

Melville's Peep-Show: Sexual and Textual Cruises in "Typee"

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I. Counteralliances?

AT A CRUCIAL moment in *Benito Cereno* (1855) the narrator asks: "Who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguering in against it with negroes?" (254). Christopher Lane has read this passage as an example of Herman Melville's horror when faced with the possibility of an imperial subject fostering a counter-alliance with a colonized group (2-3). Such readings, though, disregard the ironic voice that is so often present in Melville's narrator—a voice that destabilizes Lane's argument. A closer reading of *Benito Cereno* might highlight Melville's ironic narrator as maintaining a much more ambiguous position, for he is simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by the thought of "going native." It is the narrative's ironic inflection that signals this important paradoxical position. Such ambiguity thus allows for a potential critique of the colonial enterprise while avoiding an absolute counteralliance with colonized subjects.

The narrator of *Typee* (1846) holds a similar position. Melville's first novel combines anticolonial statements and an anxiety about being consumed by Typee society. This paper inquires into this structural tension that underlines *Typee*, an inquiry that examines the combination of Melville's unique anti-imperial assertions—based on his exotic and erotic attractions to the island—with his appropriation of colonizing discourses from contemporaneous travel narratives set in the South Pacific.

II. Melville's Lie

According to Charles Anderson's *Melville in the South Seas* (1939), Melville lied when he claimed that he spent three months among

the natives of a Polynesian island. The biographical information that we have regarding Melville's travels suggests that this fabrication resulted in other half-truths, particularly regarding the sources that he read while composing the novel. The details that scholars have collected concerning Melville's Polynesian trip include the following facts: after completing a voyage to Liverpool as a deck hand, in 1839, Melville acquired a job on board a whaling vessel; leaving from Fairhaven, Massachusetts, in January 1841, the ship arrived at what would become the fanciful island of *Typee* eighteen months later. Melville and his shipmate, Toby Greene, deserted their vessel soon after it arrived. But they were eventually separated, and Melville returned to the coast approximately one month after his desertion. This three to four week residence on the island became loosely translated into *Typee*, a text that he published in John Murray's "Home and Colonial Library" as a narrative of "authentic" experience (Anderson 20-30).

The research compiled on Melville's South Sea adventures leads the contemporary reader to speculate about his motives for lying about the amount of time he spent on *Typee*; one might also ask why Melville adamantly asserted the authenticity of his text. There are undoubtedly numerous possible motives for Melville's fabrications; perhaps one such motive was that publishers found it "far-fetched" and almost "impossible to believe." In fact, when Melville submitted an early copy of his manuscript to the Harper publishing house in New York, the narrative was rejected on the grounds that it was "too fanciful" (Woodcock 7-8). In light of this experience, Melville sent his manuscript to the English publisher John Murray accompanied by a letter that vehemently upheld the authenticity of his narrative: "I have stated such matters just as they occurred and leave every one to form his own opinion of them" (qtd. in Woodcock 8). As well as making *Typee* more attractive to potential publishers, Melville's deception enabled him to identify himself as an expert concerning *Typee* culture. That is, if he had not lied about the length of time he spent on this island, readers may have questioned his expertise and the legitimacy of his narrative. Furthermore, by convincing his readers that *Typee* was a "real" travel narrative,

Melville established a framework from which he could broach political issues that were points of debate within mid-nineteenth-century American culture. In the guise of an authentic travel narrative, that is, Melville was able to denounce American and European expansionist policies that threatened to colonize the islands of the South Pacific. Authenticity, moreover, meant that Melville could critique the powerful ideological forces that privileged American "civilization" over the "uncivilized" islands of the South Pacific.

The popularity of travel writing in mid-nineteenth-century America also helps us to understand Melville's assertions of authenticity. Texts about authentic travel experiences were fashionable because they provided American readers with voyeuristic "peeps" into foreign lands unrestricted by American social and sexual codes; under the guise of scientific observation, in other words, travel writing explored exotic and erotic sites that titillated American readers with half-naked natives and fertility festivals.¹

Melville's declarations of accuracy, however, led to further deceptions, for, by way of capturing verisimilitude, Melville consulted a number of contemporary travel narratives—narratives which he in turn attempted to hide from his audience. David Porter's *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean, in the U.S. Frigate Essex, in the years 1812, 1813, 1814* (1815), Charles Stewart's *A Visit to the South Seas, in the U.S. Ship Vincennes, During the Years 1829 and 1830* (1831), and William Ellis's *Polynesian Researches* (1833) were a few of the sources that Melville consulted before writing *Typee*.² Melville even writes of consulting David Porter's narrative, but, perhaps in an attempt to undermine Porter's influence on *Typee*, Melville supplies an incorrect title for Porter's text (38). I would suggest that these sources are significant for reading *Typee*, in that they provided Melville with an imperial frame of reference, which inevitably resulted in *Typee*'s reinscription of the same colonizing attitudes that Melville claimed to be critiquing.

III. Erotic Journeys

The epistemological and fantastic modes of *Typee* work to two distinct ends: the former enables Melville to critique colonial

Euro-American discourses, and the latter permits him to utilize contemporary rhetorical strategies that constructed Polynesian culture as an earthly paradise. The extent to which Melville borrowed images from travel narratives by such voyagers as Nicholas Dorr, David Porter, Charles Stewart, and William Ellis is uncertain. What is certain, though, is that Melville's representations of sexuality and eroticism were influenced by such travellers. For example, one of the images that Melville takes from Dorr, Porter, and Stewart is the depiction of Typee women swimming out to greet the ship. Dorr, in 1791, was the first to record this practice of Polynesian women: "The girls were permitted on board without hesitation. They were in general small and young, quite naked and without exception the most beautiful people I ever saw" (qtd. in Heath 43). Porter also records similar images in his 1815 travel narrative:

The old chief directed the young girls to swim off to us. . . . The young men led them to the water, where they were soon divested of every covering and conducted to the boat. . . . [O]n their entering the boat, the seamen threw their handkerchiefs to the beautiful naked young women for covering. (13)

Melville, borrowing from Dorr and Porter, draws on these voyeuristic accounts to present the naked "nymphs" of Typee swimming out to meet the sailors of the *Dolly*:

We were still some distance from the beach, and under slow headway, when we sailed right into the midst of these nymphs, and they boarded us at every quarter. . . . All of them succeeded in getting up the ship's side, where they clung dripping with brine and glowing from the bath, their jet-black tresses streaming over their shoulders, and half enveloping their naked forms. . . . What a sight for us bachelor sailors! How avoid so dire a temptation? (48-49)

By referring to these women as naked temptations, Melville titillates his readers—an erotic strategy that is continued when he describes the women's arrival as "wholly given up to every species of riot and debauchery," for the women were irresistible because of their "graceful figures" and "softly moulded limbs" that "seemed as strange as beautiful" (49-50).

Melville's debt to Dorr and Porter is increased by his lingering descriptions of Polynesian beauty: "The Marquesan girls

are beautiful in the extreme . . . [with their] luxuriant locks . . . anointed with fragrant oil. . . . Their appearance perfectly amazed me; their extreme youth, the light clear brown of their complexions, their delicate features . . . and free unstudied action" (49). Such descriptions function as typical Orientalist fantasies wherein dark otherness and "unlimited sensuality" transform these "Marquesan girls" into "creatures of male power-fantasy" (Said 207). And Stewart furthers these exotic myths by commenting on the sexual accessibility of these women; he is, in fact, so dismayed by the sexual prowess of the Polynesian women that he is shocked into silence. "The scenes of licentiousness exhibited in our presence," Stewart exclaims, "were too shocking ever to be narrated by either pen or tongue" (132).

Melville, who consistently invokes the conventions of earlier travel narratives, also paints erotic pictures of his male Polynesian characters. He draws, for instance, on Stewart's 1815 report of a beautiful Marquesan Prince: "Piaroro is a prince by nature as well as blood—one of the finest looking men I ever saw—tall and large, not very muscular, but of admirable proportions, with a general contour of figure . . . that would do grace to Apollo" (259). Echoing Stewart, Melville describes Marnoo in similar terms of classical and effeminate beauty: "Marnoo was built like a Polynesian Apollo [with] curling ringlets, which danced up and down [on the] feminine softness of his cheek" (147).

If, as Said and others have argued, the assigning of feminine attributes to peoples perceived as Other by a dominant and patriarchally-configured society is a way of usefully pressing them into an inferior mould, we must assume that Melville was participating in a pervasive discourse which assumed the effeminacy and inferiority of Polynesian culture. Such a discursive strategy was common in nineteenth-century travel writing. In 1853, for instance, Captain John Erskine published his *Journal of a Cruise Among the Islands of the South Pacific* (1855), a text that provides detailed accounts of Polynesian culture by focusing on the feminine features of Polynesian men. The most striking example of this occurs in a lithograph, published among the first few pages of the book, entitled *Girls and Man of Uea—Loyalty Islands* (see the black-and-white reproduction, Plate 1). This illustration by

J. A. Vinter shows three Polynesians drinking from a large round cask; the two women are erotically presented through a lack of clothing; their breasts are completely revealed to the viewer, and only a thin band of material covers their waists. More interesting, though, is the image of the Polynesian man: his slim features, his long blond hair, his facial characteristics, and his feminine body all combine to blur his gender identity. Indeed, upon first seeing this figure a viewer could easily mistake him for one of the Polynesian women. By positioning the man's back to the viewer, moreover, the artist enhanced his effeminate appearance by hiding his genitalia from view. Thus, the only indication of his biological sex exists in the caption that accompanies the lithograph.

Furthermore, because the gaze of the nineteenth-century audience of adventure and exploration narratives was often assumed to be masculine, Vinter's presentation of this Polynesian man disseminates colonial ideology while presenting a sexually-charged image for the potential homoerotic spectator. While critics often point out that feminizing projections function as forms of cultural imperialism, they often overlook the homoerotic nature of such representational strategies. Although Said astutely argues that the "East" has existed as a psychological space where heterosexual men can erect illicit sexual fantasies and explore "sexual experience[s] unobtainable in Europe" or America, he ignores same-sexuality as part of this "different type of sexuality" imposed upon "Eastern" cultures (*Orientalism* 190). Joseph Boone, remarking on these oversights, claims that "the possibility of sexual contact with and between men [during voyages to the East] underwrites and at times even explains the historical appeal of orientalism as an occidental mode of male perception, appropriation and control" ("Vacation" 90). With this in mind, we may approach Vinter's lithograph from the perspective of the homoerotic. Through the feminizing depiction of a Polynesian man, the artist conveys a sexually obtainable object, an object that symbolized a form of sexuality that was proscribed to an American spectator.

Melville's depiction of Marnoo, like Vinter's lithograph, combines feminine features with the conjecture of same-sexual op-

portunity. Marnoo, for example, is described as displaying an androgynous figure that stimulates Tom's sexual desire. We are also told that Marnoo's appearance consists of a Polynesian charm combined with classical forms of beauty, all of which culminate in a "matchless symmetry of form" (193). Melville also refers to Marnoo as "an antique bust" that displays a striking "feminine softness" (193). Upon seeing Marnoo for the first time, Tom's desire is immediately stimulated, but he soon becomes distraught when this "elegant" and "beautifully formed" man chooses to keep his distance:

Struck by his [Marnoo's] demeanour . . . [I] proffered him a seat on the mats beside me. But . . . the stranger passed on utterly regardless of me. . . . Had the belle of the season, in the pride of her beauty and power, been cut in a place of public resort by some supercilious exquisite, she could not have felt greater indignation than I did at this unexpected slight. . . . His conduct, however, only roused my desire. (193-95)

Here Melville's narrator, the adventurous explorer, is transformed into the "belle of the season" when his desire is aroused by the "exquisite" beauty of Marnoo. Such representations of fluid gender identities and same-sexual desire in *Typee* can be traced to earlier South Pacific travel narratives. As Robert K. Martin points out, Melville's reference to "Buggery Island," in a brief descriptive passage about the South Sea isles, signals his knowledge of the Polynesian institutionalization of male kinship as it came to him through Henry Dana's 1840 travel book, *Two Years Before the Mast* (Martin, *Hero* 63). In Dana's text, the narrator describes the Polynesian system of male kinship known as *aikane*, a system wherein every man has "one particular friend . . . [whom he is] bound to everything for . . . in a sort of contract—an alliance" (153).

A similar form of male kinship is reported by William Ellis, who asserts that foreign visitors to Polynesian islands are immediately presented with male companions: "On the arrival of strangers, every man endeavoured to obtain one as a friend and carry him off to his own habitation, where he is treated with the greatest kindness by the inhabitants of the district; they place him on a high seat and feed him with abundance of the finest food" (132). Tom, upon arriving on *Typee*, is presented with Kory-Kory, a

young man who provides Tom with food and shelter. This Polynesian friend, moreover, expresses a sexual attraction to Tom and becomes “jealous” when Tom’s body is anointed and massaged by Fayaway and “the young nymphs” (163). Directly following this passage, Kory-Kory begins lighting a fire; the sexual images that Melville uses in this scene suggest autoerotic behaviour on Kory-Kory’s part, which stands in for a deferral of his sexual desire for Tom: “[Kory-Kory] rubs . . . slowly up and down . . . quite leisurely, but gradually quickens his pace, and waxing warm in the employment . . . approaches the climax of his effort, he pants and grasps for breath, and his eyes almost start from their sockets with the violence of his exertions” (165).

Further textual allusions to Polynesian same-sexuality can be found in Stewart’s account of his visit to Nukuheva. This narrative includes the description of a particular scene that disgusted him more than his earlier experiences with the sexual practices of the South Pacific natives. During a visit to a so-called “unknown tribe,” Stewart observed a sexual festival of “pure heathenism” that plays out “the absolute of human depravity”:

There was less of licentiousness in the dance than I had expected; but in a hundred things else there were such open outrages upon all decency, that I hurried away in horror and disgust, with a heart too much humbled for the race to which I belong, and too much depressed at the depravity and guilt of man, to think or feel upon any other subject. (262)

Here Stewart, as in his other descriptions of Polynesian sexuality, refuses to give a detailed account of the festival. This experience is, however, distinct in that this ceremony causes him to suffer the greatest “horror and disgust.” Stewart goes on to inform us that the festival was “limited to male Polynesians, including only those women who participated in the erotic dances” (263). Because he establishes this ceremony as male-centred, it seems probable that Stewart’s “horror and disgust” arose out of his panic regarding same-sexual desire. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that “homosexual panic” may account for “the Unspeakable,” the secret of that which remains hidden and ungraspable (204). This form of “panic” would explain Stewart’s silence about and

profound outrage at the events of this particular festival, an outrage so intense that he was forced to “question his Christian faith, for the acts of the ceremony mar[red] the highest glory of man” (263).

IV. Melville's Imperialism

Throughout *Typee*, Melville is consistent in his harsh critiques of imperialist and missionary projects in the South Seas—projects led by missionaries like Charles Stewart. Thus, Melville uses anticonquest rhetoric to condemn colonial expansion. The conclusion to chapter two, for instance, denounces the “European invasion” of the South Sea islands:

Alas for the poor savages when exposed to the influence of these polluting examples! Unsophisticated and confiding, they are easily led into every vice, and humanity weeps over the ruin thus remorselessly inflicted upon them by their European civilizers. Thrice happy are they who . . . have never been brought into contaminating contact with the white man. (50)

Melville's progressive, anticolonial discourses are undermined, however, by the narrator's choice of diction; the very use of the term “savage,” for example, functions as a projection of Western constructions of Otherness by forcing a taxonomical system of that which is “civilized” and that which is “uncivilized” upon Typee society. Such binaristic language designates a boundary with which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to a culture come into forceful play. It follows, then, that *Typee* is involved in what Homi Bhabha calls “a strategy of disavowal,” whereby the trace of what is disavowed is “not repressed but repeated as something different” (114). That is, the “splittings” implied in Tom's articulations of displacement and dislocation are structured around the ambivalence of denial and repetition. *Typee's* narrator expresses such inconsistencies by placing overt disavowals of imperialism within the very structures of difference that are central to the rhetoric of colonial projects.

Furthermore, the tattoos of the various characters become distinct markers for constructing boundaries of cultural and racial difference. While Tom claims to refuse tattooing for aesthetic reasons, his repulsion indicates an aversion beyond the

aesthetic, for if he were tattooed, one of the central distinctions separating him from the Polynesian native would blur. As Elizabeth Grosz points out, tattooing often “offends Western sensibility . . . [because it does not] map a particular psyche or subjectivity but designate[s] a position, a place, binding the subject’s body to that of the collective” (138, 140). Following Grosz, Tom’s fear of being tattooed signals a much greater fear: the fear of becoming permanently marked as a member of the Typee community, thus losing his privileged position as traveller. Tom’s “tattoo panic,” moreover, may be brought back into the realm of desire by linking it to the sexual panic expressed in Charles Stewart’s narrative. If, as theorists have suggested, tattooing transforms an individual’s “sexual zones by extend[ing] and proliferat[ing] them, creating the whole abdomen, arm, back, neck, leg, or face—whichever surface is tattooed or marked—as an erotic site,” we may account for Tom’s panic as partially based on a fear of increasing the erotic sites on his body (Grosz 140). A multiplication of erotogenic space, in other words, would disrupt his culturally specific notions of erotic zones, subsequently disrupting the fundamental constructions of Euro-American sexuality that mark his difference.

Refusal of tattooing, like the discursive power exerted by Melville’s use of taxonomy, helps to stabilize cultural barriers that are reinforced by Tom’s fear of cannibalism. His anxiety about losing his identity and being consumed—culturally and physically—by the Typees constitutes yet another discursive model that originates within the nineteenth-century system of connotations and assumptions of the traditional travel narrative. Melville’s depictions of cannibalism, then, were also inspired by his sources. Gananath Obeyesekere, for example, argues that, while certain South Sea cultures may have ritualized ceremonies of anthropophagy, many early British and American ethnographers exaggerated the accounts of Polynesian cannibalism due to “the Euro-American tradition of cannibalist discourses.” Nineteenth-century American audiences of the traditional travel text, in other words, associated ocean voyages (including shipwrecks) with human consumption, and “cannibalism during an exploration among native peoples or after a shipwreck was so

much taken for granted in England and America that often ordinary innocuous survivors had trouble denying that it had taken place" (638-39). Melville, in compliance with audience expectations, echoes the conventions of the shipwreck narrative by implying that after leaving the *Dolly* Tom and Toby contemplate consuming one another. When they arrive on Typee, Tom and the crew suffer from starvation, for they have exhausted their fresh provisions and been reduced to eating only sea-biscuit (35). The hungry crew is described as symbolically consuming itself, and, once Tom reaches the island, body parts take on edible qualities: Tom's hurt leg is referred to as being "in the same condition as a rump-steak" (127); Tom's misshapen pieces of biscuit become like "midshipman's nuts" (75); Toby is said to be "ripe for the enterprise"; and, when meeting the Typees, Tom and Toby are imagined to be "a couple of white cannibals" (113). Here, as with the threat of tattooing, the civilized-savage dichotomy threatens to collapse, but the narrative structure stabilizes such anxieties by reasserting the binary through Tom's anxiety regarding a ritualized ceremony for which he believes he will become the main course.

Obeyesekere links cannibalism with male sexuality by suggesting that nineteenth-century discourses surrounding anthropophagy—particularly as they were articulated after a shipwreck—were often infused with sexual currency. "In popular [Euro-American] thought," he states, "the black man, the Spaniard and the Portuguese were highly sexed libidinous creatures. They represented sexuality and life power; by consumption of their flesh one could introject these powers" (640). It is not surprising that Melville affiliates cannibalism with sexuality, for, by the mid-nineteenth century, a long discursive tradition had linked anthropophagy with sodomy. Epiphanius, for instance, condemned the Borborites for practising both cannibalism and sodomy, and Thomas Aquinas connected sodomy with cannibalism in his descriptions of the sins that "exceed the mode of human nature" (Bergman 142). In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), moreover, Freud connects cannibalism with homosexuality in his explanation of the transition of patriarchal power from father to

son. He asserts that in "primitive societies" the father's control over the harem forces his sons to engage in homosexuality; however, when the father's strength falters with age, the sons combine to overcome the father: "one day the expelled brothers joined forces, [and] slew and ate the father" (83). Melville's reference to the consumption of the "midshipman's nuts" provides a frame in which cannibalism is given sexual currency. Such a framing partakes in the system of connotations and assumptions that conflate cannibalism and same-sexuality as potential violations of an American body. As a result, the feared physical taboos of sexuality and cannibalism inspire Tom's panic, for these possible transgressions threaten to disrupt his imagined identity as a "civilized" American. Yet, as Caleb Crain notes, it is likely that Melville's depiction of cannibalism on Typee was yet another mid-nineteenth-century legend that he borrowed from popular discourses (27).

Melville's representations of cannibalism, along with Melville's eroticization of the Typees and his critiques of Western civilization, not only function as tropes of difference, but also assume an empirical understanding of Typee culture. As a traveller, though, Melville's presumed knowledge places him in the position of the "seeing-man," a man who symbolizes the "Euro-American male subject . . . whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess" a particular culture (Pratt 7). Tom may thus be read as a "seeing-man" who "peep[s] at Polynesian life" without disenfranchising the imperial rhetoric inherent in the nineteenth-century travel narrative. Tom, read as *Typee's* "seeing-man," might be considered a precursor to the twentieth-century sexual tourist, for the island serves as a space where he can explore different forms of eroticism while resisting a loss of self or cultural identity. Likewise, as a Western traveller exploiting the sexual freedom of Typee, Tom's critiques of imperialist expansion are implicitly corrupt. This, however, is not surprising when one considers the sources that Melville consulted while writing *Typee*, sources that inspired and reinscribed the very imperialist rhetoric concerning the South Seas which he claimed to denounce.³

NOTES

- ¹ For more on the titillating aspects of the genre see Robert K. Martin's "'Enviably Isles': Melville's South Seas."
- ² Neil Rennie's *Far-Fetched Facts* (1995) discusses the structural influences of these texts on *Typee*.
- ³ Thanks to Robert K. Martin and Terry Goldie for the invaluable comments and suggestions that they offered during the writing of this article.

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