the past three decades, Melville’s “Benito Cereno” has increasingly been celebrated as a “prophetic” and morally enlightened work, one that anticipates the insights and priorities of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century criticism. Consider, for example, the introductory essay to a recent special issue of American Literature on “Aesthetics and the End(s) of Cultural Studies,” in which Christopher Castiglia and Russ Castronovo argue convincingly that “aesthetics disrupt the individual subject and provide the groundwork for an alternative, post-identity collectivism.” In making such a claim, Castiglia and Castronovo invoke the lessons of Melville’s novella: claiming that “Melville well understood both the danger and the potential of aesthetic encounters across histories, cultures, and institutions,” they use “Benito Cereno” to embrace a twenty-first-century study of aesthetics that can “facilitate collective becoming, and, with it, collective social interests.” Seeing in “Benito Cereno” the possibilities of a postracial and postnational mode of “post-identity collectivism,” Castiglia and Castronovo’s invocation of the text captures the appeal it holds to the twenty-first-century critical mind: brilliantly preoccupied with the white racist imagination’s complicity in the spectacle of slavery, “Benito Cereno” exemplifies the sort of narrative and epistemological self-consciousness valued by postcolonial and new historical models of reading.
But even as the novella helps us understand how the white literary imagination might resist and critique prevailing models of racial (and racist) consciousness, such an approach runs the risk of losing sight of “Benito Cereno” as both a romantic and a racialized text—a literary production that emerged out of its author’s subject position as a white American author whose hostility to popular models of spectatorship and reading cannot simply be celebrated as a model of national or global citizenship. As my previous chapters have suggested, to read Melville as an avatar of collective identity-making is to smooth over the contradictions of his writing, both public and private. If it is no doubt true that as an “exploration of the white racist mind” “Benito Cereno” presents a moral complexity and self-awareness that continues to be rare among white-authored depictions of slavery, it is also true that it is the work of an author whose fiercest hostility was reserved for what he considered the dehumanizing menace of mass identity.³

Indeed, one of the most meaningful tensions of Melville’s career was the pull between his self-styled “ruthless democracy” and his resentment of what he famously called “the tribe of general readers”—a tension so profound that both of these phrases come from the same 1851 letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne.⁴ The letter’s frenzied tone suggests that what he considered his radical democratic beliefs must also be understood as a way in which Melville attempted to distance himself from the threat of collective becoming:

I am told, my fellow-man, that there is an aristocracy of the brain. Some men have boldly advocated and asserted it. Schiller seems to have done so, though I don’t know much about him. At any rate, it is true that there have been those who, while earnest in behalf of political equality, still accept the intellectual estates. And I can well perceive, I think, how a man of superior mind can, by its intense cultivation, bring himself, as it were, into a certain spontaneous aristocracy of feeling,—exceedingly nice and fastidious,—similar to that which, in an English Howard, conveys a torpedo-fish thrill at the slightest contact with a social plebeian. So, when you see or hear of my ruthless democracy on all sides, you may possibly feel a touch of a shrink, or something of that sort. It is but nature to be shy of a mortal who boldly declares that a thief in jail is as honorable a personage as Gen. George Washington. This is ludicrous. But Truth is the silliest thing under the sun. Try to get a living by the Truth—and go to the Soup Societies. . . . It seems an inconsistency to assert unconditional democracy in all things, and yet confess a dislike to all mankind—in the mass. But not so. But it’s an endless sermon,—no more of it. (190–91)
Early in this passage, Melville suggests that it is Hawthorne who, due to an “intense cultivation,” possesses an “aristocracy of feeling” that might lead him to feel “a touch of a shrink” in hearing of Melville’s “ruthless democracy.” Over the course of these sentences, though, Melville’s own distaste for the masses emerges as a philosophical challenge to his own democratic views, as if he understands the need for the apparent contradiction to be resolved. And so when he invokes the paradox of his “unconditional democracy” and his “dislike” of the masses, he implies the value of the masses as a touchstone (like the plebes are for the English aristocrat) for the higher truth of his democratic views. Finally, his sense of such an argument as an “endless sermon” betrays his comprehension of the dialogic nature of his own identity: he can never get closer to communicating the “truth” of his belief than by continually invoking the masses as its opposite.

My readings of the “Old Zack” pieces and Typee have suggested that his ongoing attention to the inauthenticity of antebellum culture afforded him a language for the sort of self-invention attempted in the letter to Hawthorne: by devising storytelling strategies that foreground the social and narrative construction of reality, Melville negotiates a privileged and idiosyncratic relationship to truths beyond the reach of “the superficial skimmer of pages.” In what follows, I argue that Melville’s fragile identity as a democratic truth-seeker in a mass of misguided humanity found its most sustained literary expression in the complex narrative machinery of “Benito Cereno.” For the democratic vision of “Benito Cereno,” in which racial inferiority emerges as the product of the American captain Amasa Delano’s racist mind, is, like his letter to Hawthorne, also a condemnation of the middlebrow American reader. Just as Melville’s letter attempts to balance the author’s egalitarian beliefs and his hostility to “all of mankind—in the mass,” after all, so too does the narrative idiom of “Benito Cereno.” And just as it is critically disingenuous to privilege the letter’s claim to a ruthless democracy over its elitism, we should not simply embrace the story’s narrative agenda as the pure expression of its author’s progressive politics.

This chapter will read the novella as an articulation of romantic selfhood that relied on the status of slavery as the most hotly debated topic of mid-1850s America. As in so much of his work, the theoretical distance in “Benito Cereno” between Melville’s narrative strategies and the authenticating practices of an imagined mass American readership—here embodied by Captain Delano, “the blunt thinking American”—locates for the romantic author an escape from the collective logic of representative “Americanness.” In lieu of reading “Benito Cereno” as an attempt
at saving “the experiment of American democracy,” then, the following analysis of its place within mid-1850s abolitionist discourse portrays the text as a rhetorical high-wire act that sought for its author a space outside the archetypal thinking of mass culture. While today we can (and should) celebrate the rhetorical space envisioned by such a project as a potential site for “collective becoming,” when read in the context of Melville’s ongoing flight from antebellum culture, this realm seems more the space of white romantic individualism. And so as we continue the important critical project of using “Benito Cereno” to create “a new kind of reader . . . [who] would view her necessarily dispersed and uncertain attempts to read the narrative not as a tapping into an already-agreed-upon truth, but as establishing an understanding that is always provisional and subject to change,” we should also remember that, as his letter to Hawthorne suggests, Melville’s literary artistry required the existence of popular misreading in order to find a language for Melvillian truth. For if today’s reader sees the work as an attempt to convert the American reader to its own understanding of reality as something elusive to prevailing modes of description, we must also consider that the realization of such a goal would have meant the death of Melville as an artist.

In the famous final paragraphs of “Benito Cereno,” Amasa Delano is unable to comprehend the “shadow” cast upon his Spanish counterpart. From the perspective of the American captain, the narrative mystery of the slave revolt has been resolved, and the events of the rebellion have been undone: “‘You are saved,’ cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; ‘You are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?’” Rather than attending to the Spaniard’s famous response to Delano’s inquiry, let us linger for a moment on Delano’s astonishment. Such a reaction betrays the American’s unacknowledged commitment to narrative as a way of ordering and understanding the events he has experienced and witnessed. Consider the following passage from the text, one of many moments at which the American attempts to ascertain the authenticity of a story placed before him: “He recalled the Spaniard’s manner while telling his story. There was a gloomy hesitancy and subterfuge about it. It was just the manner of one making up his tale for evil purposes, as he goes. But if that story was not true, what was the truth? That the ship had unlawfully come into the Spaniard’s possession? But in many of its details . . . Don Benito’s story had been corroborated not only by the wailing ejaculations of the indiscriminate multitude, white and black, but likewise—what seemed impossible to be counterfeit—by the very expression and play of
every human feature, which Captain Delano saw” (68–69). Our narrator’s phrasing of “But if that story was not true, what was the truth?” suggests the process whereby the American imposes upon the category of “truth” the subtle logic of narrativity. Ultimately, it is Delano’s commitment to authenticating Don Benito’s story that renders him incapable of reflecting on the implications of that commitment.

Furthermore, Delano’s need to simply assess the authenticity of the story before him appears as the warping influence of American culture. When he reminds the Spanish captain that “yon bright sun . . . and the blue sea, and the blue sky” have all forgotten the events of the rebellion, Cereno famously responds that this is “because they have no memory . . . because they are not human” (116). According to both Cereno and Melville, then, Delano’s refusal to “moralize” upon a past that is “passed,” his assumption that the reality of the ship is a story to be either exposed as a hoax or authenticated as genuine, reflects a deformed and compromised humanity: while Cereno’s tragedy is the “shadow” cast over him by the moral and epistemological lessons of the slave revolt, Delano’s is that he attends to reality as if it were simply a narrative mystery.

Instead of focusing on portraying Cereno’s descent into grief and philosophical despair, Melville’s text is far more interested in critiquing Delano’s approach to reality and treating it as the key feature of a representative Americanness; like a patron of Barnum’s museum, or a skeptical reader of Typee, Delano skates along surfaces, obsessively searching out evidence to back up the truth claims in front of him. When, in the final paragraphs, the American is content to leave the story of the slave revolt in the past, Melville implicitly critiques Delano’s inability to comprehend his own logic as an epistemological contingency: the world for Delano simply exists in narrative form, and so when the story is resolved there is nothing more to reflect on. Here Melville juxtaposes the narrative puzzle that confronts Delano aboard the San Dominick with the “shadow” that exists beyond the narrative closure found by the American captain. Melville, of course, is tempting the reader to apply Delano’s superficial logic to his text: the secret of the San Dominick, after all, can be explained by means of an alternative story to the one contrived by the slaves (with the enforced participation of the Spanish sailors)—that is, the “true” story of the slave rebellion. But to simply locate this more authentic narrative among the official court papers is to miss, with Delano, all the meaning that resides beyond the ken of the story-seeking mind. In recasting the reality of slavery as a performance that exploits the American’s eagerness to devour the world in narrative form, “Benito Cereno” at once posits an argument about slavery as an institution grounded in racial role-playing
and formulates a critique of the American reader, whose appetite for true stories about slavery is recast by Melville as a superficial practice that threatens to make us something less than human.

Although countless critics have addressed the narrative complexities of “Benito Cereno,” I wish to briefly consider how Melville’s story confronts the distance between the fabric of his narration and the inaccessible reality of what is taking place aboard Cereno’s ship. While Melville’s narrator inhabits a third-person stance closely allied with Delano’s perspective, at times the prose of the narrator (by his own admission) moves too slowly, as in a film where the camera’s inability to keep up with the scene creates the very illusion of fast-paced action. Indeed, this seems to be Melville’s very point—not merely that language is incapable of keeping up with the world it claims to represent, but that the very act of storytelling fabricates the illusion of an authentic world beyond itself that moves too quickly for words. By distancing his narrator, if only slightly, from Delano’s perspective, Melville continuously foregrounds the narrative we read as a dramatization of the attempt to see reality as a story. At those moments that our narrator shares Delano’s point of view, Melville tempts us into accepting the validity of the story we read. And yet validity here is defined merely by the concurrence between our narrator’s and Delano’s perspectives, so that narrative authenticity is recast as consensus. Outside of the very quest for such consensus is the authorial view that recognizes the contingencies of all acts of narration.

As Delano’s boat approaches the San Dominick, for example, the reader apparently moves from the captain’s initial impression to a more objective understanding of what lies before him:

Upon gaining a less remote view, the ship, when made signally visible on the verge of the leaden-hued swells, with the shreds of fog here and there raggedly furring her, appeared like a white-washed monastery after a thunder-storm, seen perched upon some dun cliff among the Pyrenees. But it was no purely fanciful resemblance which now, for a moment, almost led Captain Delano to think that nothing less than a ship-load of monks was before him. Peering over the bulwarks were what really seemed, in the hazy distance, throngs of dark cowls; while, fitfully revealed through the open port-holes, other dark moving figures were dimly descried, as of Black Friars pacing the cloisters. (48)

Melville’s vividly descriptive language in the above passage masks the ambiguity of what is even being described here. While the narration seems to move from Delano’s association of the scene with a monastery to a
more authoritative view, in fact we move only from the suggestion of such an impression to that impression becoming a reality. The easily missed but important phrase “what really seemed,” with its paradoxical juxtaposition of subjectivity and objectivity (what does it mean to “really seem”?), performs for the reader the ease with which perception occupies the language of the authentically true: the narrator’s story becomes “true” merely by confirming Delano’s arbitrary sense of what is real. When, in the next paragraph, our narrator informs us that “upon a still nigher approach, this appearance was modified, and the true character of the vessel was plain,” we seem again to move from the inauthentic to the authentic. The only difference, of course, is that while the first move remained true for only a matter of sentences, this latter picture of “plain” reality—that the boat is “a Spanish merchantman of the first class; carrying negro slaves, amongst other valuable freight, from one colonial port to another” (48)—survives until it is overturned in the final pages of the story.

Of course, the novella’s critique of Delano’s appetite for an authentic story about slavery occurred in the wake of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s best-selling *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—that is, just as masses of American readers were brought into the slavery debate as readers. Amid this development, Melville devised a literary idiom that, in exploring the implications of hungering after a true textual picture of slavery, was defined largely by its contrast with the objectives and practices of mainstream abolitionist storytelling. This aspect of “Benito Cereno,” its refusal to privilege storytelling as a means of accessing the true face of slavery, is most thoroughly understood when we consider that, more than just a subject of moral disagreement, slavery in the mid-1850s was at the center of a public conversation about the relationship between reading and reality. In the wake of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, abolitionist and proslavery writers argued back and forth about what life in the American South actually looked like. Many writers on both sides published “firsthand” narratives seeking a true picture of American slavery, while each movement attacked the authenticity of its opponent’s partisan reports. To much of the country abolitionism equaled radicalism, and at the heart of this view was the belief that the abolitionists’ published depictions of slavery greatly exaggerated the life of the typical slave. Neither side could win a battle of pure reportage, for each side of the slavery debate could (and often did) find anecdote to answer anecdote, or newspaper article to answer newspaper article. By the middle part of the decade, as the volleys continued to fly back and forth, Ralph Waldo Emerson found no end to the rhetorical circuit of accusation and denial: in his 1855 “Lecture on Slavery,” he concluded that “the subject seems exhausted . . . endless negation is a flat affair.”

As commen-
tators debated which depictions of slavery were most truthful, Emerson distanced himself from the public by wading into the question of slavery while portraying it as an “exhausted” subject. Emerson’s description of the act of debating slavery as a mere “affair” provides a useful touchstone for approaching the complexity of Melville’s own invocation of slavery in “Benito Cereno.” With its notorious manipulation of narrative perspective, “Benito Cereno” could uproot the assumptions of both the Stowe and anti-Stowe camps, portraying the popular discourse about slavery as a “flat affair.”

When “Benito Cereno” is read in the broader context of Melville’s career, the debates over Stowe’s novel seem to offer Melville a cultural ideal of authenticity against which he could verbalize his deeper understanding of reality. But even more significantly, the example of “Benito Cereno” illustrates the racialized nature of Melville’s ongoing claim to a foundational “axis of reality”—not only the racial logic at work in the narrative itself but also the extent to which Melville’s artistic ideals were a marker of white privilege. To make such an argument, I want to briefly illustrate how the popular debates regarding the authenticity of Stowe’s best-selling novel relied on the idea of a textually representable reality to prescribe clearly racialized roles for the white author and the black eyewitness. By interrogating the racial logic of Stowe’s *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (in which she sought to defend the authenticity of her novel), I will suggest, as others have before me, that the realist ethos of 1850s white abolitionism reserved for the white author the privilege of arbitrating between fiction and reality, while relegating the black former slave to the role of eyewitness. My point in doing so is to unveil how the act of telling stories about slavery functioned as a racializing force at the moment Melville was writing “Benito Cereno”—a force that, in imposing its narrative logic onto reality, imposed its racial logic as well. While many excellent scholars have highlighted these racial dynamics of the abolitionist marketplace, my ultimate goal is to reveal that when Melville indicts the logic of storytelling as a source of racial and national mythmaking, he is rejecting the Stoweian ideal of white progressive authorship in favor of his own romantic ideal, one that could not entirely shed the racial logic of mainstream abolitionism even as it rejected its claims of literary realism.

While the publication and subsequent popularity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the early 1850s predictably led to charges of invention and misrepresentation, its success also initiated a public debate about the implications of using literature to carry out the goals of social reportage. In arguing back and forth about what slavery actually looked like, abolitionists and apologists considered what it meant to represent a real-world problem in a liter-
ary idiom grounded in artifice. At the same time, as conversations about the conditions of life in the South became more heated, slave testimony became even more valuable to the abolitionist cause. In other words, as the slavery debates grew more theoretical in considering the relationship between storytelling and reality, abolitionists relied more than ever on firsthand accounts of genuine slaves to prove the claims made in Stowe’s novel.

In her *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe relied on newspaper stories, advertisements, and legal codes to answer her critics. But as much as the *Key* may be read as a documentation of her novel’s depiction of slavery, it should also be approached as a defense of fiction as a tool of reportage and social protest. In the sixth chapter of the *Key*, for example, Stowe examines the legal requirements for protecting slaves in an attempt to justify her depiction of Legree’s violent treatment of Tom. After opening with brief excerpts from legal codes in South Carolina and Louisiana, Stowe writes, “Let us give a little sketch, to show how much it does amount to.” The “sketch” Stowe includes is an account written by Angelina Grimké Weld (originally included in Theodore Weld’s *Slavery as It Is*) of her family’s plantation in South Carolina. Weld’s “sketch” begins with the claim that “the treatment of plantation slaves cannot be fully known, except by the poor sufferers themselves, and their drivers and overseers” (90). The reason this is so, Weld explains, is that she, like all southern women, “never visited the fields where the slaves were at work, and knew almost nothing of their condition.” Even the slaveholders, Weld reports, “must, to a considerable extent, take the condition of their slaves on trust, from the reports of their overseers.” Finally, Weld concludes, “these slaveholders (the wealthier class) are, I believe, almost the only ones who visit the North with their families; and Northern opinions of slavery are based chiefly on their testimony” (91).

In one of the most intriguing moments in the *Key*, Stowe responds to Weld’s account of the remoteness of the “reality” of southern slavery by composing a story: “Now, suppose, while the master is in Charleston, enjoying literary leisure . . .” (91). Soon Stowe inserts into her fictional narrative a character named “Master Legree,” who “finds himself, one sunshiny, pleasant morning” in the middle of Stowe’s tale. While moments such as these seek to defend sentimental storytelling as a viable antislavery tool, such writing relies on the black body remaining an object and thus carves out two distinct and distinctly racialized notions of abolitionist selfhood: the white author, who mediates between fact and fiction to expose the emotional horrors of slavery, and the black eyewitness, whose value is determined by the meaning-making voice of white abolitionism.
In the *Key*, Stowe places herself between fact and fiction, arbitrating for the reader between the two.

Weld’s claim that “the treatment of plantation slaves cannot be fully known, except by the poor sufferers themselves, and their drivers and overseers” holds the slave’s account of slavery as the gold standard of such documentation.15 In a passage typical of her use of such materials, Stowe takes a long excerpt from (what she calls) “Life of Frederick Douglass” to “show that the case of George Harris [from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*] is by no means so uncommon as might be supposed” (19). Stowe then imports a paragraph from the narrative of Josiah Henson to prove the authenticity of a scene from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in which a slave auction leads to the breaking up of a family. As Stowe relies on slave writing to validate her claims about slavery, she tells her reader that she has discussed such scenes “with a very considerable number of liberated slaves . . . and, what was most affecting about it, the narrator often considered it so much a matter of course as to mention it incidentally, without any particular emotion” (19). Here the white editorial voice determines the value of slave expression, essentially recasting the slave’s voice as meaningful in a way that the slave’s own words fail to register.

In an even more telling bit of phrasing later in the same chapter, Stowe is explicit about the irrelevance of slave voice: “But we shall be told the slaves are all a lying race, and that these are lies which they tell us. There are some things, however, about these slaves, which cannot lie. Those deep lines of patient sorrow upon the face; that attitude of crouching and humble subjection; that sad, habitual expression of hope deferred, in the eye,—would tell their story, if the slave never spoke” (20). Stowe’s progression from the anticipated concerns regarding slave reliability to her cataloguing of those physical features that prove the horrors of slavery—sounding much like an auctioneer trumping the qualities of a genuine slave—suggests that the slaves’ value resides primarily in their status as objects. As Dwight McBride writes, in the abolitionist marketplace the black body was “more truthful than the word of white abolitionists.”16 Thus Stowe’s white abolitionism could find value in such bodies even “if the slave never spoke.” White authorship (which Stowe depicts as the humane unearthing of the emotional dimensions of slave suffering) relied on the public objectification of the black body. And even more significantly, Stowe implies that the slave’s voice could never do more for the cause of abolitionism than the voiceless black body—for all that the passage allows the former slave testifier to do is “to tell their story,” which the body as object does on its own. Slave “voice,” then, threatened, somewhat paradoxically, to vouchsafe
the slave’s own objectification by transforming the slave’s body into a narrative—by turning an object on public display into a “life” for sale in the abolitionist marketplace.

The racialized prescriptions outlined here were even more explicit in other defenses of Stowe’s novel. In F. C. Adams’s *Uncle Tom at Home: A Review of the Reviewers and Repudiators of Uncle Tom’s Cabin by Mrs. Stowe*, the author moves through an entire cast of slave characters, asking them to testify to the realities of life in the South. Near the end of his defense, Adams attacks southern laws that allowed state governments to recapture slaves freed by their owners upon the owner’s death. Adams, who spends much of the book addressing the proslavery southern author William Gilmore Simms, invites Simms to visit an actual slave woman and her family who have lived for three years in the “work-house” of the court, awaiting an order of sale: “You have said to the world that the book was a tissue of falsehood. We say to the world, there are truths of Mrs. Stowe’s book, staring you in the face; and before you again raise a pen against them, go to that municipal slave pen . . . [and] you will find Eliza Price and her child. Her cell is seven-by-four feet, or nearly, and if you cannot get *into it*, call her to the door—sit down by her, ask why she was put in there instead of the jail? . . . Listen to the story of her wretched life. Imagine it just as full of poetry as if it came from white lips, for her soul is *white*, and her lips are nearly so.”

Adams’s evidence sits in her cell, ready to refute apologist objections and skepticism. But while Adams gives Price a voice, it is one that is limited to the details of her life (“Let the story of her wretched life . . .”), so that the black voice prescribed by white abolitionism is prefabricated to conform to the narrative shape that vouchsafed its success as a commodity. Over the course of the passage, the author moves from an account of “Mrs. Stowe’s book” to the story told by Price, which lacks the poetry of Stowe’s writing. As in the *Key*, here Adams performs the importance of sentimental fiction to infuse the black body with a “poetry” that could only come from white lips. The function of the white author, then, is to mediate between the human evidence who sits voiceless in her prison of authenticity and a readership who demands the “poetry” of sentimental storytelling. In the phrase “as if it came from white lips,” Adams accepts the distinction implied by Stowe’s *Key* between the black body serving as evidence and the white author whose words vouchsafe the value of such a body. In Stowe-like fashion, Adams’s use of Eliza Price betrays slave “voice” as the means by which the public body—that of the imprisoned Price, who sits in a cell on display for the white audience—becomes a narrative object, a story for white consumption.
The predicament of the slave eyewitness provides a useful context for comprehending Melville’s own invocation of slavery. After all, the closing image of “Benito Cereno”—after the San Dominick is taken back from the slaves by Captain Delano’s men, after the legal documents that attempt to piece together the facts of the rebellion, after the final conversation between Delano and Don Benito—is the severed, unspeaking head of the African slave Babo. Melville’s final paragraph is less interested in giving a clear sequence of concluding events than in placing black silence at center stage as the curtain falls on the narrative: “Some months after [the conclusion of the trial], dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites; and across the Plaza looked towards St. Bartholomew’s church, in whose vaults slept then, as now, the recovered bones of Aranda; and across the Rimac bridge looked towards the monastery, on Mount Agonia without; where, three months after being dismissed by the court, Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader” (116–17). Does Cereno die before or after Babo is executed, his body burned, and his head fixed upon a pole? Melville leaves the chronology vague, opting instead to focus on the “voiceless end” of “the black,” on the very fact of black voicelessness in the story. Babo’s voicelessness is further foregrounded by the closing line of the penultimate paragraph, in which our narrator informs us that “on the testimony of the sailors alone rested the legal identity of Babo” (116). Of course, critics have long recognized that when Melville introduces legal documentation in the final pages of “Benito Cereno,” he does more than ask his reader to accept these documents as proof of what occurred aboard the San Dominick. Highlighting how the identity of “Babo” is produced by the one-sided legal testimony, and then confronting the reader with the African’s lack of voice among the text’s various accounts of what happened aboard the ship, Melville exposes black identity as a product of white storytelling.

But Melville’s use of Babo’s untalking head as a closing image for his narrative relies upon the unspeaking slave as a symbol for another white-authored text—his own—even as the author’s use of the legal documents foregrounds Babo’s identity as a product of white narrative. This maneuver allows Melville to redefine the fact of Babo’s voicelessness according to his own narrative logic: while Babo’s silence initially represents the untold story of the slave rebellion from Babo’s perspective, in Melville’s hands the untalking head of Babo comes to represent the process by which white attempts at composing and authenticating narrative accounts of slavery (Stowe’s Key, for example) render the black slave voiceless. For
the text’s use of Babo’s untalking head embodies how the white appetite for slave “voice” objectified the black speaking subject by predetermining the parameters of that voice. Revealing all attempts at narrativizing slavery as inadequate, Melville’s text recasts the reality of slavery as an unrepresentable myth produced by the very attempt at rendering slavery narratable, a myth that upholds the racial hierarchies on which slavery is founded. Hence the chronological ambiguity of the story’s final paragraph: eschewing the neat narrativization of events in favor of the closing image of Babo’s severed head, Melville’s conclusion reveals to his reader how the desire for the narrative containment of slavery privileges the racial mythmaking on which slavery thrives, inventing both the category of genuine blackness and the mythic “voice” that promises to render this blackness meaningful for the white audience.

The authorial relationship to the reality of slavery on display here replaces Stowe’s ideal of white abolitionist authorship—the author as purveyor of a kind of realism that can be fully authenticated—with Melville’s own romantic ideal—the author as arbiter of reality, who conspicuously opposes Stowe’s reader by locating the deeper truths of slavery in the “shadow” of narrative. By highlighting the narrative construction of both national and racial taxonomies, Melville articulates the “post-identity” space that today’s critics understandably celebrate. As in his letter to Hawthorne, however, a fundamental paradox of “Benito Cereno” is that in Melville’s imagination this was the space not only of ruthless democracy but also of ruthless individualism, a realm where the categories and practices of the masses could be seen for the delusions they are. Moreover, it is Melville’s very desire to rhetorically transcend the empty signifiers of American culture that betrays the contingencies of his own subject position: while his invocation of a white “gaze” witnessing the severed head of “the black” quietly claims a foundational perspective outside slavery’s binary racial logic, this imagined relationship to the question of slavery revises and reimagines a particular model of white authorial practice and, as such, reflects an ideal of authorship unavailable to nonwhite writers of the era.

But in order to understand this romantic logic as a racial privilege, we must be willing to apply to “Benito Cereno” the same critical paradigm that has long comprehended the storytelling forms of ex-slave authors as strategies of self-invention. A generation of critics has taught us that the slave writer’s dual role as speaking subject and narrative object led to a slave narrative tradition rich in formal complexity. And so it no longer suffices to say that the slave narrative depicts a progression from captivity to freedom—from an oppressive and contingent identity violently shaped
by the social practices underlying slavery to the narrator’s discovery, upon escaping the South, of an autonomous selfhood in which the escaped slave partakes of a universal freedom. Certainly William Andrews is correct in arguing that for escaped slaves such as Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown the writing of autobiography marked “the final, climactic act in the drama of [former slaves’] lifelong quests for freedom.”

Yet the former slave’s entrance into the antebellum print marketplace has more recently been understood as an arrival into a new network of social and economic contingencies. Saidiya Hartman’s description of the postbellum black experience can easily be applied to the predicament of the fugitive-slave abolitionist: “Emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of knowledge and racial subjection.”

By the early 1850s, black writers responded to abolitionism’s demand for particular kinds of stories by departing from the conventions of traditional slave autobiography. Frederick Douglass’s revisions to his life story between 1845 and 1855, for example, suggest an increasingly complicated relationship between the author and abolitionism. In My Bondage and My Freedom (1855) Douglass famously attacks the expectations and demands placed upon him as an abolitionist lecturer. Douglass’s exposure of the abolitionist attempt to “pin me down to my simple narrative” highlights the relationship between the logic of storytelling and black commodification in the abolitionist marketplace that I have been describing. The slave, Douglass implies, becomes a commodity at the precise moment when his life enters the marketplace—that is, when the life of Frederick Douglass becomes the “Life of Frederick Douglass.” And underlying such a process, Douglass argues, is the merging of selfhood and narrativity that allowed white abolitionism to produce the black speaking and writing subject as “genuine.” In a perfect illustration of this subtle merging of life and “life,” John Collins tells Douglass, “Be yourself . . . and tell your story” (367)—as if the two were naturally synonymous. One could argue that Douglass’s response to Collins was to write a second autobiography—so that in keeping more than one story of his life in public circulation the ex-slave writer could foreground the distance between the production(s) of his life and the Frederick Douglass who existed outside of the antebellum print marketplace.

One of the most significant responses to the dilemma of the ex-slave author was William Wells Brown’s Clotel; or, the President’s Daughter, which appeared in 1853 in England. As many critics have pointed out, the novel’s mixing of fictional and nonfictional texts problematized the role of eyewitness imposed upon the black writer by white abolitionism.
In fact, Brown’s evasion of the role of first-person storyteller began at least as far back as 1850, when he briefly toured England with a series of twenty-four paintings that were marketed as *William Wells Brown’s Original Panoramic Views of the Scenes in the Life of an American Slave.* In the published pamphlet that accompanied the panorama, Brown writes the following about his panorama’s twelfth picture: “The view now before us is the first scene in which the writer is represented in this Panorama.” His panorama included images based on the published narratives of other well-known escaped slaves (such as Henry Bibb), but by far the life most often represented in the panorama was his own. What is striking about these passages in the pamphlet is not his choice of subject matter but the rhetorical approach Brown takes in describing his own life. Eschewing the traditional autobiographical voice associated with slave eyewitness testimony, Brown writes about a representation of his own experiences under slavery in the third person. The decision to speak in third-person voice reveals the singular value a medium such as the panorama held for a black abolitionist like Brown. As an authentic former slave on the abolitionist lecture circuit, Brown was expected to speak in a first-person voice, one that could tell an autobiographical story of life in the American South. If the lived experience of the former slave was transformed into a commodity the moment it appeared in public—the moment, that is, when the slave’s life became the “life” of an authentic slave—narrativizing the details of his own life meant putting into circulation (in lectures or in writing) a public version of himself that gained value solely from the meaning that white abolitionism found in his story. Thus the panorama afforded the former slave eyewitness a rhetorical means of physically removing himself from both the narrative machinery by which slavery was represented and the first-person voice by which the slave eyewitness was objectified and commodified.

Nowhere concerned with opposing an “inmost Me” to the fictions of antebellum culture, Brown’s reliance on representations of himself foregrounded and manipulated his status as an object in the public’s eye. Pointing to someone else’s visual representation of his own life (for he tells us that these scenes “have been copied by skilful artists in London”) allowed Brown to exploit the physical distance between his body and the “life” that sat upon the abolitionist stage as a public commodity. Similarly, when Brown published *Clotel* in 1853 the novel appeared with a strange prefatory autobiography, “Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown,” in which Brown again adopted a third-person perspective on his own life, even bringing in excerpted first-person passages from his 1847 autobiography and from his abolitionist lectures—so that Brown’s
authorial persona implied an editorial mastery over the public accounts of his life. Such an editorial posture connected the prefatory “Life and Escape” with the narrative strategies of *Clotel*, which relied heavily on excerpts from newspaper extracts and legal documents and borrowed an entire plotline from Lydia Maria Child’s story “The Quadroons.” Ultimately, the authorial self-portrait that emerges in both “Life and Escape” and *Clotel* rejects the notion of an authentic black voice, positing in its place a minstrel-like authorial figure who carefully manipulates public texts. As an answer to white abolitionism’s demand for a stable voice that embodied authentic blackness, the literary innovations of the 1853 text created a strange, hybrid text that flaunted the instability of its varied textual productions of black selfhood.

In the 1853 “Life and Escape,” which continually frames and excerpts Brown’s earlier first-person texts, Brown at once circulates competing stories of his life (à la Douglass) and reveals this self-mastery to be a form of economic control. Not allowing his reader to overlook the former slave’s status as a commodity, Brown draws a parallel between his economic manipulation of whites (in the anecdotes excerpted from the autobiography and his lectures) and his manipulation of the (i.e., his) textual “life” from which he takes these very excerpts. In one of Brown’s lectures excerpted by his third-person narrator, the lecture’s first-person voice describes the process by which the young slave learned to read. Importantly, the later, third-person narrator picks up the first-person account at the moment when Brown enters the northern marketplace, having earned a shilling for an unnamed job—as if there is no textual “I” without a particular economy to render it meaningful:

This was not only the only shilling I had, but it was the first I had received after obtaining my freedom, and that shilling made me feel, indeed, as if I had a considerable stock in hand. What to do with my shilling I did not know. . . . After considerable thinking upon the subject, I laid out 6d. for a spelling-book, and the other 6d. for sugar candy or barley sugar. Well, now, you will all say that the one 6d. for the spelling-book was well laid out; and I am of the opinion that the other was well laid out too; for the family in which I worked for my bread had two little boys, who attended the school every day, and I wanted to convert them into teachers; so I thought that nothing would act like a charm so much as a little barley sugar. (35–36)

Brown next describes how he manipulated the white children into teaching him all the letters of the alphabet. As in the above passage, here Brown
highlights his economic mastery over the children: “I kept those two boys on my sixpenny worth of barley sugar for about three weeks. Of course I did not let them know how much I had” (37). Such a careful focus on economic manipulation allows Brown to foreground himself as an economic production: by the end of the excerpted section of his speech, Brown tells his audience, “I next obtained an arithmetic, and then a grammar, and I stand here tonight, without having had a day’s schooling in my life” (38). While the first-person “William” of the lecture emerges as an economic production, the third-person narrator allows Brown to expose “voice” as one means by which this production is achieved—for Brown frames his own “I” to highlight the relationship between voice and the textual production of “William.” “Voice,” it seems, is not so much a means of expression as a mode of production.

This foregrounding of “William” as a textual production occurs from the opening paragraphs, in which our narrator introduces us to the region where William the slave grew up. The narrative of “Life and Escape” opens with the following statement: “William Wells Brown, the subject of this narrative, was born a slave in Lexington, Kentucky, not far from the residence of the late Hon. Henry Clay” (17). After describing William’s move with his master to “a beautiful and fertile valley” in Missouri, Brown’s second paragraph begins in the following way: “Here the slaves were put to work under a harsh and cruel overseer named Cook. A finer situation for a farm could not have been selected in the state. With climate favourable to agriculture, and soil rich, the products came in abundance. At an early age William was separated from his mother, she being worked in the field, and he as a servant in his master’s medical department. When about ten years of age, the young slave’s feelings were much hurt at hearing the cries of his mother, while being flogged for being a few minutes behind the other hands in reaching the field” (17–18). The striking contrast in tone between the first and second sentences—in which Brown describes the cruelty of slavery and then relies upon a picturesque mode of third-person description—highlights how abolitionist rhetoric objectifies the slave. If these ways of narrating strike the reader as paradoxical, that seems to be the very point: the narration moves back and forth between the disengaged stance of a tourist and sharp reminders of the violence of slavery to show how both narrative modes objectify their subjects. Brown cloaks his descriptions in the passive voice to make the language itself, with its indirect, distanced, even objective tone, echo the violence of the floggings Brown describes. By telling us that William “was separated,” that his feelings “were much hurt,” by saying only that his mother was “being worked in the field . . . [and] being flogged,” Brown links the
attempts of white abolitionism to contain slave experience to the violence of slavery itself: the passive voice literally makes William, “the subject of this narrative,” into a grammatical object.

And throughout “Life and Escape” Brown’s writing charts this very process. Almost immediately after the above passage, violence bursts through, shifting the tourist’s passive voice to active. In the very next sentences, Brown states: “He heard her cry, ‘Oh, pray! oh, pray! oh, pray!’ These are the words which slaves generally utter when imploring mercy at the hands of their oppressors. The son heard it, though he was some way off. He heard the crack of the whip and the groans of his poor mother. The cold chill ran over him, and he wept aloud; but he was a slave like his mother, and could render her no assistance” (18). Here William-as-slave appears more directly, as the subject who hears and suffers. Framing slavery’s violence with the narrator’s explanatory commentary (“These are the words which slaves generally utter”), Brown’s writing emulates the white attempt to determine the value of direct slave emotion. Such a narrative maneuver helps us understand Hartman’s claim that the white attempt to imagine slave emotion is actually an act of distancing: “The gaze shifts from the spectacle to the inner recesses of feeling and desire—that is, the emotional substrate that presumably resides within the ‘poor slave,’ which mutes the shock of the scene and mitigates its ghastly incommensurability with the suggestion of containment.”

In lieu of capturing (and thus containing) William’s pain, Brown refuses to narrate in the first person—so that William’s distance from his mother is paralleled by the narrator’s distance from William. As the helplessness of William’s position yanks the narrative back in the final sentence above, the narrator returns to the passive voice. “He was taught,” the narrator tells us, “by the most bitter experience, that nothing could be more heart-rending than to see a dear and beloved mother or sister tortured by unfeeling men, and to hear her cries, and not be able to render the least aid” (18). William’s experience of hearing his mother being whipped must capitulate to the meaning-making demands of storytelling; William’s pain, it seems, must culminate in a lesson. And thus Brown reveals how abolitionism’s demand for an authentic narrative account of slavery transforms the speaking slave as “expressive” subject into a narrative object.

Herein lies the significance of what Andrews calls the “novelization” of slave writing at this moment. Clotel, the first African American novel, emerged out of the ex-slave writer’s singular position between the theoretical implications of the Uncle Tom debates on one hand and the commodifying threat of abolitionism on the other. If a Stowe-like authorial distance from the goals of strict description was a marker of a
productive abolitionist selfhood, the former slave’s status as fetish object imposed a violent and paradoxical notion of individualism: slave subjectivity was only meaningful as a public text. In *Clotel*, then, the idea of a genuine black voice appears not as an authentic and liberating discovery on the part of the ex-slave writer but as a cultural product whose value was predetermined by abolitionism. Instead of giving Brown’s own testimony as a former slave, *Clotel* exposes and undercuts the white attempt at commodifying black experience. Upon the death of Mr. Peck, a southern slaveholding parson, Peck’s daughter Georgiana walks with Carlton, her suitor, as they overhear the singing of her father’s slaves. In an oft-cited scene, Carlton is surprised to hear in the songs that the slaves “pretend” to grieve but are in fact “mighty glad” that their master “will no more trample on the neck of the slave.” Georgiana, however, informs her suitor that “it is from these unguarded expressions of the feelings of the Negroes, that we should learn a lesson.”

Upon returning to their house, the couple encounters the same slave they had heard singing only moments earlier, now “looking as solemn and as dignified as if he had never sung or laughed in his life” (156). After Georgiana lectures Peck about the value of the slave songs, she goes on to philosophize about the universal faith in “the idea that [the slave] was born to be free” that survives in the slave’s heart even in the face of oppression. By framing this white experience of black expression within Georgiana’s arguments about slave humanity, Brown portrays the very category of the “genuine” as a function of white signification, for there is no place in the scene for slave utterance outside of the eyes of white characters: even when the slave thinks he is alone, the white Georgiana overhears him. While the scene looks on the surface like a somewhat typical rejection of apologist claims of slave contentment, Brown’s careful avoidance here of slave subjectivity outside the ken of a white audience confronts the abolitionist appetite for a picture of genuine black expression—that is, for a trace of “black reality” outside of any white frame. By portraying (in Georgiana’s lecture) this appetite and then refusing to give a glimpse of any slave utterance outside of the marketplace that demands it, Brown confronts the abolitionist marketplace with its own inescapable logic—and subtly associates the myth of pure self-expression with the terms of white narrativity. As Georgiana tells Peck, “It is from these unguarded expressions . . . that we should learn a lesson,” as if black emotion exists solely for the production of white knowledge.

As in “Life and Escape,” in *Clotel* Brown manipulates his own value as a genuine former slave to constantly flaunt the slave self’s status as capital in the abolitionist marketplace. At one of the only moments in
the entire novel where the author refers to himself explicitly, he appears with no voice at all. After excerpting a Boston church deed outlining its segregationist pewholder policy, Brown writes: “Such are the conditions upon which the Rowe Street Baptist Church, Boston, disposes of its seats. The writer of this is able to put that whole congregation, minister and all, to flight, by merely putting his coloured face in that church. We once visited a church in New York that had a place set apart for the sons of Ham. . . . It had two doors; over one was B.M.—black men; over the other B.W.—black women” (180–81). Brown’s salient refusal here to write in the first-person singular—his move from “the writer of this” to “we”—signals a careful avoidance of an authorial voice that could be at all confused with the autobiographical writing associated with the slave eyewitness. While he uses his own position as the editor of a range of actual texts to validate one of his authenticating texts, he does so as a voiceless black body whose mere appearance “puts the whole congregation . . . to flight.” After referring to himself as “the writer of this,” Brown places his body on display with the odd phrasing of “merely putting his coloured face in that church”—so that at the rare moment when Brown writes autobiographically, he simultaneously equates such a maneuver with his own self-objectification. Describing his body as something “put” before a white congregation, Brown confronts his reader with the striking contrast between the public roles of author and slave eyewitness.

Furthermore, Brown relies on fiction to fabricate a textual self-portrait in the pages of *Clotel* that flaunts its own contingent status, for the “William Wells Brown” produced by *Clotel* (like the “William” who stands before an abolitionist audience in “Life and Escape”) is largely a textual production. At the end of the novel, Brown includes a “Conclusion” in which he addresses the question of the reliability of his novel’s account of slavery. Here Brown informs his reader that he has “personally participated in many of these scenes” and has “derived” many of the other stories from various sources: “Having been for nearly nine years employed on Lake Erie, I had many opportunities for helping the escape of fugitives, who, in return for the assistance they received, made me the depositary of their suffering and wrongs. Of their relations I have made free use. To Mrs. Child, of New York, I am indebted for part of a short story. American Abolitionist journals are another source from whence some of the characters appearing in my narrative are taken. All these have combined to make up my story” (245). The economic tone of Brown’s conclusion (e.g., use of the words “depositary,” “indebted,” and, later, his “resources”) underscores the author’s acknowledgment of his position within a marketplace and links his self-production here with the first-person William of “Life
"Benito Cereno" and the Blunt-Thinking American

and Escape.” If “Life and Escape” exposes abolitionism as the ultimate determinant of the value of slave utterance, Clotel further evades the promise of a genuine black voice within this marketplace. Brown’s confession that “all these have combined to make up my story” is not what it appears to be: instead of undercutting his own authority as a creative author, the claim challenges the assumption of an autonomous selfhood on which the phrase “my story” relies. In place of the autobiographical writing expected of the black abolitionist, Brown has given his audience a hybrid text that has no “I” at the center. If “all these have combined” to make what must be called “my story,” then the authorial self emerges as the product of storytelling, not as its source.

As I have already suggested, Brown’s flaunting of the self as a discursive product foregrounds both the romantic and the racialized dimensions of Melville’s treatment of slavery. At its most basic level, Melville’s deconstruction of racial and national taxonomies—his celebrated argument that these categories are largely the product of the (white American) appetite for an authentic story—was, like Brown’s related project, a response to his own subject position: in pointing to white storytelling instead of embodying it, Melville, like Brown, sought to elude a model of antislavery authorship shaped by the intensifying debates over slavery. But while Brown responds to the demands on black authorship by inserting himself into his novel and flaunting the contingencies of black identity, Melville attributes the categories of “American,” “Spanish,” “black,” and “white” to the narrative logic of Delano’s mind—thereby distancing the text’s authorial persona from Delano’s white epistemology. When read alongside Brown’s manipulation of those public masks that make up the spectacle of antebellum life, Melville’s rhetorical flight from the surfaces of antebellum culture comes into focus as the calling card of white romanticism. As Paul Gilmore writes of Clotel, “Brown turns to fiction not to escape the problematic of stereotyped black representability, but to negotiate the objectification and commodification of the black image . . . thus opening up the possibility of a blackfaced version of literary manhood.”

Instead of joining the game, Melville’s response to the racial role-playing of slavery and abolitionism is to claim a foundational perspective that locates the romantic imagination outside the fictions of nation and race. The point is not that Melville is guilty of racism but that his desire for an authority over the racial role-playing of slavery, even as it frames and reject’s Delano’s model of white epistemology, cannot escape the whiteness of his ontological ideals.

Indeed, these racial contingencies of Melville’s artistic ideals would reemerge two years later, in The Confidence-Man, his final novel and the
last piece of his fiction that would appear during his lifetime. Much like “Benito Cereno,” *The Confidence-Man* relies on the popular preoccupation with the criteria of authentication and documentation to articulate a totalizing vision of “America” on which the romantic author could look down. Relying on the status of the Mississippi River as a fluid, all-encompassing symbol that could contain the variety of the nation within a unifying representative logic—as it had, for example, in the various Mississippi River panoramas of the late 1840s—Melville portrays the nation as a collective ship of fools. Like Delano, those aboard the steamer *Fidèle* surrender their humanity not simply by being humbugged but by approaching reality exclusively through the question of confidence—so that their own identities are no more stable than the shape-shifting con man that preys on them. But while we might be tempted to agree with the popular critical assessment that in Melville’s work the artist himself is a kind of confidence man, the romancer’s presence in the novel appears to be defined against the superficial world of the *Fidèle*, where all identities depend on the public’s confidence. Neither one of the masses nor confidence man (whose identity and financial well-being depend on the superficial practices of the public), the romantic author is perhaps most clearly aligned with the mysterious stranger of the final chapter, who overhears a conversation between two fellow travelers, and, still in darkness, asks, “Who’s that describing the confidence-man?” Out of view both to those aboard the ship and to the novel’s reader, the author of *The Confidence-Man* hovers as a rhetorical presence whose ontological shape is defined against the fictional identities of a dehumanized America.

As in “Benito Cereno,” this rhetorical distance from the logic of role-playing seems to quietly claim for Melville’s authorial ideals an authority over the fiction of race itself. In one of the more famous moments in *The Confidence-Man*, “a grotesque negro cripple” named Black Guinea appears in the forward part of the boat, playing a tambourine and “raising a smile even from the gravest” of the crowd (10). As happens throughout the novel, a passenger begins “to croak out something about his deformity being a sham, got up for financial purposes” (12), and the crowd scrutinizes him for signs of impostery, asking him if he has “any documentary proof, any plain paper about him, attesting that his case was not a spurious one.” Black Guinea responds by assuring his interrogators that there are several men aboard the ship who “knows me and will speak for me,” including a “good ge’mman wid a weed” (13). While the boat is searched for the man with the weed, a country merchant hands him a half dollar as “some proof of [his] trust,” making “the cripple’s face” glow “like a pol-
ished copper saucepan” (17). Just as the spectacle of Babo’s unspeaking head at the conclusion of “Benito Cereno” confronts the racial dynamics of mainstream white abolitionism (by refusing to ventriloquize for a black subject who can have no authentic voice), here Melville links the surface truths of racial difference with a broader cultural logic that renders identity dependent on the role-playing that emerges out of the pursuit of capital.

In both “Benito Cereno” and *The Confidence-Man*, Melville flees from the terms of this culture, staking out an authorial identity whose stability is offset by the “polished” surface of Black Guinea’s black face and the arbitrary white authority of the man with the weed—whom the crowd searches out but of course will never find. According to *The Confidence-Man*, Brown (that is, the minstrel-like manipulator of images so aptly described by Paul Gilmore) and Stowe (the white authenticator of her own fictions in the *Key*) are not only dependent on one another for their fragile identities; by making both “Black Guinea” and the white man with the weed two incarnations of the confidence man, Melville seems to be telling us they are in fact the same person. As in the layered narrative approach of Hawthorne’s *Story Teller* pieces, Melville carves out a romantic authorial identity predicated on exposing the contingent and ultimately interchangeable nature of all identities in the American marketplace.

The collectivizing logic of *The Confidence-Man*, according to which the romantic author seeks to portray American society *en masse*, helps us understand the centrality of the role played by Amasa Delano in Melville’s literary imagination. By portraying the *San Dominick* through Delano’s eyes, Melville connects the instability of national and racial taxonomies to the surface-oriented epistemology of those embodied by Delano’s representativeness—not the American reader but the “American” reader. That is, Melville’s text elevates the reader’s relationship to the problem of reality as the defining characteristic of identity: to read surfaces is to be a mass subject; to understand the shadows and depths beyond the reach of language or storytelling is to be more genuinely human. Intriguingly, though, when we consider Melville’s reliance on the Spanish Benito Cereno to offset Delano’s delusional approach to reality, we are again reminded of the text’s own location within the racial politics of 1850s America. For, as I will now suggest, Melville’s distinction between the blunt-thinking American (who neatly falls under both national and racial logic) and the liminal Don Benito (who resides in the shadows of these distinctions) exploits the slippery nature of Spanish identity at the time Melville was writing, so that the novella’s apparent quest for a postracial,
postnational political space looks more like a different kind of racial logic, one that, even as “black” and “white” are recognized as biological and legal fictions, cannot escape the game of racial signification.

In the 1850s, in the wake of the U.S.-Mexican War and as American politicians and commentators debated the feasibility and desirability of annexing Cuba, the term “Spanish” occupied a singular discursive space, embodying an intriguing combination of national and racial significance. Antebellum accounts of American encounters with Mexico and Cuba provided an opportunity for writers to distinguish between “Anglo-Saxon” and Spanish-inflected identities. In a piece from the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* written during the Mexican War, the prospect of annexing Mexico leads to a conception of “Spanish”-ness as an uncertain racial signifier:

> The very virtues of the Anglo-Saxon race make their political union with the degraded Mexican-Spanish impossible. . . . The Mexican race now see in the fate of the aborigines of the north, their own inevitable destiny. They must amalgamate and be lost, in the superior vigor of the Anglo-Saxon race, or they must utterly perish. They may postpone the hour for a time, but it will come, when their nationality shall cease. It is observable, that, while the Anglo-Saxon race have overrun the northern section, and purged it of a vigorous race of Indians, the Spaniards have failed to make any considerable progress at the south. . . . The proud, rapacious, and idle Spaniards have but poorly fulfilled their mission. . . . The progress of emigration on this continent has hitherto been peaceful;—but the Spanish race, to maintain their slothful possession of the country they hold, have, in the madness of their pride, attacked the colossal power that is about to overwhelm them.39

The above argument stakes its claim for the purity of “Anglo-Saxon” blood through a contrast with “the Spanish race,” which has “failed to make any considerable progress” due to those qualities that are intrinsic to their nature. In a typical account of American-Mexican contact, the racial hybridity of the Mexican people is offset by the “Anglo-Saxon” identity of America.

As Julia Stern shows, the vagaries of Spanish racial identity provide an important context for the various invocations of the Spanish gentleman in passing novels: “Averting the dualism of black and white in his capacity as neither, the brown-skinned Spanish gentleman transmutes the problem of race by disputing its rigid terms. . . . Spanish masquerade obscures white supremacist fantasies about slaves in flight . . . [and]
thrusts a privileged and mysterious ‘darkness’ squarely in the face of a white racist patriarchy.” Discussing specifically the “Spanish masquerade” of George Harris in Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stern reminds us that the racial ambiguity embodied by the figure of the Spaniard (an ambiguity with a history dating back several centuries) reemerges in the mid-nineteenth century to challenge the legal and cultural fictions of black and white. Similarly, in her discussion of George Lippard’s *Legends of Mexico*, Shelley Streeby finds evidence that Lippard’s writing extends the boundaries of American whiteness beyond “Anglo-Saxon” to include Germany, Scotland, Ireland, and other northern European countries; and yet, as Streeby makes clear, “this more expansive definition of white American unity crucially depends upon the construction of Mexicans as a [in Lippard’s words] ‘mongrel race, moulded of Indian and Spanish blood.’” Streeby also cites nativist writer Daniel Ullmann, who wrote in 1856 that the Spanish empire ultimately fell apart because it lacked the “real unity of race, language, and territory.” Finally, Streeby illustrates how the antebellum fascination with “Spanish fantasy” novels provided a highly charged imaginative space in which American writers and readers could address the possibility of territories such as Mexico and especially Cuba becoming part of a “southern slave empire.”

Politicians, newspaper editors, and ordinary Americans debated the idea of taking over Cuba throughout the years leading up to the Civil War, and as such debates were taking place, popular novels such as Mary Denison’s *The Prisoner of La Vintresse* worked through questions of race and slavery as they pertained to neighboring lands such as Cuba. At the same time, new illustrated periodicals such as *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* depicted highly romanticized renderings of Havana, rural Cuba, and more distant lands such as Nicaragua—pictures that appeared alongside novels with titles such as *The Spanish Moor*. As Streeby points out in her discussion of *The Prisoner of La Vintresse*, these novels used the color line to debate the implications of Cuban annexation. Denison, Streeby writes, “racially ‘darkens’ Cuba in ways that echo the various antislavery but still racially phobic objections to the annexation of Cuba.” We see a similar reliance on the slipperiness of Spanish racial identity in Maturin Murray Ballou’s *Miralda; or, the Justice of Taçon*, a melodramatic love story that takes place in Havana. The American character, Seth Swap, makes the following observations about the people he encounters on the island: “Thought I’d just stop a few weeks on this island of Cubey [on his way from Mexico to Maine] to see the folks. What a funny people they are! [T]wo fifths niggers, one fifth grandees, one fifth poll parrots and fireflies, and one fifth darnation pootty gals. The rest’s pootty much sugar cane and
merlasses.”

The story-seeking mind of Delano in “Benito Cereno” allows Melville to chart this slipperiness of “Spanish” as a racial and national signifier. On one hand, Delano’s attitude toward Cereno exhibits the prominence of the “nation” as a marker of identity. As our narrator tells us, “as a nation . . . these Spaniards are all an odd set; the very word Spaniard has a curious, conspirator, Guy-Fawkish twang to it” (79). Indeed, throughout Melville’s story, Delano attempts to make sense of Cereno’s odd behavior by resorting to various narratives of Spanish national history. When he first encounters the San Dominick, for example, our narrator’s description quietly attempts to explain the “slovenly” appearance of the ship by placing it within the larger story of Spanish decline: it was a “very large, and, in its time, a very fine vessel, such as in those days were at intervals encountered along that main; sometimes superceded Acapulco treasure-ships, or retired frigates of the Spanish king’s navy, which, like superannuated Italian palaces, still, under a decline of masters, preserved signs of former state” (48). When Delano considers whether the Spanish captain is an “imposter,” he soon dismisses the thought with an affirmation of the captain’s genuineness: “He was a true off-shoot of a true hidalgo Cereno” (65).

What is perhaps more subtle about the text’s invocation of Spanishness is the way in which Melville plays on the racial ambiguity of the Spanish throughout the text. At various moments the narration flaunts the slipperiness of its Spanish characters as they occupy the space between black and white—a space that typifies the unstable nature of Spanish identity at the time when Melville was writing. When Delano first boards the San Dominick, it is the American captain who is an outsider to the racially mixed and ambiguous population aboard the boat, as if the Spanish sailors are themselves opposed to the American’s whiteness. It is not simply that the ship comprises both blacks and whites; rather, the Spanish characters seem to drift conspicuously between these two categories: Cereno is described as “the dark Spaniard” (69); another Spanish sailor, seated between two blacks, is described as “an old Barcelona tar” who seems at one point to merge into the blacks on either side, forming what our narrator calls a “centaur” (72); and soon after Cereno escapes into Delano’s boat, we see the ship in chaos, with “the few Spanish sailors . . . helplessly mixed in, on deck, with the blacks” (99).

Once the battle to overtake the ship begins, and the Spaniards separate themselves physically from the blacks on board the San Dominick (either by leaping toward Delano’s boat, or climbing the ship’s masts, “just out of reach of the hurtling hatchets” [101]), the racial taxonomies
fall into place, and the story becomes a clear battle between white and black. Indeed, once Cereno makes his escape, the Spaniards are at times no longer “Spaniards” at all; they are simply “whites.” In one of the most intriguing sentences in Melville’s narration, our narrator charts the return of the Spanish characters from the realm of racial ambiguity to the clarity that Delano so clearly desires: “Soon, in a reunited band, and joined by the Spanish seamen, the whites came to the surface, irresistibly driving the negroes toward the stern” (102). The “Spanish seamen” join the reunited whites, a formulation that at once implies their racial unity while also calling attention to the distance between the signifiers “Spanish” and “white.” Melville thus links the narrative uncertainty of the first portion of the text, during which time Delano is attempting to figure out what has taken place aboard the ship, with the racial ambiguity of Delano’s perceptions; when the narrative becomes a battle, though, and Delano and our narrator fully comprehend what is at stake, the racial categories fall into place, albeit uneasily. The Spaniards arise out of the murky depths and reunite with the whites, and the blacks quickly return to subjugation and racial caricature: “Their red tongues lolled, wolf-like, from their black mouths. But the pale sailors’ teeth were set; not a word was spoken; and, in five minutes more, the ship was won” (102).

In one of the text’s rare moments in which things proceed within a clear temporal progression, Melville connects such narrative clarity to a reassertion of the racial categories that had been challenged by Delano’s inability to penetrate the narrative mystery. And yet if this interrogation of “Spanish” as a racial category preys on the slipperiness of race itself, the novella’s concluding opposition—between a Spanish captain who dwells in “shadows” and a blunt-thinking American who can think only in the broadest cultural categories—seems to uphold the liminal status of Spanish identity in the popular imagination. As the textual representative of a racially hybrid people who fall short of the criteria of empire and nation, Cereno is more “human” than Delano precisely because he fits imperfectly into the categories of race or nation. In using the Spanish captain to make the point that such collective identities deform the individual, Melville’s romantic ideal privileges antebellum race logic by making Don Benito representative of liminality.

Connecting “Benito Cereno” to Melville’s subject position amid such subtle and inescapable racial politics, and reading the text alongside the contemporaneous writing of William Wells Brown, brings to light the important differences between the prevailing critical treatment of “Benito Cereno” as a text that verbalizes its author’s moral beliefs and the long-standing sense of Brown’s literary innovations as a way of carefully
negotiating and manipulating identity. Despite the different ways they have typically been read, “Benito Cereno” and Clotel have a similar point to make about the instability of authenticating and documenting practices in the debates over slavery. Just as Brown’s narrative maneuvers subtly mock the authenticating voice of white abolitionism, the court documents that conclude “Benito Cereno” exploit the textual surfaces that protect American slavery. If, by the time we encounter the legal extracts of “Benito Cereno,” narrative has already been revealed as an inadequate and illusory mode of capture, we are clearly invited to turn to these documents with a suspicion toward their own storytelling machinery. We need not question the fact that Cereno’s ship was actually overtaken by the slaves he was transporting; instead, we are asked to recognize that our experience of these events is merely the experience of texts. Cereno’s deposition provides Melville with a link between his story’s fictional narration and the rhetoric of factual writing that submerges the former mode’s complexities and indeterminacies. When read as a rewriting of the events described in the earlier portion of the story, the deposition appears much like the excerpted bits of missionary writing in Typee in its subtle interest in smoothing over the difficulties of interpretation.

One need only look at Cereno’s court-mandated account of the communications between the eighteen-year-old slave, José, and Babo before the revolt. While Cereno points to their “secret conversations . . . in which [José] was several times seen by the mate” (111) as evidence of their conspiracy, no direct account of the conversation is ever given. By relocating this impenetrable conversation to the context of his own narrative of events, though, Cereno’s deposition makes meaning out of what cannot be read. Such a depiction of secret communication among the slaves essentially solves those various moments in the earlier portion of the narrative where our narrator suspects a similarly covert mode of communication on board the San Dominick, “as if silent signs of some Freemason sort had . . . been interchanged” (66). Resolving such moments of illegible signs with Cereno’s legal narrative, the white witness makes meaning where before he was confronted with his own inability to know.

As far back as the Old Zack anecdotes, of course, Melville mocked the notion that the facts of nonfictional narrative could ever be certified in any reliable way. But in “Benito Cereno” the author connects the lie of authentication to the survival of American slavery in the 1850s. Near the end of Cereno’s legal account of the events leading up to Delano’s boarding the ship, he tells of the various acts of violence perpetrated by the rebelling slaves, including the murder of Don Alexandro Aranda. After describing the solemn songs and dances performed by the female slaves as the men
committed “the various acts of murder,” Cereno claims that “this melancholy tone was more inflaming than a different one would have been, and was so intended.” The women, we are told, were bloodthirsty, using “their utmost influence to have the deponent made away with.” Finally, the deposition points to black testimony to lend authority to this account: “All this is believed,” the narrative reads, “because the negroes have said it” (112). The paradox of black testimony serving as the grounds on which a white witness’s deposition stands is striking, in part because the maneuver calls to mind the manipulation of white texts that appear in Brown’s 1853 rewriting of his autobiography and in Clotel. By inverting the traditional relationship of black narrator/white authenticator, Melville, like Brown, reveals the fictions on which narrative authentication was based.

And yet the respective critical fates of Melville and Brown suggest a subtle but consequential double standard: Brown’s narrative innovations, which at once evade a first-person autobiographical voice and subvert the logic of authentication, have long been understood as the product of Brown’s culturally specific status as a black eyewitness within an abolitionist movement that threatened to objectify black speaking subjects by imposing upon the former slave a prefabricated “voice.” Melville’s invocation of slavery in “Benito Cereno,” however, which similarly complicates the logic of authentication, and which seeks to elude the white authorial voice sanctioned by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s brand of abolitionism, continues to be understood as evidence of its author’s near-miraculous sensitivity to timeless epistemological, linguistic, and moral truths. The above account of William Wells Brown reminds us that we have long read similar theoretical claims as a rhetorical by-product of historical contingencies; it is just that we do not apply such criteria consistently. For as the example of Brown makes clear, critics seem far more willing to comprehend the deconstructive agenda of a literary text as a language for imagining and communicating a certain kind of identity when that author—a black slave, for example—writes from a subject position whose contingencies are easily visible to our own eyes.

As I have attempted to illustrate, in this chapter and throughout my readings of Hawthorne and Melville, the romantic deconstruction of cultural facades was inextricable from the ongoing process of romantic identity-making. To dig beneath the fraudulent surfaces of antebellum culture was not simply to model for American citizens an ideal of skeptical, reflective civic participation; to foreground the artifice of narration and language was not merely to provide a more genuine or more responsible kind of national history. If these authors wrote as if they had access to a more lasting authenticity than mass culture could ever provide, we have
also seen that such language was often most valuable to the romantic imagination for the ontological dimensions it afforded. This more rhetorical understanding of the romantic obsession with cultural surfaces suggests that maybe “Benito Cereno” is most valuable for the irresolvable contradiction at the heart of its authorial performance: is the text an attempt to rid America of the great social ill threatening its integrity and survival, or is it the invention of a fundamentally contrarian artist who valued his romantic autonomy more than anything else? The viability and importance of both ways of understanding “Benito Cereno” only reaffirms that the question of what constitutes genuine reality had penetrated to the very bone of antebellum being. Choosing one of these readings over another would be to isolate Melville’s ethical and political beliefs from his ongoing negotiation of identity—and, in doing so, to elevate belief itself to a realm of impossible purity, above the contingencies of rhetoric and self-making. Instead, by interrogating the romantic worldview that sees culture as a realm of surfaces, by understanding how placing scare quotes around the word “reality” affords the romantic subject a foundation on which to build a self, we come to the more surprising conclusion that reality is a powerful but arbitrary way of understanding and communicating who we are.