Colonialism and Melville's South Seas Journeys

Malini Johar Schueller

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Despite the ideological bent of American literary scholarship in the last decade, Melville's narratives of the South Seas have scarcely been analyzed in terms of macropolitics, that is, in the context of major political realities such as colonialism and imperialism. Typee, for instance, has been seen as a critique of the ills of civilization or a discovery about the morality of cannibals, but the colonial politics of its narration, the recording of the lives of disempowered "natives" by the privileged Westerner, have been largely unexplored, intimately connected though these narratives are with the colonial politics of the South Sea Islands. Typee, and to an extent Omoo and Mardi, are texts in which the Melvillean narrator, although highly critical of colonialism, nonetheless affirms his position as colonist in order to maintain the separation between himself and the natives, a separation on which his racial and cultural identity depends. At the same time that these narratives dramatize transgressive situations which challenge boundaries between civilized and savage, they attempt to contain the moments of transgression so that the boundaries remain intact. This essay will focus mainly on Typee, the most politicized of the three narratives.

Until recently, the fact of Euro-American empire building had played a negligible role in the academic interpretation of literary texts. The 1978 publication of Edward Said's Orientalism, however, has led to enormous productive activity in the deconstruction of symbolic, exotic texts and reinterpretation of them as forms of colonial discourse. It is now accepted, for example, that Heart of Darkness is as much a discourse about the British colonization of the Belgian Congo as a symbolic text about spiritual regeneration. American literary scholars are also increasingly beginning to recognize the importance of an imperialist context for understanding American literature and cultural mythology. Both Richard Drinnon and Richard Slotkin have brought attention to the pervasiveness of the idea of conquering racial Others in American popular culture, political rhetoric and serious literature. American writers had ample reason to be interested in the ideology, practice, and effects of colonialism, given the discourses of colonialism and imperialism in circulation in mid-nineteenth century America. David S. Shields has shown how, until the mid-eighteenth century, American poetry featured a discourse of empire. After 1750, this myth was simply shorn of its British imperial frame and applied to the "republican glory of the rising glory of America." From the beginning, therefore,
American literary nationalism included the idea of a colonial-imperial nationalism. By the mid-nineteenth century, as Wai-chee Dimock has shown, the idea of America as empire had gained wide and acceptable currency. Jefferson praised America as an "empire for liberty" while Jackson used the phrase "extending the area of freedom" to justify the annexation of Texas. When Melville published Typee in 1844, American rhetoric on empire-making was well established. It is more than coincidence that neither in England nor America did abolitionism question the ethics of subjugating non-Western peoples. Post-bellum America freed itself legally from slavery and entered into an aggressive phase of imperialism, justifying territorial conquest by an assumed Euro-American cultural primacy, America's divine mission, and the need to "civilize" the savages. In this context, references to Eastern and African cultures, narratives of journeys to "exotic" lands, and philosophical meditations on racial Otherness in American literature become much more than simply symbolic. The well-known interest of the American transcendentalists in Eastern philosophy, Melville's sociological travel narratives, Poe's poems about strange and marvelous lands, and other texts too numerous to be mentioned here form a continuous narrative that needs to be read through the discourse of empire-making.

At the heart of colonial discourse is the concept of culture or civilization as power possessed by the colonizer. Said suggests how this proprietary concept of culture "designates a boundary by which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to the culture come into forceful play." Typee is a complex cultural representation of Euro-American colonial aspiration articulated through what Homi K. Bhabha calls a "strategy of disavowal." As Bhabha explains, "the discourse of cultural colonialism" does not operate through a simple discrimination between the colonial and colonized cultures. Rather, the discourse is "produced through the strategy of disavowal" where "the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something different." Melville's narratives of the South Seas are replete with overt disavowals of Euro-American colonial prerogative, but at the same time they repeat cultural colonialism through strategies of difference, creating racial boundary situations and describing natives through the scientific schemata of classification. It is worth recalling some of the historical details of the Marquesan colonization, not to measure the accuracy of Melville's account in Typee but to foreground a social and political context that is too often ignored. When Melville published Typee in 1844, the Marquesan islands had been subject to a long history of colonization, beginning in 1774 with James Cook. In 1791 the French staked their claim over the Islands. Two decades later, during the British-American war of 1812, Captain David Porter took possession of the Marquesas Islands in the name of the United States; in 1813 the Marquesas became the first colony
of the United States. The islands became a pawn in European powerbrokering, fought over by the British and then annexed by the French in 1842, all this leading to a decimation of the local population. The politics of the islands were important to America as an emergent imperial power and it is in this context that we need to situate Typee if we wish to understand its ideological underpinnings.

Melville was by no means a firm believer in the colonial mission of civilizing savages, in Euro-American imperial destiny, or, for that matter, in American manifest destiny. In all his South Sea narratives, Melville takes pains to distance himself from the colonial-imperial mission of civilizing savages. Melville constantly attributes the felicity of the Typees to their freedom from the corruption of European influence; in Omoo he presents an almost schematic correlation between the degeneration of the natives and colonization. He constantly attacks the misguided machinations and self-evident cruelty of the missionaries. And in Typee there are endless comparisons between the goodness, warmth, and simplicity of the natives and the cruelty, over-intellectualization, and cunning of the Europeans. This overt content level is so persuasive that many critics have read Typee simply as an inversion of Eurocentric values. But such a reading assumes that ideologies work only in a primitive manner—overtly and by repression. Foucault’s alternative conception of power usefully upsets this vertical model and suggests, first, that power is something which circulates and, second, that it is a “productive network which runs through the whole social body” and “induces pleasure.” It is perhaps the most benign of cultural situations, then, that most effectively displays the powerful workings of the cultural discourses of colonialism and empire-making.

Typee is ostensibly a record of Melville’s stay at the Island of Nukahiva from July to August 1842 after deserting his ship, the Acushnet. Melville’s arrival at Nukahiva coincided with the French acquisition of the Marquesas Islands and their takeover of Tahiti, and the young writer joined in public outrage at the takeover. Describing the French occupation of the Marquesas as a “signal infraction of the rights of humanity” and decrying the subterfuge whereby the French placed their puppet, Mowanna, as the King of Nukahiva, Melville uses the opening occasion of his narrative to question France’s claim to a civilized and humane culture. To this point the narrative seems unambiguous in its criticism of the colonial imperative, but its rhetoric of condemnation in another way uncritically repeats colonial topoi. Comparing the Marquesas takeover to the French takeover of Tahiti, Melville charges that “under cover of a similar pretence, have the outrages and massacres at Tahiti the beautiful, the queen of the South Seas, been perpetrated.” At its didactic level, this statement obviously questions the overt workings of colonial aggression. But to accept this didactic reading would be to deny the ideologically charged value of metaphor,
by means of which Tahiti itself is here deprived of concreteness and specificity, imaged as the passive female awaiting representation and appropriation by the West. The narrative participates in, even as it questions, the axioms of colonialism.

As the narrative continues, it is fraught with such ambivalent moments of colonial inscription, often embedded in seemingly irrelevant digressions like the "instance of feminine heroism" that Melville inserts into his description of the French takeover of Tahiti. On the one side Melville arrays the arrogance of Du Petit Thouars who "as an indemnity for alleged insults offered to the flag of his country . . . demanded some twenty or thirty thousand dollars to be placed in his hands forthwith, and in default of payment, threatened to land and take possession of the place" (p. 23). On the other side are the Tahitians who although "at first disposed to resort to arms, and drive the invaders from their shores," decide otherwise; "the unfortunate queen, Pomare, incapable of averting the impending calamity, terrified at the arrogance of the insolent Frenchman," flees the island (p. 23). Into this narrative of aggression and disempowerment, Melville inserts an episode concerning the bravery of the wife of the British missionary consul who keeps the British flag flying despite the French invasion. "The consular flag of Britain waved as usual during the day, from a lofty staff planted within a few yards of the beach, and in full view of the frigate" (p. 23). The flag leads to a martial exchange between a French soldier and the missionary wife: "'The admiral desired the flag to be hauled down—hoped it would be perfectly agreeable—and his men stood ready to perform the duty.' 'Tell the pirate, your master,' replied the spirited Englishwoman, pointing to the staff, 'that if he wishes to strike those colors, he must come and perform the act himself; I will suffer no one else to do it' . . . Was that flag hauled down? Mrs. Pritchard thinks not; and Rear-Admiral Du Petit Thouars is believed to be of the same opinion" (p. 24).

Here the innocuous occasion of female heroism becomes the site of colonial appropriation: note the facility with which this digression provides the narrator an occasion to admire unabashedly the British flag flying high over the Tahitian harbor. Nor does the narrator excoriate, at this point, the cultural dominance of the missionaries. Instead, the people of Tahiti become extraneous as Tahiti is conceptualized as colonial possession, so much space to be fought over by rival European powers, and as the ethical question of dominance is covertly translated into the imperial question of rightful ownership.

After the initial chapters about the political maneuverings in the Tahiti and Marquesan Islands, however, the narrative develops in ways that challenge the assumptions of colonial ideology. If the colonial world is, as Franz Fanon describes it, a "Manichean" one in which the settler physically delimits the place of the native and "paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil," Melville's narrative seems to subvert this
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The narrator, the source of authority, is not a missionary, official, or settler, but one who himself has chosen to transgress "civilized" laws. He has jumped ship and escaped into a valley of Nukahiva island, where natives, because of their reputed ferocity, have been free of colonial influence. The narrator is not given the colonial privilege of conquering, exploring, and naming "new" territory, but is instead named "Tommo" by the Typees. During his stay he is held prisoner by the natives. But unlike the traditional captivity narrative, in which captivity reinforces the captor's morality and the antagonist's brutality, Tommo in his gentle imprisonment by the Typees discovers their superiority over the "civilized" world. Indeed, he forms a substitute family among the Typees with the father-figure Marheyo, his son Kory-Kory, and the beautiful paramour Fayaway. And in what seems a complete transvaluation of values, the narrator decides that cannibalism is not, after all, an absolute evil. He is perfectly content to stay with the natives, and finally decides to escape only after he is convinced that he will be forced to undergo a complete submission to the Typee culture through the ritual of tattooing.

Edward S. Grejda's study is typical of this failure of critics to come to terms with racial analysis. Grejda's explicit purpose is to clarify Melville's judgments and attitudes to the "dark-skinned races." But this purpose is immediately undermined by Grejda's ahistorical and asocial humanism, which assesses Melville's achievement as recognizing the "fundamental sameness of all human kind." Typee continues to attract criticism of the universal and symbolic school, some of which has its own obvious racial agenda. It has been seen as a symbolic "descent into the canyon of the past" (Arvin), a symbolic exploration into the "Typee" or "murderous part of all men" (Stern), a discovery about the "fundamental enigmas of all mythology and all theology" (Franklin) and "an apprentice version of Melville's horror at the relativity of values" (Oliviero). Undoubtedly it is always possible to read symbolism, universal values, and irony in any text. But these strategies too often ignore the cultural complexities in which a text is engaged and through which it derives its richness. The colonial subtext of Typee is one such enabling cultural complex.

Typee is appropriately subtitled "A Peep at Polynesian Life," establishing at the outset the role of the author as voyeur observing the passive and static object of his contemplation. The powers of observation,
representation and analysis belong to the outsider. If Tommo's observations on Typee culture are acts of "imaginative imperialism," much the same is true of the ideology inscribed in the form—in the structure of the narrative and the mode of narration.20 The introductory chapters of Typee describe Tommo's preconceptions of the Marquesas and are replete with fearful images of alterity. The Marquesas connote "strange visions of outlandish things... savage woodlands guarded by horrible idols—heathenish rites and human sacrifice" (p. 11). These images coexist with voluptuous images of colonial fantasy, of "mermaids" and "nymphs" with "inexpressibly graceful figures" and "softly moulded limbs" (p. 19–20). At this point in the text both sets of images—the fierce and the sensual—are supposedly purely imaginary for the narrator. But the manner in which they are described suggests that the descriptions serve to mark a difference between the narrator and the natives. Whether dangerous or enticing, the natives belong to an unreal or fantasy world, one free of time, history, and presentness. Melville, of course, suggests that these images dramatize the naivete of the narrator who, at this point, can only speak from his Euro-American perspective. However, the representation of natives (both within and without America) as free of historicity and conflict was common in the culture at large and found its way into Melville's later works as well. In Moby Dick, for instance, Melville names Ahab's ship, the Pequod, after "a celebrated tribe of Massachusetts Indians, now extinct as the ancient Medes."21 The explanation, as Wai-chee Dimock points out, not only rewrites history by substituting extinction for extermination, but also places the Indians in the timeless past of the ancients.22 In Typee the manner in which the narrator presents his observations on the natives continues to empower him.

In contrast to the ostensible dramatic situation of the narrator-protagonist's captivity, the narrative enacts an imperialistic survey of Polynesian life. Using the anthropological imperative of power, the narrator classifies, catalogues, labels, and judges Typee culture (just as he will deal with Tahiti in Omoo) without doubt or hesitancy, asserting his powers of definition and control. Definitive assessments of alien cultures attest to the simplicity of the latter, their easy interpretability. Significantly, Typee purports to be an adventure story that is also a comprehensive cultural study. The chapters themselves are anthropologically arranged—from descriptions of the making of tappa and breadfruit to the "Natural History of the Valley," the "history of a day" in the valley, the history of the "pi-pis," the religion of the Typees, the connection between tattooing and tabooing, the Typees' "primitive simplicity of government," and their "The Social Condition And General Character" (p. 190). There are two reasons why the descriptive-anthropological venture is inherently an act of mastery. First, the anthropological imperative is only exclusively available: the so-called civilized people
have the privilege of observing and recording the "habits" of so-called primitives. The position of the recorder is a position of power. Second, as Aijaz Ahmad suggests, the classificatory mode impoverishes the subject, forcing the multiplicity of the alien culture into a manageable hierarchy. One of the most striking revelations of the narrator's need for control is his impatience with the polyglossia of the Typee language. Its annoying peculiarity "is the different senses in which one and the same word is employed; its various meanings all have a certain connection, which only makes the matter more puzzling. So one brisk, lively little word is obliged, like a servant in a poor family, to perform all sorts of duties" (p. 212). The versatility and richness of language could have been an inspiration to an aspiring writer (as it was with the complicated etymology of the whale and the different cultural meanings of the whale with which *Moby Dick* begins), but the linguistic prerogative traditionally belongs to the colonizer; further, for one striving for control over the subject and attempting to define himself through exclusion, such diversity threatens the simplicity and regularity needed for control.

Colonial discourse depends on the supposed singularity of the natives, their predictable characteristics. Melville's narrator, too, attempts to mold the reality of Typee culture into clear and simple categories: "Nothing can be more uniform and undiversified than the life of the Typees; one tranquil day of ease and happiness follows another in quiet succession; and with these unsophisticated savages the history of a day is the history of a life" (p. 144). Tommo's own stay in the valley shows him that, in fact, days of feasting and warfare radically alter the time-space framework of the Typees. The entire community prepares for days for festivals such as "the feast of the calabashes" which is celebrated with dance and song. And as Marnoo's visit illustrates, the Typees continually react politically to the actions of the French at their harbors. Nevertheless, when engaged in the descriptive-anthropological mode, the narrator manages the Otherness of the natives by imposing regularity, predictability, and stasis on their culture.

In addition to giving the text an ethnological structure, Melville in another way perpetuates a racial hierarchy by giving the hero access to the symbols of European power. Tommo arrives at the valley with a meager set of possessions, but these are enough to ensure his cultural power over the natives. The novelty of Typee culture scarcely leaves Tommo at a loss. He soon becomes adept at making tappa, the traditional cloth of the natives; he begins to relish raw fish and learns to eat the slippery poee-poee deftly; and he gains mastery over all he encounters by classifying, assuming the role of the expert. The natives, on the other hand, always stand in varying degrees of subordination to their captive. "Every article, however trivial, which belonged to me, the natives appeared to regard as sacred," writes the narrator (p. 141). Tommo's weather-beaten shirts are used by the islanders on special festive days
and render "the young islanders who [wear] them very distinguished characters" (p. 176). "Civilized" possessions here signify more than their labor value. Simply put, the natives cannot measure the labor value of such items because, within the limits of the narrative, they can never produce them.

Such possessions, in colonial-imperial discourse, are always signifiers of the power over the native. The native's delight at the mundane artifacts of culture and the incongruity between the savage's actions and civilized things emphasize the superiority of the Westerner and the inferiority of the savage. The Typees' interaction with Western artifacts typifies this hierarchical relationship. The ludicrous picture made by the aged warrior Marheyo as he wears the mouldy shoes he has begged from Tommo is a traditional one symbolizing Euro-American colonial power:

The venerable warrior approached the house, with a slow, stately gait, earrings in ears, and spear in hand with this highly ornamental pair of shoes suspended from his neck by a strip of bark, and swinging backwards and forwards on his capacious chest. In the gala costume of the tasteful Marheyo, these calf-skin pendants ever after formed the most striking feature (p. 142).

In this description, Marheyo's (mis)use of Western artifacts works to question any native access to power. Marheyo's status, signalled by the words "venerable" and "stately," is immediately undermined and ridiculed as it is associated with his treating dirty, worn shoes as stately, ornamental artifacts. Within the economy of colonial relations, Marheyo is equated with the value of his colonial possessions. The humor, too, belongs entirely to the Westerner, with the savage serving as the uncomprehending butt of cultural innuendo. No less empowering are Tommo's skills with the simple artifacts of civilization. The natives are amazed at the pop gun Tommo carves for a child with a bamboo shoot and his pocket knife. The child "scamper[s] away with it, half delirious with ecstasy," and soon the entire Typee population become children. Tommo is "surrounded by a noisy crowd—venerable old graybeards—responsible fathers of families—valiant warriors—matrons—young men... all holding in their hands bits of bamboo, and each clamoring to be served first" (p. 141). Shoes or pop-guns, Western artifacts serve to assert the childlike propensity of the natives despite their "venerable" and "responsible" demeanors. It is appropriate, then, that Tommo's last gesture to the substitute family he has formed among the Typees is to give them the artifacts he has saved for barter: a musket to Kory-Kory, rolls of cotton to Marheyo and Fayaway and powder bags to the rest of the women.
The use of culture as power to invalidate and demarcate the native as aberrant rests philosophically on binary thinking. Melville in *Typee* courageously attempts to upset the binary hierarchy which privileges the first term over the second, white over native. Thus he admires the Islanders, indeed sees them as superior to Europeans because of their simplicity, childishness, and instinctive behavior. But such criteria for admiration had long been used, and were still in contemporary use as Melville wrote *Typee*, to reinforce a paternalistic epidermal alterity in America—by abolitionists who held that because blacks were simple and childlike (more moral, if less intelligent, than their white counterparts) they should be freed, and by pro-slavery believers who used the same criteria to argue that blacks needed to be controlled. The criteria operated by what George M. Frederickson calls "romantic racialism," reinforcing the inferiority of the blacks but by invoking images of sympathy rather than hatred.

Melville did not take to the lecture circuit to condemn slavery, but as Carolyn Karcher points out, he dealt with some of the moral issues of slavery through his treatment of other people of color. The colonial experience raised questions about the ethics of Euro-American dominance. Melville asserted the inherent moral superiority of the savage, but only as long as the latter remained an identifiable savage. In fact, Melville takes care to justify his admiration of the Typees on racial grounds, in such a way that reflections on the beauty of the Typees are, in effect, reinforcements of European norms. It is striking how often the narrator refers to the fairness of the Typees, their almost-white complexions that differentiate them from the rest of the savages. In comparison to the Typees, "the dark-hued Hawaiians and the woolly-headed Fgeees are immeasurably inferior . . . The distinguishing characteristic of the Marquesan Islanders . . . is the European cast of their features—a peculiarity seldom observable among other uncivilized people" (p. 176). In terms of the racial politics of antebellum America, the Typees could almost "pass" for white, and, it is implied, their being termed "savages" is therefore a gross injustice. The narrator's overt rhetoric about the beauty of the Typees introduces a clear racial subtext which maintains strict hierarchical separations between European and native, white and non-white, civilized and savage. Melville keeps these boundaries distinct because to call into question the binaries themselves would be to undermine the colonial use of culture as power. It would also create a fearful uncertainty, an alterity in Western-colonial self-definition.

Consequently, the most interesting moments in Melville's texts are those where he deals with what might be called boundary situations or transgressive situations. Such situations are numerous in colonial experience: the native who, like Caliban, learns the oppressor's language and thus has the power to change it; the native who appropriates the
powers of colonial signifiers; the colonial who "goes native" or partici-
pates ambivalently in both cultures. Melville's narratives of the South
Seas present a complex approach to these situations. The narratives
permit increasingly radical transgressive situations while at the same
time making more concerted efforts to recuperate these situations as
binaristic.

The earliest of these boundary situations is presented in *Typee* by
the anomalous character Marnoo, who unlike the rest of the Typees is
free to roam through antagonistic tribes and communicate with the Eu-
ropians, and who speaks colonial languages—French and English.
Marnoo clearly disrupts colonialist demarcations between civilized in-
tellect and savage simplicity. But the text also contains this disruption
by transforming the signifiers of culture into racial signifiers. Marnoo
not only acts differently from the natives, but looks different as well.
He is a "Polynesian Apollo" whose features remind Tommo of "an an-
tique bust." But "the marble repose of art [is] supplied by a warmth and
liveliness of expression only to be seen in the South Sea Islander under
the most favorable developments of nature" (p. 131). Marnoo's unique-
ness becomes the result of the fortuitous workings of culture over na-
ture, of civilizing the savage. "The natural quickness of the savage had
been wonderfully improved by his intercourse with the white man" (p.
136). Melville allows Marnoo his uniqueness but also simultaneously
manages to use the language of racial distinction to keep separate the
political distinctions between the savage and the civilized.

Although the intelligent and thinking native posed a problem for the
easy demarcation between the cognitive Westener and the instinctive
Islander, the Westener who had chosen to live forever with the island-
ers (and with no intention of proselytizing) was a more immediate threat
to the idea of a hegemonic Euro-American racial identity. Such a per-
son had given up his access to culture and had thus repudiated the racial
manichean ideology so essential to colonialism and imperialism. Melville
found it increasingly difficult to accept, or to represent in print without
censure, such possible lives. Possibly as a result of pressure from his
publisher, Melville appended to the narrative of his stay among the Typees
"The Story of Toby: A Sequel to 'Typee.'" The ostensible purpose of
the sequel is to provide a natural ending to the dramatic suspense about
the whereabouts of Toby. But the sequel might well have been titled
"The Moral of Jimmy: The Results of Savagery." Toby finds his way
ashore partly with the help of Jimmy, an old sailor who lives with the
Islanders, has Marquesan wives, and acts as a translator between the
French and the natives. The sequel details Jimmy's treachery: deceiver-
ing Toby into thinking that the natives will fetch Tommo, Jimmy plies
him with a local liquor and cheats him of all his money. By implication,
such treachery can only be expected from this "grizzled sailor" who
lives a "devil-may-care life in the household of Mowanna the king,"
who is a “royal favorite, and [has] a good deal to say in his master’s councils” (p. 247).

Whatever Melville’s motives may have been in writing about racial transgression in Typee, he nonetheless continued to be troubled by such situations in Omoo and Mardi. In Omoo the Westerner-turned-savage presents a more threatening and destabilizing aspect. At the bay of Hannamanoo the crew of the Julia is met by a delegation of Islanders and the unnamed white man who shocks the narrator. The lone white is a renegado from Christendom and humanity—a white man, in the South Sea girdle, and tattooed in the face. A broad blue band stretched across his face from ear to ear . . . Some of us gazed upon this man with a feeling akin to horror, no ways abated when informed that he had voluntarily submitted to this embellishment of his countenance. What an impress! Far worse than Cain’s.27

Tommo’s desire to escape from Typee is precipitated not by his confirmation of cannibalism in the valley but by his fear of being tattooed by the zealous artist. Despite his reflections on the felicity of the Islanders’ lifestyle, Tommo cannot submit to tattooing, the permanent visible impress of the Other on his whiteness. In Omoo, the white sailor who has willingly submitted to tattooing is therefore profoundly disturbing. His presence questions the assumed superiority of Euro-American values. The narrative solves this crisis by unambiguously valorizing racial and cultural hierarchies. We should not be surprised at Melville’s censure of the sailor as a renegade Christian. Melville, after all, did not question the ethics of the missionary enterprise, only its poor practical application.28 But why is the sailor a renegade from “Christendom and humanity?” Are the Islanders somehow less human than their Western counterparts? The text problematically provokes such a question. Indeed, the narrator argues that only the most victimized could live happily with the savages: the anachronistic sailor is an unfortunate orphan who escaped the parish workhouse where he was scorned by all. “It is just this sort of men,” the narrator surmises, “uncared for by a single soul, without ties, reckless, and impatient of the restraints of civilization, who are occasionally found quite at home upon the savage islands of the Pacific” (p. 354).

The urgent political and philosophical questions posed by colonial ideology in Typee and Omoo might well have forced Melville to abandon all reference to particular historical situations and to turn to philosophical and abstract narrative in Mardi. But Mardi continues to raise the political issues of Typee and Omoo. The hero of Mardi is a Prospero-like figure, unwillingly crowned king of the Islanders; he is also the figure of colonial fantasy, the bearer of culture, rescuer of beauty (here symbolized by Yillah, a native beauty who mysteriously disappears).
In fact, in this seemingly apolitical text, transgressive situations are more forcefully recuperated within colonial-imperial ideology. Such is the case, for instance, with the natives Samoa and Annatoo, who are in sole charge of the Parki after the crew has mutinied and killed the captain. Even though there is no evidence to suggest Samoa’s and Annatoo’s complicity with the mutineers, Melville uses the occasion to emphasize the treachery, evil, and alterity of the natives. What is at issue here is the act of appropriation by which the natives have assumed command, a situation which threatens the distinction between ruler and ruled, white and native.

The narrative begins by translating the political difference into a racial one. Samoa, at first sight, is a stereotypical picture of racial Otherness: evil, exotic, dehumanized, ludicrous. “He was a tall, dark Islander, a very devil to behold, theatrically arrayed in kilt and turban. . . . His neck was jingling with strings of beads.” Samoa and Annatoo are laughable as they strut around the ship arrayed in the captain’s clothes. But Annatoo poses a greater threat, for she assumes and demands her rights to the ship’s goods. In Annatoo Melville creates an anomalous character, one who is native and woman but not disempowered. But if she is strong and imposing, it is also clear that the text invites us to read Annatoo as an aberrant woman. The narrative seems almost obsessively focused on her gendering: Samoa falls in love with Annatoo after her “first virgin bloom had departed, leaving nothing but a lusty frame and a lustier soul” (p. 728). She is “sinewy of limb, and neither young, comely, nor amiable [and] exceedingly distasteful in my eyes. Besides, she was a tigress. . . . It was indispensable that she should at once be brought under prudent subjection; and made to know, once for all, that though conjugally a rebel, she must be nautically submissive” (pp. 750-51). Annatoo upsets both traditional gender construction and colonial relations which rely on such gender constructions.

If, as George Mosse suggests, in modern Europe the nation is thought of as exclusively male, Edward Said has shown how the colonized Orient was viewed as female territory ready for conquest. Melville’s representation of Annatoo as the threatening obverse of colonial fantasy is so powerful that simultaneous attempts to maintain a racial demarcation seem wishful. “Instances were known to me of half-civilized beings, like Samoa, forming part of the crews of ships in these seas, rising suddenly upon their white shipmates, and murdering them, for the sake of the wretched ship” (p. 750). The narrative employs the familiar rhetoric of “us” and “them,” “civilized” and “savage,” in order to contain the disruption occasioned by Samoa and Annatoo.

Melville’s reliance on the hierarchies of colonial discourse and his narrative strategies of managing the natives reveal the persistence of empire-building in the literary imagination of nineteenth-century America. It would be historically naive and critically unsophisticated to expect
Melville to be free of the racial and cultural biases of imperialism when America was entering its imperial phase. It would be equally unsophisticated to read the texts and ignore the colonial context—read, that is, allegories of relativity of values, of good and evil, white and black symbols, without concerning ourselves with the people to whom these categories are applied. Melville attempted to write alternatives to the simple "civilizing the savages" narratives of colonial repression. While Emerson would declare, "Cold and sea will train an imperial Saxon race... All the bloods it shall absorb and domineer," Melville explored the consequences of such attempts at domination. But he could not disrupt the civilization/savagery dichotomy enough not to figure the native as Other.

Indeed, because the natives were Others, any blurrings of the dichotomy created moments of fearful uncertainty in Melville's works throughout his career. The horror of "Benito Cereno" is Captain Delano's inability to recognize the reversal of the master-slave relationship between Benito Cereno and Babo. Melville's courage as a writer lay in continually dealing with issues of domination and exploitation, of stereotypes and alterity. By increasingly focusing on boundary situations where distinctions between the imperial and native race became unclear, Melville questioned, even as he repeated, colonial discourse with a difference.

Notes

1 Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo distinguish between micropolitics, or the Foucauldian idea that power circulates everywhere, and macropolitics, which emphasize the importance of political realities such as colonialism, imperialism, and oppression. See Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo, eds., Macropolitics of Nineteenth Century Literature: Nationalism, Exoticism, Imperialism (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

2 Drinnon and Slotkin both provide historical evidence to substantiate the mythology of conquest. Drinnon traces the continuity between the Puritans' view of the Indians as embodiments of instinct and sexuality and similar views of other races, culminating in the "Indianization" of the Vietnamese in the Vietnam war. Slotkin examines the persistence of the Last Stand motif as developed around the figure of General Custer, and its relation to the definition of the frontier as an environment to be subdued. See Richard Slotkin, The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890 (New York: Atheneum, 1985). Curiously, neither author deals with Typee, Omoo or Mardi. Drinnon sees Melville as one of the few counterculture figures, but he focuses mainly on Confidence Man. See Richard Drinnon, Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1980).

4 Wai-Chee Dimock, Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), p. 9. In contrast to Dimock, Lawrence E. Buell views nineteenth century American literature as postcolonial. Buell suggests that Melville's writings reflect a postcolonial anxiety and consciousness of two audiences (the colonial and the native) similar to that of writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o. See Lawrence E. Buell, "Melville and American Decolonization," AL, 64 (1992), 228. Persuasive as this thesis is, it is problematic in that it trivializes the very importance of the fact of the internal colonization of minorities in America. In his essay, "American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon," Buell acknowledges the problems of "imagining America of the expansionist years as a postcolonial rather than proto-imperial power," but argues that despite its imperialism, "American culture can be said to remain at least vestigially postcolonial as long as Americans are impressed by the sound of an educated British accent." See ALH, 4 (1992), 411, 434. For a critique of the universalizing of the category "post-colonial" see Ella Shohat, "Notes on the 'Post Colonial,'" Social Text, 31/32 (1992), 99–113.

5 Patrick Brantlinger points out how in England "abolitionism contained the seeds of the empire . . . as the leading industrial power in the world, Britain found in abolition a way to work against the interests of its rivals who were still heavily involved in colonial slavery and a plantation economy." See Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent," in Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., "Race," Writing, and Difference (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 186.


8 Walter Herbert's Marquesan Encounters provides an excellent political and historical background for Typee. Herbert examines the accounts of three widely different types of people who came to the Marquesas: Captain Porter, Reverend Charles Stewart, and Herman Melville. Analyzing the different types of Europeans who visited the islands, he situates Melville as a beachcomber whose ambiguous social status created fruitful ambivalences in the text. Herbert analyzes Melville's attitudes to the Marquesans mainly by focusing on the characterization of Tommo and his changing views of the islanders. Thus he finds that Melville's account emphasizes more the anxieties upon encountering another race than self-affirmation (p. 158). Herbert also isolates a few cases (the treatments of missionaries, for example) where Melville does not follow the radical implications of his criticism of colonization (p. 177). See Walter T. Herbert, Marquesan Encounters: Melville and the Meaning of Civilization (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980).

9 Although the first Europeans to invade the Islands were the Spaniards in 1595, their settlement was brief and the Islands were not invaded again till Cook's voyage. See Greg Dening, Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas 1774–1880 (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1980), pp. 11, 16. I have relied on Dening's study for much of my information about the Marquesas.

10 Walter T. Herbert Jr., Marquesan Encounters, p. 79.
During the nineteenth century the population of the Marquesas Islands fell from an estimated 100,000 at its height to 4,865 in 1882. See Walter T. Herbert, *Marquesan Encounters*, p. 19.


See Grejda, p. 9.


Mitchell Breitwieser, “False Sympathy in Melville’s *Typee*,” *AQ*, 34 (1982), p. 398. Breitwieser’s study is the only one which reads *Typee* through the lens of colonialism. Breitwieser, however, maintains a definite separation between Melville and the narrator Tommo, suggesting that Melville was in fact exposing Tommo’s ethnocentrism. I do not make the separation, because I believe that the “real” author is a construct (revealed through letters and diaries, which are simply different texts) and because I am dealing with the “author” or authorial voice as it emerges in the text. Further, my analysis of the aesthetic-ideological structure of the text makes it impossible to settle the question of intentionality versus irony.


For specific historical analysis of Euro-American ways of maintaining cultural superiority and domination over the Marquesans, see Greg Dening, *Islands and*


28 Walter Herbert, in *Marquesan Encounters*, notes that “Melville . . . focuses his attack on targets that his readers would readily comprehend, on the moral failures of individual missionaries and on their mismanagement of an enterprise he asserts in principle to be glorious” (p. 177).

