

Hieroglyphic, Oral, and Performative:  
(Re)Evaluating Resistance to Colonialism in the Works of Melville

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Demetra McBrayer  
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Chair: Laura Mielke

Randall Fuller

Maryemma Graham

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The thesis committee for Demetra McBrayer certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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### Abstract

Herman Melville's legacy in nineteenth-century American literary studies remains prolific. Recent scholarly inquiry, such as those by Christopher Freeburg, Geoffrey Sanborn, and Birgit Brander Rasmussen, critically read key texts of Melville for their unique depictions of Polynesian and African cultures. In this paper I focus on the depictions of oral and performative literacy by those African and Polynesia cultures in three key texts by Melville—*Typee* (1846), *Moby-Dick* (1851), and "Benito Cereno" (1855). By focusing on his depictions of non-alphabetic literacies, I revisit Melville's engagements with colonialism, evaluating their efficacy and limitations. Tommo's refusal of the Typee facial tattoo, Ishmael's fear of Queequeg during the Monkey Rope scene, and Amasa Delano's inability to understand the revolt aboard the *San Dominick* show a continuum of Melville's anti-colonialism, opening discussions of what it means to *read* the Other. In examining the ways white colonialist characters presume their right to learn and to take the knowledge from those non-Western literacies they cannot read, we can probe what including non-Western literacies in academic studies means for the future of the field – interdisciplinary efforts between literary studies and non-Western areas of study that best preserve, maintain, and engage the texts of non-anglophone cultures.

**Key Words:** American literature, Herman Melville, literacy, Nineteenth-century American literature, Postcolonialism, Anticolonialism, tattoos, performance

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## I. Introduction

Across three of Herman Melville's key works, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846), *Moby-Dick; Or, the White Whale* (1851), and "Benito Cereno" (1855), we see a consistent pattern in his thoughts on colonialism. In these texts, Melville hypothesizes potential outcomes for European colonialism by tracking his white protagonists, their engagements with representatively Other characters, and the resolutions of key scenes. Consistent amongst these three works is a disdain toward imperialism and its incursions into Polynesian and African lands; the best example of this is the way in which Melville's characters engage non-Western, non-alphabetic literacies. Tommo, Ishmael, and Delano encounter alternate literacies of hieroglyphs, orality, and performance throughout their engagement with the Typee, Queequeg, and the Africans on the *San Dominick*, respectively. Each character's engagement with these alternate literacies makes them aware of the colonialist assumption of alphabetic communication's superiority, and each work has the white characters imagine or experience the loss of their position in imperialism's alphabet-based hierarchy. By interpreting the way in which *Typee*, *Moby-Dick*, and "Benito Cereno" pose questions about colonialism's engagement with non-Western, non-alphabetic communication and knowledge, we can understand the limits of Melville's critique of colonialism and at the same time examine how diverse literacies resist colonialism.

Three main elements in Melville's texts demonstrate complex methods of communication and documentation that do not adhere to Western convention and subject each character to being inscribed by, tied to the fate of, and yet unable to grasp the story around them. Specifically, Melville utilizes the tattoos of the Typee and of Queequeg, and the oral and physical communication of the Africans to explore these ideas. These moments offer white characters the

opportunity to recognize or accept alternate literacies, equalizing the alphabetic and the non-alphabetic. Yet they refuse the opportunity, for it would dismantle the image of uncivilized, illiterate Others, thus deconstructing the colonialist white characters' power.

In this thesis, I combine and build on the evaluations of Christopher Freeburg, Geoffrey Sanborn, and Birgit Brander Rasmussen to examine the non-alphabetic literacies of Queequeg, the Typee, and the songs of the Africans in "Benito Cereno" as well as the actions of Babo, demonstrating how these texts in which they appear exemplify Melville's stance on colonialism. However, I also re-evaluate the scholarly interpretation of Melville as anti-colonialist. An examination of these works reveals Melville's anti-colonialism, yet Melville does not imagine a world without colonialism or the creation of a world after the complete deconstruction of colonialism and its power structures. His works hypothesize potential solutions to colonialism, yet they do not deconstruct colonialism. Tommo, Ishmael, and Delano eventually return to their colonialist positions of power: Tommo denies his tattoo and escapes the island to return home; Ishmael does not accept Queequeg's life as equitable to his own and enacts a distance in their friendship, maintaining his position above the Polynesian harpooner even in death; and Delano aids in the capture of the *San Dominick*, leading to Babo's death and the punishment of the rebel Africans. Melville's white characters' attempts to "read" the Polynesian and African characters acknowledge the complicated relationships between Western and non-Western bodies and cultures; still, these white characters return to their Western homes. This move is significant as each character, should they accept the literacies of the Other, could explore the knowledge they wish to know: Tommo and Ishmael could understand the culture of the Typee and of Queequeg, and Delano would understand the situation of the *San Dominick*. My evaluation, thus, exposes

Melville's position of ambivalence: while his works entertain possibilities for ending colonialism, they lack damning critique.

## II. Reading the Typee, Refusing Potential Colonization, and Returning Home

A fictionalized autobiography, *Typee* is the story of Tommo, a young American sailor, who abandons his ship when it docks at Nukuheva in the South Seas to escape the abuses and violence of his captain. Tommo retreats to what he believes is the Edenic territory of the Happar only to find himself amongst the Typee, a tribe Tommo's captains refer to as the "bloody cannibals" of Nukuheva (Melville, *Typee* 24). Tommo suffers an injury during his journey and, contrary to his expectations, the Typee care for him until he recovers. During this stay, he is increasingly drawn to the culture and religion of the Typee, to their concept of the taboo for which he cannot find a tangible meaning, and particularly to their tattoos. While Tommo does not know the meanings of the tattoos, and never fully accesses this guarded knowledge, he nonetheless recognizes the tattoos as significant and potentially religious. He believes these tattoos are synonymous with guarded, secretive knowledge, comparing them to wearing "a sort of freemason badge" (220). This secretive knowledge is best understood if we realize that for Tommo this makes the Typee into texts to read and to consume. Tommo refers to Karky as an artist "engaged on an original sketch" upon "the human canvas before him" (218). Similarly, Tommo recounts the story of Mowanna, the Queen of Nukuheva, describing her tattoos as hieroglyphics and like "inscriptions in India ink as the lid of an Egyptian sarcophagus" (8). For Tommo, Typee bodies are textual, yet the language written upon them is untranslatable. As such, the initial interest in the tattoos is exacerbated; Tommo continually attempts to read the tattoos, trying to understand the Typee culture fully. What Tommo and his evaluations of Typee tattoos make clear is his colonialist belief in the right to read Polynesian cultures. Tommo is intrigued



by the indecipherable Typee language, and, in an acquisitional drive, believes it is his innate right to understand their language, to read the body of the Other. However, this assumption is ultimately subverted by his conversation with the tribe's tattooist.

During his journey to what he believes are the Happar, Tommo injures his leg. After discovering Tommo and his companion, Toby, the Typee take in Tommo and Toby, and they meet their king, Mehevi, who determines the pair will stay with an elder Nukuhevan until Tommo is healed. Tommo receives treatment for his leg, but the two remain apprehensive, knowing they are amongst the rumored cannibals of Nukuheva. Tommo and Toby are made residents in the home of Marheyo, an elder of the Typee, and his family. Tommo details each member of Marheyo's household, but he starts with Kory-Kory. Kory-Kory is the son of Marheyo and a caregiver to the injured Tommo, carrying the disabled sailor throughout the Typee village and surrounding areas. He sleeps near Tommo and cares for his injuries throughout Tommo's stay. Kory-Kory's general appearance strikes Tommo: he notes the shaved head except for two spots of hair that resemble a pair of horns and hairy stretches of skin that droop from his upper lip and chin. Yet Tommo is most concerned with the tattoos that adorn Kory-Kory, those that are referred to as "a little curious to my [Tommo's] unaccustomed sight, and therefore I dilate upon them" (Melville, *Typee* 83). Tommo, at length, describes the tattoos of Kory-Kory:

Kory-Kory [...] had seen fit to embellish his face with three broad longitudinal stripes of tattooing, which, like those country roads that go straight forward in defiance of all obstacles, crossed his nasal organ, descending into the hollow of his eyes, and even skirted the borders of his mouth. [...] His countenance thus triply hooped, as it were, with

tattooing, always reminded me of those unhappy wretches whom I have sometimes observed gazing out sentimentally from behind the grated bars of a prison window. (83)

This description of Kory-Kory's longitudinal stripes is the most detailed and the lengthiest description of the Typee native. Tommo does go further to acknowledge that Kory-Kory was dutiful and faithful to him, yet this is the extent of our introduction to Kory-Kory, and it is only a fraction of the length of Tommo's description of Kory-Kory's tattoos: we, like Tommo, can only gaze upon his most non-Western features, drawn to the Typee native's Otherness.

Tommo's reading of Kory-Kory's tattoos inadvertently shows not only his colonialist interpretation of the Typee but the limits by which this colonialist knowledge understands Typee tattoos. For these to be longitudinal stripes, the geographical indicators of distance from Greenwich, England, they must extend vertically from north to south or forehead to chin, yet Tommo's description makes clear that the stripes of Kory-Kory's tattoos wrap around his face horizontally, "crossing the face in the in the vicinity of the nose, and [...] sweeping along his lips from ear to ear" (83). And Tommo subsequently reads these lines as shadows cast across the faces of prisoners, which does suggest they are vertical. This inconsistency stems from Tommo's colonialist knowledge, which confuses the horizontal, or latitudinal lines, of Kory-Kory's face with vertical, longitudinal lines. This confusion is significant as he mis-translates the Typee tattoos from indications of distance from the equator to their distance from Greenwich, England, which we can extrapolate to say Tommo can only conceive of Kory-Kory's body in relation to a colonialist nation. Furthermore, this indicates that Kory-Kory can only be read by Tommo through colonialist frameworks or, rather, colonialist knowledge. Translation is integral in Western colonialism, but the inability to translate affords it the ability to assume or mis-translate native literacies in ways that benefit imperialist ambitions. As such, the tattoos of the Typee

substantiate their barbarism not only because of the way they immediately indicate their alterity, but also because it is an impenetrable, non-alphabetic language Tommo, as representative of Western colonialism, is free to interpret as he wishes. This act is, as Eric Cheyfitz claims, the way in which colonialism determines its hierarchy from the civilized to the uncivilized (101, 95). However, Tommo's acceptance of a hierarchy in which the Typee are uncivilized comes prior to his engagement with the tribe; Tommo's captain draws on the specter of cannibalism to evoke this idea. Thus, the tattoos inadvertently draw out the colonialist fear of the impenetrable Other, and Tommo's space within this hierarchy is complicated. He repeatedly returns to the tattoos, attempting to find some discernable meaning that reveals the true nature of the Typee, but he is incapable of reading to verify or to assuage his fears. As a result, the tattoos remain an impenetrable lexicon throughout the novel.

Tommo's realization of the significance of a Typee tattoo comes when he encounters Karky at work and the intellectual and textual combine: the first place Karky outlines for a tattoo is Tommo's face. However, Karky is not the sole Typee to observe the importance of tattooing the face; Mehevi similarly suggests a face tattoo to Tommo, who, after declining the King's suggestion, summarily recounts the strange facial tattoos he has seen throughout his time in Nukuheva. These images horrify Tommo, who fears the disfigurement and the inability "to have the *face* to return to [his] countrymen" (Melville, *Typee* 219, emphasis in original). As Tommo and Karky demonstrate, there is a recognition of the face as a form of identification and importance. In combination with their hieroglyphic nature, tattoos are how the Typee document their cultural identity and history. Current scholarship indicates Melville stayed and drew inspiration for the Typee as well as their tattooing practices from the Marquesians. Marquesian tattoos are "linked to larger cultural contexts such as legends and other narratives" that make

them “a conventionalized code and combined to create narratives that could be ‘read’ by other Marquesians (Rasmussen 124). It is likely that the hieroglyphic language of the Nukuheva tattoos, as a distinctly non-Western textual act, are untranslatable to Tommo – foreign to an extent that he cannot decipher or obtain their meanings. As a result, he is unsettled by their existence.

The inaccessible aspect of the Typee language and Tommo’s resulting fears symbolize contemporary colonialist fears about Polynesians. Geoffrey Sanborn argues that Tommo’s fear of being tattooed is Melville’s commentary on colonialist anxieties about the barbarism of Polynesian communities (72). While the tattoos do invoke these fears—a possible explanation for why they inadvertently provoke a colonialist response from Tommo—the intention behind the tattoos differs. Whereas a connection can be drawn to the Maquilla, who use Western fear of cannibalism to keep colonizers from settling, the Typee tattooing practice and its meanings exist before Tommo’s and other Europeans’ arrival. The tattoos meaning and implementation are not in response to colonialism nor intentionally resistant; their resistance is in their hieroglyphic nature as well as their ability to signify non-Western knowledge that has history. As colonialism relies on the barbarity and destruction of non-alphabetic cultures, Typee tattooing practices signal a means of communication and extensive, historical record that defy barbarity, countering the narrative of uncivilized savage Others. Rather, the concerns of looming cannibalism are largely from Tommo as it returns him to the safe assumption of the Typee’s supposedly savage nature, and we can argue that Karky’s intent to tattoo Tommo is not solely to give him access to Typee culture but a means of scaring him away. Tommo’s fear of tattooing his face can be interpreted as a moment of awareness that makes him aware of his colonialist allegiance and severs the connection he feels with the Typee. Tommo is irreparably disconnected from the

Typee he previously romanticized. Tommo's assurance in his right to retreat to the Typee, learn of the culture, and leave without issue stems from a colonialist belief in dominance and innate superiority, and he cannot fathom an equivalent cultural exchange that Karky's tattooing requires. Whereas Tommo realizes that the tattooing is related to Typee religion and so they seek to convert him, he cannot resolve this with the "utter ruin of [his] 'face divine,' which he believes renders him unable to return home (Melville, *Typee* 220). Tommo becomes aware that the Typee require an exchange of his colonialist identity and security to receive Typee knowledge. He must give up an aspect of himself laden with power to receive any within the Typee community. As a result, Tommo's colonialist identity is destabilized; he must take on a visual indication of alterity that removes the freedoms of white, Western colonialists. Thus, Tommo feels the threat of losing the safety of colonialism's power as this physical act equates him to the Other that haunts the warning his ship captain plays on.

Tommo's encounter with tattooing exemplifies the ways in which colonialist acquisition is an act of violence and a beneficiary of perceived power. As Karky reacts joyfully at the idea of tattooing his face, Tommo's desire to leave strengthens: his "former desire to escape from the valley [is] now revived with additional force" (220). For Tommo, his quest has been one of elucidation; he seeks validation that the Typee are cannibals and to understand their unique cultural knowledge. Yet the passion to decode Typee tattooing ceases once Tommo encounters Karky and the prospect of what is required to understand the tattoos—Tommo would need to be inscribed in order to understand the Typee tattooing process and its meaning. Once he is subject to becoming a Typee, giving him access to all he seeks, Tommo wishes to leave. By seeing how impermanent his power is over the Typee, Tommo denies Karky's request to have his face, the mental and physical bastion of his cultural identity, tattooed: in the instance of Karky's wish to

tattoo Tommo, Tommo becomes the one who is being colonized by a non-Western form of inscription. The recognition of the uncertainty of his position as colonizer is, what his Western identity and knowledge represent, strikes terror in Tommo; he relinquishes the romantic idea of the Typee that initially quiets his fears for the distanced stance that pervades the final chapters.

Admittedly, Tommo does not consistently maintain his dominance as colonizer. He repeatedly attempts to interpret the Typee and their language, as we see with Kory-Kory and Karky, but returns to the comfort of his imperialist position. This constant awareness of the attempt to understand, the inability to decipher, and the awareness of his tenuous position overwhelms Tommo and inspires his escape. As John Bryant states, Tommo's tattooing scene with Karky "marks the turning point" because "it means a farewell to Western life completely, and no turning back," and this revelation results in the return of Tommo's pain and desire to escape (xxi). Tommo returns to his Western, colonial self and plans his escape from the Typee, growing increasingly desperate with each failed attempt. The fear of the impending assimilation reinstates Tommo's Western identity as he seeks return to the only two English words he brings to the Typee valley upon his escape – "'Home' and 'Mother'"; he wishes to escape the future that his textualizing encounters with Kory-Kory, Karky, and the Typee represent (Melville, *Typee* 248). With this, Tommo's potential assimilation into Typee society makes evident the power structures of Western colonization, but this awareness makes him long for rather than reject the familiar power structures of the West.

Melville makes his commentary on American colonialism apparent through Tommo's potential colonization by Polynesian knowledge. While this concern grew over his lifetime, Melville's experience with the Marquesas islands, the colonial occupation of the islands by the French, and his experiences with missionary expeditions to Polynesian islands inspire the

political tones in *Typee*. As such, Melville's inversion of Tommo's power "reverses the colonial gaze and threatens to turn Tommo into a text rather than a writer, an object rather than subject" (Rasmussen 131). With this realization, Melville demonstrates how, in order to become a text, the subject must become readable, reducing them to consumable commodity; Tommo realizes that to be a text inscribed by the Typee, he will become subaltern and no longer retain the power the colonialist gaze affords him. The tenuous nature of the colonial gaze instills Tommo with fear and a subsequent fervor to return home. The comfortable tourism of the Typee is no more; it is replaced by the realization of his potential to be colonized, making evident Tommo's foolhardy and prideful belief in his dominance. Tommo is no longer in control and, therefore, no longer wishes to be amongst the Typee.

In his exchanges with the Typee, Tommo assumes a distanced, observant position in relation to them as though they are a puzzle to solve; a book to open, read, and shelve; a piece of knowledge now his. Tommo believes himself deserving to learn everything about the Typee, hence his frustration with the un-translatable meanings of their tattoos and the dialect itself: "The Typee language is one very difficult to be acquired; [...] its various meanings all have a certain connection, which only makes the matter more puzzling" (Melville, *Typee* 224). In contrast with his native English, this multivalent, context-reliant language confuses Tommo. It requires understanding of the different situations and causalities in order to understand whether a word means "sleep, rest, reclining, sitting, [or] leaning" (224). In this way, the Typee unintentionally circumvent complete consumption by the Western countries Tommo represents. Melville uses these moments to make apparent not only the foolish endeavor of attempting to colonialize untranslatable and inaccessible Polynesian knowledge, but also how feeble the Western construction of dominance is over Polynesian cultures. With an exchange centered on the

tattooing of Tommo, Melville transports his readers into the position of the colonized thereby emphasizing the frailty of their colonialist identities; however, these critiques do not occur solely in his use of Tommo and the textual act of tattooing; they also extend to Melville's actions in writing *Typee*.

Melville resists fully textualizing the Taipivai, the basis for the *Typee*, for colonial America. John Evelev acknowledges that Melville fought "his publisher's requests for 'documentary evidences' after the publication of *Typee*," showing "anger toward his audience" and referring to them as "the 'parcel of blockheads,' who require 'documentary evidences' and will accept only fact" (28). Melville's anger at the request to confirm the text's authenticity through evidence makes clear a concern about how his readership would similarly enable colonialism's need to understand and fully penetrate the knowledge and culture of the Other. I suggest Melville did not wish to contribute to the commodification of the Taipivai by establishing the validity of *Typee*. By allowing them to remain enigmatic, the Taipivai are distanced from the *Typee* they signify; the Taipivai then exist in the indiscernible where "[t]hey mark the ubiquitous presence of what cannot be distinguished" (Freeburg 116). In doing so, Melville allows them to remain outside of colonialist acquisition.

An example of Melville's condemnation of destructive colonialism appears early in *Typee* as the *Dolly* arrives in Nukuheva. Tommo describes how the crew takes advantage of the uninhibited Nukehevans, engaging in voyeuristic tourism and using the people for their own licentious needs. Indeed, Melville does not condemn the Nukuhevans for their actions. He condemns the settlers who engage in these actions:

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, inhabiting some yet undiscovered island in the midst of the ocean, have never been brought into contaminating contact with the white man. (*Typee* 15)

By providing space from settlers, Melville prevents a similar encroachment by his readership. Melville's refusal to authenticate his story amongst the *Typee* maintains the isolation of the Marquesas Islands he praises. If *Typee* were to be verified, Melville's audience would forcibly acquire the Taipivai's knowledge, a symbolic enactment of the colonialism the novel explores; Melville would have been offering the clear solution he keeps from Tommo. Instead, Melville creates a blind spot for his readers and Western colonialism by refusing to give away what he knows or verify the extent to which he truly knows the Taipivai, and by doing so, he opposes the cultural expectation to authorize the Taipivai and their culture, making them a digestible commodity amidst the Western, imperialist marketplace of Others' experiences.

Melville's observations, commentary, and perspectives are not static; rather, they adapt and grow through the course of his writings. The metaphors he uses to engage the violent, acquisitional, and destructive nature of Western colonialism does not drastically change. Melville continues to engage and complicate his understanding of colonial domination in dynamic ways throughout his work. The most evident is Melville's revisiting the theme of tattoos and knowledge through Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby-Dick* wherein, like *Typee*, the hieroglyphic inscriptions of non-Western, non-alphabetic tattoos enrage and terrify the narrator—a terror worsened by the hieroglyphics of the white whale.

### **III. Interpreting Queequeg and Examining Colonialism's Disparate Value of White and Polynesian Bodies**

*Moby-Dick* tells the story of the *Pequod* and Captain Ahab's diverse, motley crew. We begin the story from Ishmael's perspective, a young man whose melancholy pulls him from the shore to the sea. In doing so, he chances upon a meeting with a Polynesian native from the island of Rokovoko named Queequeg. Queequeg's appearance initially strikes fear into Ishmael, who describes him as inscribed with "large, blackish looking squares" and depictions of frogs running amongst trees as well as a singular "small scalp-knot twisted up on his forehead" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 31–32). Queequeg is more than the barbarism his tattoos signify to the whites of New England. Ishmael signs the two for the *Pequod*, and their journey with Ahab and his diverse crew begins. During his journey, Ishmael is forced to recognize the body of the Other in equity to a Western body—a realization that drives a wedge between the friendship, exposes Ishmael's reversion to the comfort of colonialist structures, and severs the potential for the friendship between the American and Polynesian to pass beyond through their friendship. Ultimately, Ishmael returns to a colonialist perspective, distancing himself from Queequeg. By charting the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg, Melville demonstrates the colonizer's beliefs about acquiring knowledge: they entertain equality with the Other in order to gain non-Western knowledges, but they ultimately cannot accept the Other's body as equally valuable to the white, Western body. The colonizer seeks to obtain an Other's knowledge and rejects the Other, benefiting from the foundation that non-Western cultures, as we see with Queequeg's coffin, for example. This artifact confounds Ishmael and he wishes to decipher its inscriptions much like Queequeg himself. Queequeg's coffin, empty of the body it signifies, will carry Ishmael to his rescue and bring to shore the tale of the *Pequod*. This dynamic replicates how expanding colonialist empires steal knowledge from native cultures, and the colonizer erases any evidence

of non-Western knowledges, perpetuating the narrative of the barbarous natives in need of Western civilization.

When meeting Queequeg for the first time, Ishmael surveys his Polynesian body from a distance, determining its potential to harm: “A peddler of heads too—perhaps the heads of his own brothers. He might take a fancy to mine—heavens! look at the tomahawk!” (32). This is not specific to Queequeg and his Polynesian body as Ishmael intermixes the concept of a tomahawk, an item associated heavily with Native Americans in American culture. It is Queequeg’s Otherness, the association of barbarity with the tattoos and non-Western appearance, that draws Ishmael to focus on the perceived violence. At once we are aware that Ishmael assumes the hostility of Indigenous, in this case Polynesian, bodies toward his. Queequeg’s race does not matter. He is homogenized under the term of “Other” and catalogued as a violent savage. The colonial gaze Ishmael uses is obsessed with the textual aspect of Queequeg’s body that immediately signifies his status as a non-Christian Other. Furthermore, Queequeg’s tattoos become synonymous with an untranslatable, arcane language, one that commits a textual act and one that Queequeg uses to bind himself, through a contract, to the *Pequod*; his signature is merely a replication of a tattoo on his body (80). Queequeg, thus, correlates his tattoos with his status as the literacy of an Other; the non-alphabetic signature on his contract indicates his status as a potential subject to be colonized, and with an unknown language. Yet Queequeg remains, for Ishmael, an uninterpretable quantity whose Otherness is immediately identifiable and frustrates the colonial gaze. Queequeg’s tattoos represent the knowledge of his tribe, depicting “a complete theory of the heavens and the earth and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth” (351). Queequeg is marked with black squares and frogs – imagery Ishmael cannot interpret nor

understand. Despite the friendship formed between the two, Queequeg's tattoos remain indecipherable acts that resist Ishmael and Otherize Queequeg through his visible alterity.

Early in their journey, many of Ishmael's descriptions of Queequeg include or reference his tattoos: Queequeg's "brown tattooed legs," "his pagan arm" or his cleanliness continually remind Ishmael and the reader of Queequeg's race and imagined barbarity and un-Christian nature (53, 35, 33). These reminders distance Ishmael from Queequeg: while they do grow close, their initial meeting, the zenith of their friendship, and Queequeg's death are marked by distances between them: Ishmael initially surmises the threat of the Polynesia; the monkey rope ties Ishmael to Queequeg, stretching the distance from Ishmael into the vast depths of the ocean where Queequeg works; and Ishmael ultimately floats on Queequeg's coffin a vast distance above where the remains of the *Pequod* rest. As Rasmussen notes, distance is integral in understanding how colonialism views divergent literacies and sustains its dominance: "The equation between alphabetism and writing maintains the colonial mythology of a meeting between 'civilized' and 'savage' peoples, marked respectively by literacy and its absence" (4). Furthermore, Ishmael recognizes Queequeg's logographic literacy based upon his tattoos and determines that pagan communities are unable to operate within alphabetic culture. When showing Queequeg the Bible—an exchange Ishmael believes will bring them closer—Ishmael does not attempt to read the text to Queequeg. Instead, Ishmael explains the text's purpose and "the meaning of the few pictures" within it (*Moby-Dick* 52). Due to his colonialist preconceptions, Ishmael assumes Queequeg's inferiority and inability to fully engage with Western civilization; however, Queequeg complicates those initial assumptions. Throughout their journey to the *Pequod*, Queequeg enacts a more equitable version of religion than the surrounding Christians; in fact, the Polynesian native is capable of performing Christianity better

than the members of the Christian community he finds. Notably, the pair encounter a young man aboard a ship to Nantucket who mimics Queequeg. While he is immediately labelled as “devil” and “cannibal” by a fellow passenger, when the young man topples overboard, Queequeg dives in to save him (58). As with other instances in *Moby-Dick*, the more benevolent Queequeg’s actions are compared to Christians, the more Ishmael romanticizes him, creating a dialogue that attempts to anglicize the Rokovoko native: “He [...] seemed to be saying to himself – ‘It’s a mutual, joint-stock world, in all meridians. We cannibals must help these Christians’” (59). Queequeg deconstructs colonialist perceptions on the intersections of savage and un-Christian – the beginning of the ways in which Queequeg conflicts with the way Western cultures read Polynesian bodies; likewise, Ishmael’s presumptuous narration of Queequeg’s thoughts Westernizes the Other. In doing so, Ishmael is interrupting Queequeg’s true character, finessing him into a Western concept of the Christian savage.

By Westernizing Queequeg, Ishmael seeks to explain his charitable, non-savage actions. Through these actions and imposed dialogues, Ishmael forges a relationship with Queequeg. The pair have fraternal moments, yet Ishmael does not understand Queequeg’s markings or Otherness. Ishmael imposes an imagined monologue onto the harpooner; these enact and dictate with alphabetic language a character who is consistently attached to a picture, or sign-based, language. Ishmael’s imagination recreates the colonialist monologues typical of conquest rhetoric (Rasmussen 4). However, the strange practices of the *Pequod* and, ultimately, nature, force Ishmael to confront the extent to which he is willing to accept Queequeg. Using the monkey rope, Melville binds Ishmael and Queequeg metaphorically in a contract of equivalence. In other words, the monkey rope forces Ishmael to reckon with his ability to fully renounce his place in the colonialist hierarchy and accept he and Queequeg’s equity. If Queequeg were to

“sink [and] to rise no more, then both usage and honor demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 244). Ishmael rationalizes that there is “some sort of interregnum in Providence; for its even-handed equity never could have sanctioned so gross an injustice” as to “plunge innocent” Ishmael to the depths if Queequeg dies (244). For Ishmael, there is a connection between Providence, or Christianity, and the Western, colonial body; his innocence is presumed, but Queequeg’s is not. He relies on this connection to deliver him from danger, to assuage his fear that his life will come as part of the price for Queequeg’s. Thus, he is incapable of reconciling his colonialist position to fully accept that Queequeg can be his parallel. Rather, he believes that Providence, a Western, Christian concept, will save him from suffering the same fate as his Polynesian counterpart.

Ishmael’s response logically stems from the fear of drowning, yet it also indicates Ishmael’s awareness of his weakness in physically supporting his Polynesian partner. Melville’s footnote mentions that the choices in who supports the harpooner are calculated “in order to afford the imperiled harpooner the strongest possible guarantee for the faithfulness and vigilance of his monkey-rope holder,” which likewise draws Ishmael’s ire as it relegates him to “the management of one end of it” (244). As with Tommo, Ishmael experiences the fleeting nature of his power. The literally submerged Queequeg controls Ishmael, who cannot resist his potential death should Queequeg not survive. Furthermore, Ishmael is surprisingly aware of his situation, noting that his is the “situation of every mortal that breathes” (244). Still, Ishmael realizes his situation has greater significance. For others, their monkey rope is hidden amongst the “plurality of other mortals” – a safety in the numbers of those who the monkey rope affects (244). If the cost of Queequeg’s life was dispersed amongst a group of persons, it would metaphorically cost less to Ishmael, yet Ishmael does not have this safety; he and Queequeg equally rely upon the

other to live. Like Tommo, this scares Ishmael, resulting in their distance. Ishmael sees how the power of colonialism can be inverted as Queequeg can equally control Ishmael's livelihood. After this realization, Ishmael's "emphasis is on difference rather than sameness" when estimating Queequeg, reestablishing Ishmael's inability to translate his Polynesian boon companion to a digestible Western context (Stauffer 149).

As untranslatable as Queequeg's body is its facsimile, his coffin. This carefully crafted coffin is commissioned by Queequeg when he catches a severe fever. Although he recovers, Queequeg chooses to use "his coffin for a sea-chest," "carving the lid with all manner of grotesque figures and drawings; and it seemed that hereby he was striving, in his rude way, to copy parts of the twisted tattooing on his body" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 351). This act engraves the coffin, making it a symbol of Queequeg long after his death. Rasmussen reads Queequeg's coffin "as a synecdoche for Polynesian writing" wherein native people's "writing could survive just as Egyptian hieroglyphs survived," deconstructing colonialist erasure (136). Rasmussen's reading empowers Polynesian, non-alphabetic literacy, giving it a defiant trajectory in arguably still-colonized countries, yet the imagery of the coffin also gestures to the violence of colonialism: Queequeg is unable to control his body. By also reading that Queequeg's coffin denies his agency over his own burial, Rasmussen conjures issues of colonialist control over Polynesian knowledge. For example, Spanish settlers in the Yucatan peninsula appeal to "fellow missionaries to destroy all but the historical books, which were seen as reliable historical sources for European chroniclers" (28). Furthermore, we could question the way in which archives, a place of colonized knowledge, plunder knowledge from native communities for the sake of expanding the imperial storehouse of information, and this act often involves either the destruction of all non-alphabetic records or of the persons or cultures who write and read them.

As with these native communities, Queequeg's coffin becomes one of these non-alphabetic texts, detached from the signifiers and persons which explain it: Queequeg, the one who knew the meaning of the texts and the original text, is lost to the bottom of the ocean. The text of his coffin will forever remain untranslatable and the lexicon behind them is extinct from the context. As a result, Queequeg's coffin and the removal of agency in his burial symbolizes the removal of Polynesian control over their body of knowledge as well as the violence of its erasure.

As Ishmael describes Queequeg's coffin, hypothesizing its supernatural potential, he acknowledges the powerful capacity of Queequeg's tattoos. He postulates they are either from "a departed prophet" or "seer" and acknowledges their capacity to hold "a complete theory of the heavens and the earth," yet laments that these ideas will "moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 351). These images will, through the inscription on the coffin, survive the sinking of the ship and the parchment it signifies. In fact, it will carry Ishmael to salvation upon the *Rachel*. However, this end is not the one Queequeg wishes for himself. Afraid of "being buried in his hammock [...] tossed like something vile to the death-devouring sharks," Queequeg requests the coffin; he wishes for the Nantucket practice of a coffin burial, a representation for Western civilization (349). Queequeg's fears became reality as he, like many of the *Pequod's* crew, is lost at sea, and although not explicit, subjected to the presence of sharks. I suggest that, like Rasmussen's knowledge, this is Melville's attempt to critique colonialist erasure of Polynesian knowledge. As Ahab sinks with his vengeance, Queequeg's impregnable knowledge supports Ishmael. From this ending, it can be said that Melville offers a moderate solution to colonialism that must confront how Polynesian knowledge is the foundation on which it stands. Without Polynesian literacies, or the Other, colonialist knowledge holds no currency. If Queequeg's coffin, and by extension



Queequeg, do not support Ishmael, *Moby-Dick* does not exist. As Rasmussen claims, this is a moment where “Queequeg’s coffin reveals that at the ‘vital center’ of American literature is the intersection between the alphabetic and indigenous forms of writing—and the possibility of recovering a sense of shared destiny” (138). However, it is valuable to question whether there can be shared destiny within colonialism and its power structures. Polynesian and other indigenous bodies and texts are, as with Queequeg’s coffin, immeasurably detached from their signifiers, from those that read and write the language. Not only does Melville’s ending call us to consider recovery and re-evaluation within American literary studies, it also exposes the fragile nature of American literature as a concept, predicated as it is upon the theft and destruction of native bodies and texts.

*Moby-Dick* tells of the desire to access Polynesian knowledge that resists the colonial tendency to either destroy or consume it. Within this violence, there is resistance. For Queequeg, the meaning of his tattoos is never shared with others, forever withholding that knowledge from Ishmael’s colonialist urges. Melville’s criticism of this colonialist practice becomes evident in connecting *Moby-Dick* and *Typee*, demonstrating a concern for Polynesian culture. Yet Melville did not explicitly focus on colonialism and Polynesian cultures; his interests were as diverse as the colonialism he evaluated. As such, we see Melville’s concern for colonialism, slavery, and African cultures in “Benito Cereno”. Throughout “Benito Cereno,” Captain Amasa Delano is assaulted with oral and auditory clues to what has happened on the *San Dominick*, yet his Western mind cannot interpret the oral literacies of the Africans; he cannot access and interpret an oral culture as it does not conform to his privileging of alphabetic and textual knowledge. With this, Melville further expands his critique to include colonialist engagements with African cultures. Within “Benito Cereno,” African cultures offer a unique way for the Africans and for

Babo to communicate while not allowing Delano to know the truth of his precarious situation: that he boarded a ship wherein the enslaved Africans rebelled, and that should the illusion of their captivity fail, Delano and Benito Cereno will die. As such, African communication operates in non-Western ways that serve Babo and the Africans' purpose by obfuscating the truth of the *San Dominick's* state. Indeed, as Zora Neale Hurston states, "So we can say the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics" (80). Delano can only understand what is directly spoken to him and in his languages, yet the Africans aboard the ship are continuously alluding, singing, or embodying divergent conversations—ones that Delano cannot understand, ones Delano cannot speak. Admittedly, Hurston speaks from an African American perspective and therefore does not refer to the intricacies in African communication, but Hurston's comments exemplify the dichotomy of Western and non-Western thought, utilizing the same representative assumptions by characters such as Melville's Amasa Delano. Indeed, non-written communication obscures the truth for Delano throughout "Benito Cereno," and Delano's supposition of his innate dominance via written language's inherent superiority proves nearly fatal.

#### **IV. Hiding the Story in Plain Sight: The Oral and Physical Literacies aboard the *San Dominick***

While European colonialism took multiple forms across the Americas and Africa, "Benito Cereno" evidences Melville's persistent concern with imperialism's denial of non-Western knowledge, which we see in the African oral and performative literacies. "Benito Cereno" is the story of Captain Amasa Delano, who encounters a ship, the *San Dominick*. The *San Dominick* has few white, European sailors remaining, so those who remain and work aboard are the Africans the slave ship is transporting. While aboard the ship, Delano is incapable of

perceiving the signs of the Africans' rebellion, as these realizations are disastrous to the perceived inferiority of Africans: "Captain Delano's surprise might have deepened into some uneasiness had he not been a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature [...] and hardly then, [one not] to indulge in personal alarms" (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 36). There are several instances where Cereno's narrative and the actions of the Africans aboard the *San Dominick* trigger Delano's distrust and uneasiness. I argue this anxiety stems in the past from the ways in which the Africans communicate without Delano's awareness. The non-Western, non-alphabetic exchanges by the Africans are inaccessible to Delano, engendering fear and discomfort as it conflicts with innate colonial conceptions of knowledge, power, and control.

Throughout "Benito Cereno," the sounds of the *San Dominick*'s presumably enslaved Africans disorients and disturbs Amasa Delano. Upon boarding the ship, he is greeted by a unified voice, engendering an ominous feeling in Delano. The cacophony of voices makes the ship sinister to him, conjuring images of the ship as "a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep" and filled with "strange costumes, gestures, and faces" (39). Delano is overwhelmed by the African unity—the vocal mass of bodies before him speak in a language he understands, and this confronts the unsympathetic, colonialist imagery he associates with African bodies. Throughout the story, he is upset by the forward nature of the Africans and their violence toward the remaining white sailors, yet it is more upsetting that he cannot understand them, a fact undermining Western imperialist assumptions. The ability of the Africans to communicate in a non-African language, either English or Spanish, conflicts with the propagated concept of brute savages. The Africans can clearly and effectively articulate their pain and suffering to the Spanish captain – empathetic appeals that overwhelm Delano, as evidenced by Melville's description:

Climbing the side, the visitor was at once surrounded by a clamorous throng of whites and blacks, but the latter outnumbering the former...But, in one language, and as with one voice, all poured out a common tale of suffering...The scurvy, together with a fever, had swept off a great part of their number...Off Cape Horn, they had narrowly escaped shipwreck; then, for days together, they had lain tranced without wind; their provisions were low; their water next to none; their lips that moment were baked. (39)

While we cannot assert what language Delano and Cereno speak in as Cereno is Spanish and Delano, although we learn that Delano speaks Spanish, is American, we can infer that they speak either colonialist language. As a result, Delano refers to the Africans as “strange inmates,” believing these Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking and articulate Africans to be fantastic shadows that complicate colonialist conceptualizations as they can access and skillfully use the tongue of colonizers (39). Encountering these multilingual Africans conflicts with his colonialist propaganda, and Delano is incapable of reconciling the English appeals of the Africans with his preconceptions – an act that, like several others, intentionally misdirects Delano’s colonialist need to acquire and control the exchanges of the Africans, preventing him from fully interpreting what is happening aboard the *San Dominick*.

As the English-speaking Africans overwhelm and disrupt the colonial ear upon the *San Dominick*, the songs of the Africans likewise prevent Delano from seeing the rebellion that has occurred aboard the ship. Delano encounters African workers who accompany their tasks “with a continuous, low, monotonous chant; droning and druling away,” and later the African women raise “a wailing chant” that resembles “the clash of the steel” (39, 91). Rather than attaching the chant to any choral or other musical image, Delano translates it as the sound of a battle. Delano can only conceive of war shouts and tribal exchanges when hearing the songs as it reaffirms his

perceptions of African inferiority and barbarity. Delano's belief in his natural right and ability to understand and dominate the Africans suggests to him that he look no further in determining what distresses him on the *San Dominick*, denying all moments where his colonialism questions the validity of the images before him and labels the ship as suspicious. Delano does not fear the African songs, as they do not recognizably disrupt his perceptions of dominance over the Africans. Intricately, they reaffirm his position as colonizer and the perception of Africans as savages in need of colonization. The songs of the Africans are untranslatable to Delano; they are nothing more than wails and clashes to his ears, yet they serve an ulterior purpose. The songs of the Africans provide a means of communication without the awareness of the colonizer; it succeeds by conveying a message impregnable by Western knowledge and translation. In this way, the songs of the Africans serve a function similar to sorrow songs: "They conceal much of real poetry and meaning beneath conventional theology and unmeaning rhapsody" (Du Bois 150). By reading the songs of the African women as sorrow songs, they take on the ability of signifyin(g), representing "an 'encoded' intention to say one thing but to mean quite another" (Gates Jr. 262). Although we are not told what the Africans sing, it is not unreasonable to consider that they maintain a conversational quality like sorrow songs, encoding discussion as what Delano perceives to be meaningless sounds. These multivalent songs destabilize colonialism's belief that English and alphabetic communication are the sole, complex ways to convey knowledge. Furthermore, the inaccessible nature of the songs subtly threatens Delano's position within colonialist discourse, contributing to his continual unease, as he is unable to understand how these songs sustain the Africans' rebellion. The songs of the African slaves remain impregnable by Delano's colonialist knowledge, yet they are not Delano's sole encounter with a coded, non-alphabetic communication.

As he observes the *San Dominick*, Delano notes several Ashanti men polishing axes upon the deck. In a row, the axe polishers, unlike Delano's previous encounters, speak to no one, not even each other. Instead, the Ashanti communicate by hitting their axes: "[T]wo and two they sideways clashed their hatchets together, like cymbals, with a barbarous din. All six, unlike the generality, had the raw aspect of unsophisticated Africans" (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 40). Immediately after the first engagement with the Ashanti polishers and their cacophonous exchanges, Delano turns to find the *San Dominick's* captain, "impatient of the hubbub of voices" that continue to dislocate him; the colonialist captain's inability to understand and intake the variety of communications on the foreign ship overwhelm colonialism's belief in the superiority of the alphabetic. As Eric Sundquist suggests, the Ashanti axe clashing works similar to that of African drumming, "with complex rhythms and tonalities" that extend beyond the range of the human voice, maintaining "the links between rebellion and cultural community" (167). While Sundquist's analysis focuses on the ways to use this communication to maintain the slave revolt of "Benito Cereno," I suggest it also provides a way to explore how the Africans and African Americans undermine Western colonialism's violent erasure of communication amongst those it colonizes. Delano's "interpellated existence, his 'regulated mind,' reaches its limits [...] when Delano's ability to analyze facts betray him"; the inability to recognize the situation aboard the *San Dominick* results from the non-Western, vocal and musical communications of the Africans (Freeburg 120). Delano recognizes some dark, underlying plot while on the ship, yet he can never determine what it is as his assumptions are obscured by the sounds of Africans. He is unable to trust the facts around him as there is a discord, yet this disruption stems from Delano attempting to understand a non-Western, non-alphabetic means of communication through a Western colonialist lens. Although the narratives of the Africans are fairly silent outside of their

performances, drumming has “a significant role in the formation of black cultural languages in the United States, and is “epitomized resistance” that fulfills Babo’s need to elide the truth from Delano (Sundquist 167). In using this performative, musical dialogue, the Africans transmit knowledge and support in ways the colonialist minds cannot engage or silence; they defy acquisition. At the heart of “Benito Cereno” these continual and untranslatable exchanges complicate Delano’s attempts to understand the *San Dominick*’s story, allowing for rebellion to exist at the margins of Delano’s vision. What Delano assumes to be “unsophisticated” is, in fact, complex and combative resistance, deconstructing the assumed power Western imperialism has. Furthermore, the musical communication’s complexity lies in its ability to make evident and use the liminal aspects of Western, alphabetic dominance (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 40).

This dissonance between the colonialist preconceptions of what aural communication can do and its inferiority to Western written script sustain the rebellion and dislocates Delano from fully assessing the *San Dominick*. More specifically, Babo is an expert orator and performer, staging the Africans and the ship for Delano’s consumption and playing the part of Cereno’s personal servant. Delano, as a representation of colonialists, assumes Western means of communication as the norm, and this assumption is what Babo’s performances play upon; each exchange by Babo serves multiple functions, signifying differently for Cereno and for Delano. As such, the dual conversation within “Benito Cereno,” those of the Africans and those with Delano, creating two divergent yet simultaneous stories – one of the Africans rebellion and one of the *San Dominick*’s outbreak and tragedy. The scene where Babo shaves Benito Cereno while Delano observes best exemplifies the dual conversations occurring aboard the *San Dominick* as Babo’s performance appears one way to Cereno and another to Delano. Within Benito Cereno’s quarters, Delano watches Babo shave Cereno, incapable of fully understanding the significance

of Babo's actions. Babo reenacts, by way of a grand gesture, what happened during the rebellion and reminds Cereno of what may happen should he expose the slave revolt to Delano. Melville's description of the scene makes clear its double nature. When Cereno must place his head upon the basin for his shaving, Delano almost interprets correctly: "[I]n the black he saw a headsman, and in the white, a man at the block" (74). Babo's performance is so powerful that Delano can, for a moment, read the scene as it is conveyed to Cereno, yet Delano denies the image, letting it flee from him. To accept what he briefly surmised, Delano would have to allow the possibility of a successful slave revolt and Cereno's lack of power on the ship. When the scene broaches the limits of his colonialist conceptions, he refuses to probe further: "But this was one of those antic conceits, appearing and vanishing in a breath, from which, perhaps, the best regulated mind is not always free" (74). Delano's mind is not entirely free to contemplate the true meaning of Babo's message: his place within the power structures of Western colonialism and slavery would be obliterated by a slave revolt.

Furthermore, Babo's performance engages what Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theory of signifyin(g) defines as the "figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning" (262). Cereno's testimony reveals the double nature of the shaving scene, disclosing that "Babo warned him that if he [Cereno] varied in the least, or uttered any word, or gave any look that should give the least estimation of the past events or present state, he would instantly kill him, with all his companions, showing a dagger" (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 99). Babo's threat makes clear the multiple exchanges occurring during Cereno's shaving: between Babo and Cereno, between Cereno and Delano, and between Babo and Delano. In fact, Babo can, and does, successfully maintain these multitudes exchanges because Delano cannot understand the significance of Babo's performance, as it remains outside of Western



language and translation. Cereno, aware of the rebellion and Babo's threat, is subtly threatened, while Delano cannot understand the truth behind Babo's intentions, as they disrupt his conceptions of self and power. Even as Babo draws blood from Cereno when Delano questions the veracity of Cereno's story, Delano continues to deny any interpretation that makes clear the Africans' rebellion, as it requires Delano to acknowledge their capacity for language and literacy. Delano's inability to access the truth of the events aboard the *San Dominick* keeps him dislocated from fully understanding the situation. Sanborn believes this is Melville's ambitious goal for "Benito Cereno": he wants the contemporary audience "to learn to live in a world where meaning is the product of ungrounded decisions, and where acts of illumination are always shadowed by the darkness they displace" (175). "Benito Cereno" offers us a tale wherein the reader, like Delano, is dislocated and unable to fully read the story, continuing to push us to understand that a colonialist mind frame provides limited access, and, paradoxically, our quest for the knowledge of marginalized groups comes at their continual displacement and assimilation into colonialist narratives. Readers must re-read the story in order to understand the multivalent conversations and actions of the Africans and Babo aboard the *San Dominick*. Thus, we must question whether, as readers, we approach the text with the same colonialist assumptions as Delano and the extent to which we are blinded by those beliefs. "Benito Cereno" leaves the audience questioning not just Delano's inability to understand the story fully but ours as well.

## V. Conclusion

The hieroglyphic, oral, and performative literacies at work in *Typee*, *Moby-Dick*, and "Benito Cereno" center Polynesian and African non-Western communications as resistant to colonialist discourse. Despite their efforts, Tommo, Ishmael, and Delano are unable to translate the meanings behind these non-alphabetic literacies. The Typee and Queequeg's tattoos remain

arcane and untranslated, and the songs and Babo's performances are obscured until the end of the story. The anti-colonial resistance of these communications are not equally explicit. The performances in "Benito Cereno" are the only instances intended to elude the Westerner. The tattoos of the Typee and Queequeg are far older, existing long before Tommo or Ishmael encounter them and not intended to respond directly to colonialism. Still, their existence and persistence constitute acts of defiance. Yet the tattoos, the songs, and the performances succeed in both eluding the characters who seek to pierce the veil and better understand either the cultures or the truth of their situation. Furthermore, the resistance from interpretation of these non-Western literacies expose the respective white, Western character to the temporary and delicate nature of their power; it makes clear that colonialism's power is a means of perception that can be subverted or rebelled against. By demonstrating these moments of resistance, Melville's texts show how Polynesian and African communities can defy Western imperialism, but these works do not go far enough in their ruminations on resistance and colonialism. They stop shy of delivering what modern readers expect from anti-colonialism.

It is this gap between hypothesis and realization that I believe exemplifies why Melville is best defined as an anti-colonialist. Certainly, many correctly discuss the forward-thinking author's willingness to engage colonialism and, for years, read his work as evocative of post-colonialism, but Melville's privilege ultimately stops the work short of achieving their potential. Tommo, Ishmael, and Delano each return to their Western empires, and the novel is resolved through the severing their ties with the Other – Tommo escapes, Queequeg dies, and Delano turns in the Africans aboard for their rebellion. Despite their engagement and repeated attempts to understand and to consider the Other, each character returns to their colonialist positions of power as white, Western men. For those affected by colonialism, post-colonialism is a necessary

genre and theory as it offers a space for those the violence of imperialism affects to imagine spaces where colonialism and its power structures are deconstructed or never existed. It is within these works that key fields such as wonderworks, to borrow from Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice, and Afro- and Africanfuturism are born. These provide the creation of new worlds and experiences that do not consistently exert colonialist violence and imagine alternate lives for those whose alterity colonialism wages war against. Thus, Melville enacts privilege by merely hypothesizing what ways colonialism could re-engage the Other and potentially be dissolved, but he cannot go further to imagine the deconstruction or the alternative. He can only theorize what it looks like to attempt ending colonialism. If imagining alternate realities and creating world's without colonialism is instrumental in post-colonialism, then Melville's works do not deliver.

Although Melville does not deliver on imagined futures as post-colonialism calls for, his anti-colonialist approach to *Typee*, *Moby-Dick*, and "Benito Cereno" is an important example and begins larger, critical scholarly conversations. These three works center on acts of resistance by non-alphabetic literacies – literacies that are, in some cultures, endangered or lost. As in the observations on Queequeg, those who spoke, wrote, performed, tattooed, beaded, and more in these diverse languages are, in some cases, dead or have had their native languages taken from them through forced acculturation. We can, and should, take this as a call to re-evaluate current texts for moments of resistance and center those minority communities at the forefront of our analysis.

I would likewise suggest we take this as a call also to re-evaluate what works we teach, how we come to them, and how we understand them. In the move to push for finding works from underrepresented groups, we will inevitably need to discuss what and how we teach these works. The value of the non-Western communication in Melville's works are made brighter by those

from those communities working to preserve and to write on their culture's languages and experiences. We can, instead of solely finding these moments of resistance, work with Indigenous, African American, Polynesian, and other peoples to find non-Western and non-alphabetic texts for study. This is only successful if done in tandem; literary studies and these variety of respective cultural areas of studies can, when working together, expand our concept of what is American literature by demonstrating the various types of texts available in Native American, African American, and Latin American cultures, for example. Our concepts of American literature can grow and better represent the diverse cultures that it comprises, and it can show how those diverse literacies existed and persist into our current moment despite colonialism's attempt to eradicate both the people and the language.

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