sea rovers, who have domesticated themselves among the barbarous tribes of the
Pacific. Jack, who has long been accustomed to the long-bow, and to spin tough yarns on a ship’s forecastle, invariably officiates as showman of the island on which he has settled, and having mastered a few dozen words of the language, is supposed to know all about the people who speak it. A natural desire to make himself of consequence in the eyes of the strangers, prompts him to lay claim to a much greater knowledge of such matters than he actually possesses. In reply to incessant queries, he communicates not only all he knows but a good deal more, and if there be any information deficient still he is at no loss to supply it. The avidity with which his anecdotes are noted down tickles his vanity, and his powers of invention increase with the credulity of his auditors. He knows just the sort of information wanted, and furnishes it to any extent. (170)

The South Sea rover operating as “showman” suggests that Typee culture is already a production—shaped, in part, by our own culturally specific manner of witnessing and narrativizing foreign cultures. Melville’s title, with its “peep” at Polynesian culture, makes it clear to the reader, before we even arrive on the island, that we can only approach such cultures in a mode of seeing dramatically shaped by how we view foreign lands at home—for as Justin Edwards has suggested, Melville’s travel book is very much a “peep-show.” The language of Barnum-like showmanship in the above passage is especially meaningful in the wake of the earlier passage in which Melville-as-reader first “sees” through a missionary narrative before zooming out to reveal the fictional world contrived by linguistic and narrative manipulation. The description of such a contrived world as “humbuggery” invokes Barnum to imply that all staged depictions of culture, however carefully displayed, are contrived for a particular audience.

Writing about such scenes, Paul Lyons describes how “Melville denounces the ‘humbuggery’ spread by ‘learned tourists’ in the Pacific before him . . . , or between those who have wandered much in the realms of texts and those who have had direct experience of the thing described.” Using the work of Jonathan Culler, who seeks to collapse the conventional distinction between tourist and traveler, Lyons reads Melville’s desire to contrast his own account of the Typee from “less authentic productions” as a “staple feature of such Euro-American writing, whose degree of authenticity as adventure has always been a financial necessity, and whose admissions of befuddlement in interpreting adventures are often perversely taken as a measure of their general trustworthiness.” Thus Melville’s repeated confessions of his inability to penetrate the taboos of Typee culture constitute, in Lyons’s convincing reading,
“a central self-authenticating trope.” To be sure, such a reading helps us understand Melville’s rhetorical use of competing textual accounts of the Typee as a product of the Western fetishization of cultural authenticity. And yet Melville’s invocation of antebellum museum culture, like the telegraphic metaphor, should remind us that the sense of reality as a show does not appear in Melville’s imagination solely as a function of his place in a Euro-American tradition of travel discourse. For as his invocations of both Barnumesque showmanship and telegraphy suggest, the narrative stance of Typee relied also on the status of reality in 1840s New York as an increasingly marketable commodity. How different the text’s use of Western vocabularies such as “showman” and “telegraph” look when we consider that even his deconstruction of these phenomena are the product of the author’s cultural embeddedness: instead of marking Melville’s awareness of the false authenticities of all cultures, these moments remind us that such an understanding of reality as a production was a view borrowed from the world in which he lived.

As Melville juxtaposes his own experiences of Typee rituals and practices with (the often corrupted) published accounts of these phenomena, his very sense of the authentic Typee requires the foil of informational writing—a kind of writing that is always inadequate, and often in the service of political and economic exploitation. Consider the following passage, which highlights for the reader the important distance between missionary rhetoric disguising itself as description and the secret reality of slavery in the Sandwich Islands. Here Melville defines his own understanding of reality against the goals of mere storytelling:

Look at Honolulu, the metropolis of the Sandwich Islands!—A community of disinterested merchants, and devoted self-exiled heralds of the Cross, located on the very spot that twenty years ago was defiled by the presence of idolatry. What a subject for an eloquent Bible-meeting orator! Nor has such an opportunity for display of missionary rhetoric been allowed to pass by unimproved!—But when these philanthropists send us such glowing accounts of one half of their labors, why does their modesty restrain them from publishing the other half of the good they have wrought?—Not until I visited Honolulu was I aware of the fact that the small remnant of the natives had been civilized into draught horses, and evangelized into beasts of burden. But so it is. (196)

Melville’s narration takes the template of missionary rhetoric (“civilized,” “evangelized”) and forces it upon the violence of slavery that such rhetoric tries to keep hidden.16 Through the use of a narrative mode interested
at once in the reality of Western colonialism and the textual accounts of such a reality, Melville reveals how the rhetoric of impartial description answers the needs of its writers’ colonial objectives. In a sense, the first version of *Typee* presented the reader with two narrative realms, each representing a particular phase of colonial imposition: the land of the Typee, where missionary writing had only recently begun its corruptive work; and the Sandwich Islands, where such rhetorical duplicity had culminated in both slavery and an embedded colonial presence. Melville’s own claim to authenticity thus relied on the broad backdrop of colonial contact to remind his readers of the unprecedented access he was affording them—and thus also implied the integrity of his own literary idiom. If he wished to reveal the hidden truth of slavery in the Sandwich Islands, he also used the authority of this cultural access to claim this untouched region for his own story about the nature of reality.

As part of such a rhetorical project, Melville links competing modes of writing with the goals of Western imperialism and colonialism, thereby implying the purity of his own writing as a way of capturing Typee culture. The parallel Melville draws between the Sandwich Islands and the island of the Typee is echoed by the parallel between the newspaper and travel writing, two modes of storytelling Melville portrays as marred by political and economic corruption. In opening the chapter in *Typee* that is most scathingly critical of missionary work, Melville briefly refers to the Sandwich Islands, where “the republican missionaries of Oahu cause to be gazetted in the Court Journal” the most regal and gracious descriptions of the king of the islands (188). Against the “gazetted” version of the honorable king, Melville employs racial caricature, arguing that “His ‘gracious majesty’ is a fat, lazy negro-looking blockhead, with as little character as power” (189). In the context of the first edition’s various exposures of missionary fabrications regarding Typee culture, Melville’s use of the newspaper in the more “civilized” Sandwich Islands suggests that the move from the travel writer’s misleading depictions of Typee culture to the newspaper’s more obviously corruptive mode of discourse is merely a matter of time; travel writing, Melville implies, marks the first step of a narrative imperialism that relies upon the reader’s demand for informational authenticity to violently rewrite the world.

Of course, the quieter implication of such a passage is that his own work, providing his reader access to the real face of imperialism, is defined by its distance from both travel writing and journalism. By exposing the press as an instrument of Western exploitation, Melville foregrounds his own access to a reality unexploited by the combined forces of journalism and colonization—one that Melville claims to both access and
protect by framing all acts of storytelling as politically corrupt. Outside of what we might call the colonial temporality set up by the juxtaposition of Typee with the Sandwich Islands, then, is an authorial persona undeceived by the misleading stories of the newspaper and travel writer, existing, it seems, outside of the unreal world of information exchange. And so Melville is telling a clear story about the march of the West into the Pacific as he disavows storytelling, and even the very idea of information, as tools of imperialism. In a sense, he has beaten the force of colonization to this inland spot and thus seeks to establish a literary relationship to his heretofore untouched—that is, authentic—subject. But he cannot do so without bringing in the Sandwich Islands and the colonial predicament by which the islands are defined. Searching for an idiom that could present the Typee to the Western reader outside of the story of colonization, Melville promises an authenticity markedly different from that which was embodied in missionary stories of cultural contact but which nonetheless relied on the presence of colonialism elsewhere to define itself.

Hence the deeper meaning of the telegraphic metaphor in *Typee*: its very presence reminds us that the author’s refusal to privilege storytelling as a method of organizing and interpreting the Typee was a way of being an outsider to both American and Typee cultures. In *Typee* Melville’s critique of newspaper writing combines with the metaphor of the “vocal telegraph” to expose the myths of narrative omniscience and transparency as important tools of political manipulation.\(^\text{17}\) Information exchange is a constant subject of *Typee*, in the various moments in which Tommo attempts to make sense of native communication, or in the example of the “vocal telegraph.” To see all cultures—either that of the Western writer, who hastily manufactures textual pictures of distant lands for the reader, or that of the Typee, who (like the slave revolters in “Benito Cereno”) place the bones of the dead on display for Western eyes—as performances, as Melville does, is to claim to occupy a rhetorical realm beyond the mythmaking of any culture.

As I have already shown, the early use of the telegraph as a guarantor of authenticity evolves into the more complex view that sees the island telegraph as a tool of cultural oppression. In other words, the telegraph morphs from a sign of the enlightenment Tommo promises his reader to a signifier that unveils this very faith in informational enlightenment as a culturally contingent myth. But long after Toby has departed from the scene, Melville again uses the telegraphic metaphor—this time not to foreground the impenetrableness of Typee culture but to communicate Tommo’s partial acculturation. In chapter 28 he describes the anticipation of his hosts as they await the return of a recently departed fishing party:
During their absence the whole population of the place were in a ferment, and nothing was talked about but “pehee, pehee” (fish, fish). Towards the time when they were expected to return the vocal telegraph was put into operation—the inhabitants, who were scattered throughout the length of the valley, leaped upon rocks and into trees, shouting with delight at the thoughts of the anticipated treat. As soon as the approach of the party was announced, there was a general rush of the men towards the beach; some of them remaining, however, about the Ti, in order to get matters in readiness for the reception of the fish, which were brought to the Taboo groves in immense packages of leaves, each one of them being suspended from a pole carried on the shoulders of two men. (206–7)

Perhaps the first thing to notice about this passage is its contrast with some of the more talked-about moments in Typee, at which Tommo foregrounds his own inability to make sense of the mystifying practices that confront his narrative eye. Here Melville’s narrator understands everything about how their society works, translating “pehee” without so much as a stutter and carefully outlining the role of each member. Just as significantly, here the telegraph functions in the narration precisely as it functions for the Typee itself: as an instrument for the rapid and efficient exchange of intelligence. While the chapter with the book’s first invocation of the island telegraph ended with Tommo and his captor hosts scrutinizing one another for information, this chapter ends with our narrator partaking in Typee culture: “When at Rome do as the Romans do, I held to be so good a proverb, that being in Typee I made a point of doing as the Typees did. Thus I ate poee-poee as they did” (209). Not bothering to put “poee-poee” inside quotation marks, Tommo’s acceptance of Typee custom occurs at the very moment when their telegraph is presented as the efficient, even picturesque tool of harmless, even benevolent cultural practice.

In the chapters that follow, though, Tommo’s life quickly becomes “one of absolute wretchedness” as he is daily “persecuted by the solicitations of some of the natives to subject myself to the odious operation of tattooing” (231). As he begins “bitterly to feel the state of captivity in which I was held,” he plots his escape. Tommo is like Melville in that he is only comfortable when he can imagine himself at the margins of any one culture—Western or otherwise. Though we can certainly read the significance of tattooing in light of Tommo’s unwillingness to give up the “whiteness” he maintains throughout his narrative, much of Melville’s career can be defined by this conspicuous refusal to be “tattooed” by any culture. After all, the implication that his true self requires the loud rejection of cultural standards of popularity is everywhere in Melville’s
correspondence—in his refusal of an invitation to be daguerreotyped for a magazine (“The fact is, almost everybody is having his ‘mug’ engraved nowadays... so that this test of distinction is getting to be reversed”); in his begging Hawthorne not to publish a review of Moby-Dick (for his fellow author “understood the pervading thought that impelled the book,” and so a public review would “rob” Melville of his “miserly delight”); in his striking confession that “it is my earnest desire to write those sort of books which are said to ‘fail.’” In politely refusing the offer to sit for a daguerreotype, for example, Melville suggests that “this test of distinction is getting to be reversed,” thereby using the marketplace’s own logic to imply his private autonomy from the gaze of the reading public. His almost gleeful unwillingness to sit for a daguerreotype (and his unapologetic inability to even spell the word) should remind us that it was not only the practices of Typee culture by which he felt persecuted. Because the telegraph signifies in Typee as a rhetorical counterpoint to the text’s invention of the Melvillean self, it should not surprise us that at the very moment the telegraph begins functioning in Typee the way it was functioning in 1845 America (that is, once Tommo sees the telegraph from the perspective of a cultural insider), it is a sign that Tommo is growing susceptible to the collective logic of culture itself, and so it is time for him to move on.

It is this ironic relationship to the technologies and practices of any one culture that is a defining characteristic of the Melvillean self. In his correspondence from the 1840s and 1850s, Melville’s rhetorical flight from the terms of antebellum culture seems more than a posture, more than the public persona of a writer who, as Charles Fiedelson once wrote, “from first to last... presents himself as an artist, and a conscious artist.” Asking Hawthorne not to publish a review of Moby-Dick, for example, Melville refers to the praise that Hawthorne shared with him outside of public view, implying that its value is far greater than anything that could ever appear in the realm of mere puffery: “Truth is ever incoherent, and when the big hearts strike together, the concussion is a little stunning. Farewell. Don’t write a word about the book. That would be robbing me of my miserly delight. I am heartily sorry I ever wrote anything about you—it was paltry” (213). Much like Hawthorne writing to Sophia, Melville here defines the intense authenticity of his shared contact with his friend against the paltriness of the print culture where he published “Hawthorne and His Mosses.” Indeed, Melville seems aware, in his reference to his “miserly delight,” of his own need to imagine a literary marketplace that fails to understand the genuine value of his books and Hawthorne’s appreciation for them.
But even as he rejects the superficial practices of the literary marketplace, his sense of himself as an artist is indebted to the contingencies of antebellum culture in ways he seems unable to acknowledge. Later in the same frenzied letter begging Hawthorne not to write publicly about *Moby-Dick*, Melville confesses: “I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb.” Desperately seeking some language for conveying the intense bond he feels with Hawthorne, he writes, “I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling” (212). After rejecting Hawthorne’s offer to write a review—indeed after having already signed his name—Melville is still unable to put down his pen: “I can’t stop yet. If the world was entirely made up of Magians, I’ll tell you what I should do. I should have a paper-mill established at one end of the house, and so have an endless riband of foolscap rolling in upon my desk; and upon that endless riband I should write a thousand—a million—billion thoughts, all under the form of a letter to you. The divine magnet is on you, and my magnet responds. Which is the biggest? A foolish question—they are One” (213). Earlier in the same letter, Melville had asked Hawthorne, “Lord, when shall we be done changing?” (213), and this closing image continues the theme by imagining a technology by which he could communicate in real time with his beloved Hawthorne—without mediation, without the artifice of publication and publicity.

Of course, Melville’s imagined technology resembles nothing if not Morse’s own electromagnetic telegraph: the responding magnets, the ribands of paper, even the “Magians” (evoking the technology’s supernatural implications). In a letter obsessed with the implied threat posed by mass culture to Hawthorne and Melville’s private bond, the author invokes telegraphic symbolism to underscore the intense and unmediated nature of their connection. This strange image, finally, suggests that as Melville imagined himself in perpetual flight from a “world of lies,” such an escape was really a rewiring of antebellum culture’s own machinery to serve the needs of the romancer’s self-invention. In much the same way, I would suggest, the presence of the island telegraph in *Typee* reminds us that Melville’s refusal to simply impart information to his audience was always something more complex than a philosophical or moral insight; rather, it was a way of looking at reality that connects the American author to the culture he never really left behind.