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Marked at Sea: Race, Class, and Tattoo Culture in Melville's Early Sea Fiction

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Marked at Sea: Race, Class, and Tattoo Culture in Melville's Early Sea Fiction

A Thesis Presented

by

CONNELL DUNCAN SWENSON

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University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

MARKED AT SEA: RACE, CLASS, AND TATTOO CULTURE IN MELVILLE'S
EARLY SEA FICTION

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This thesis explores the role of Euromerican maritime tattoos in Herman Melville's early sea fiction. Through layers of historic and scholarly obfuscation, Euromerican maritime tattoos have been delimited to a marginal role in the cosmopolitan shipboard culture of 19th-century Pacific whaling and trade networks. This project extracts and contextualizes that cultural practice as formative in the creation of sailors' hybrid embodied identities. With this intervention in mind, Euromerican maritime tattooing emerges as a small but important feature in Melville's first six books. Probing issues such as race, class, slavery, and colonialism, this project deploys an intimate reading practice, which seeks to engage Melville from within the text. Tattoos serve as a symbol by which he grapples with larger social formations. Through prolonged engagement with marked bodies, Melville unfurls a cast of characters who demonstrate how identity is shaped by the various domineering axes of modernization. He also reveals how a series of interconnected and somewhat autobiographical first-person narrators strive to find embodied alternatives to the violent forms of exploitation alive in the colonial Pacific and interconnected 19th-century global shipping networks. Ultimately,

this project seeks to think, feel, and read alongside Melville to gain insight into how he made sense of the world. Through the lens of tattoos in his early sea fiction, Melville reveals the power of interrelation, the human potential to defy subjugation, and charts a path toward new social embodiments.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force, United States Space Force, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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INTRODUCTION

MARKING THE TATTOO ENCOUNTER

On October 6th, 1843, Herman Melville was serving aboard the American frigate *United States* when it entered the bay of Nukahiva. The frigate was on a homeward bound journey that would cap off his time roving the South Pacific, experiences which he would convert into the body of his early sea fiction. It had been nearly two years since his previous eventful stay in the Marquesas, where he deserted his whaleship and lived in the Taipivai valley for roughly a month. The frigate's stopover was short lived, lasting only a day. However, while in port, the ship was visited by a French admiral accompanied by the King and Queen of Nukahiva. This royal visit was briefly recorded in "Abstract of a Cruise in the United States Frigate *United States*," an anonymous account of the ships voyage (Parker 274). Melville also turned the royal visit into subject matter, describing the episode in the first chapter of *Typee*, a fictional narrative derived from his experience living among the Taipi. A comparison between the two descriptions of the royal visit offers a revealing entry point into Melville's use of tattooing in his early sea fiction.

In the "Abstract of a Cruise," the unknown author makes note of the appearance of the Queen, describing that she wore "a red skirt which reached a few inches below the knee, about 15 years of age, with handsome features, and tattooed on all visible parts" (qt. in Parker 274). The "Abstract of a Cruise" follows the style common among Euromerican accounts of 19th-century encounters in the Pacific, it relies on a language of observation. Rendered through the gaze of the author, the Queen becomes an object of fascination. The tone remains objective and descriptive, seeking an accurate portrayal of

what was viewed akin to an otherworldly encounter. The short description of her dress and “handsome features” allude to the sexual promiscuity that colored the Western imagination of Pacific Islander women. The reference to her tattooing is brief, noting simply that it appeared “on all visible parts.” The effect of this short passage is what William Cummings interprets as a primary mode of Orientalist discourse in relation to the Pacific: “visual observation and material culture” (Cummings). Here, the brief emphasis on tattooing exoticizes and ‘others’ the body of the Queen. Melville’s own description of this episode, which Hershhal Parker in his expansive biography, calls “a more lickerish version” appears in the first chapter of *Typee* where he presents the reader with a wide view of the Marquesas (Parker 274). However, unlike the “Abstract of a Cruise,” Melville’s rendition stages the encounter along the lines of transnational cultural exchange. Both perpetuating and undermining the objectifying tone of observation, Melville seems to gesture toward a moment of commonality through tattooing that casts doubt on the legitimacy of the American imperial project in the Pacific and thereby moves toward alternative nonhierarchical modes of representation.

Melville’s tone throughout the episode of the King and Queen’s visit is outwardly ironic. This irony is felt strongly in his description of the King. He writes,

His majesty was arrayed in a magnificent military uniform, stiff with gold lace and embroidery, while his shaven crown was concealed by a huge chapeau brass, waving with ostrich plumes. There was one slight blemish, however, in his appearance. A broad patch of tattooing stretched completely across his face, in a line with his eyes, making him look as if he wore a huge pair of goggles; and royalty in goggles suggested some ludicrous idea. (NN TY 7-8)

Here, he is relying on a similar objectifying observational language as seen in the “Abstract of a Cruise” which briefly paints the King as “being dressed in a French uniform given him by the French admiral” (qt. in Parker 274). Melville’s description of

the tattooing as “goggles” is a clear indication that he is poking fun at the scene. Before this description he seems to be satirizing the ceremoniousness of the French, who are quite pleased with their display of a ‘civilized’ King decked out in military dress. Yet, the uncoverable face tattoo draws attention to the performative nature of the display, whereby Melville uses ready-made racial tropes that link savagery, tattooing, and cannibalism to paint the King as playing dress-up: his unconcealable ‘savage’ nature bleeds through the uniform in the form of the facial tattoo. However, the whole encounter is juxtaposed with a reference to a massacre at “Whitihoo” where the French “in one of their efforts at reform... had slaughtered about a hundred and fifty” Marquesan Islanders (NN *TY* 7). In this way, his racially inflected derisive comments against the King discursively antagonize the colonial French. Rather than locating the absurdity of the scene in his racist description of the King, Melville points to the absurdity of the French ‘civilizing’ influence. Through his overt reliance on irony, the French are cast as the ones who are playing dress up, covering the massacre with displays of military pomp and circumstance. In broad terms, Melville invites the reader into a discursive analysis of the scene: using the objectifying and racist commentary toward the King to invert traditional colonial perceptions. This discursive tactic – using widely understood tropes as means of questioning the colonial project – appears again and again throughout *Typee* in more explicit manners, namely his lengthy passages on missionaries. It is a tactic he returns to through many of his works to explore other social challenges, such as racial constructions and slavery.

In a similar tone, Melville’s portrait of the Queen reimagines the colonial encounter from one of hierarchical observation and ‘othering’ to one of transnational

exchange, albeit modulated by uneven power dynamics. He describes the Queen as dressed in “a gaudy tissue of scarlet cloth, trimmed with yellow silk, which, descending a little below the knees, exposed to view her bare legs, embellished with spiral tattooing and somewhat resembling two miniature Trajan’s columns” (8). Her appearance draws the attention of the crew, and they gather round to look at her. At which point,

She singled out from their number an old salt, whose bare arms and feet, and exposed breast were covered with as many inscriptions in India ink as the lid of an Egyptian sarcophagus... she immediately approached the man, and pulling further open the bosom of his duck frock, and rolling up the leg of his wide trowsers, she gazed with admiration at the bright blue and vermilion pricking, thus disclosed to view. (8)

She clings to the man and caresses his tattoos. Then, to the utter dismay of the French, she proceeds to pull up her skirts “to display the hieroglyphics on her own sweet form” (8). On seeing this the “aghast Frenchmen retreat precipitately, tumbling into their boat, fled the scene of so shocking a catastrophe” (8). The Queen’s display amplifies the irony employed in the King’s description. In satirizing the French “retreat,” Melville highlights the preposterousness of their conduct, creating sardonic tension within their colonial aims: they slaughter hundreds to satiate their colonial authority but run from a naked woman. As with the heavily racialized description of the King, Melville uses the Queen’s refusal to acquiesce to European standards of personal conduct not as a cudgel to reproduce Western superiority, but to highlight the illegitimacy of French occupation.

Beyond this comedically rendered colonial skepticism, the Queen’s interaction with the sailor offers an alternative means of understanding the encounter. Namely, tattooing becomes a locus of transnational cultural exchange. On the surface, the scene is a physical encounter between two tattooed bodies: the Queen and the sailor. By briefly unpacking the way Melville treats this interaction, tattoos come to represent a palpable

cultural sphere in which disparate cultural contexts meet and interact. Thus, unlike the “Abstract of a Cruise,” which stigmatizes tattoos as a description of the ‘other,’ tattoos, for Melville, offer a symbol through which he constructs a lateral dynamic of encounter. Reading the Queen’s and sailor’s tattoos as disparate cultures requires some qualification. As I will demonstrate in depth in chapter one, American maritime tattoo culture, though contested and transformed by Pacific Islander tattoo culture, is its own unique practice. Thus, our perception of the American sailor’s tattoos ought to be viewed as a cultural symbol produced by the realities of maritime life, rooted in Euromerican tattoo practices and customs.

This separation in cultural context is conveyed with the words Melville uses to describe the tattoos. For both the King and Queen, he uses the term “tattoo,” an alternative spelling of tattoo. The word itself is an English transliteration of *tatau*, (the Tahitian word for the custom of marking the body with indelible ink) which was introduced to the English lexicon by the British explorer Captain James Cook (Thomas 9). Prior to the introduction of the word tattoo, some phrases in English to describe the practice of indelibly marking the skin with ink were “pricked,” “marked,” and “engraved” (Friedman 19). Notably, Melville does not refer to the sailor as having tattoos; rather, he calls them “inscriptions in India ink” and “pricking.” The subtle lexical difference reinforces the separation of the practice. By the 1840’s, when *Typee* was written, the English term ‘tattoo,’ or one of its alternate spellings, was used to describe all manners of indelibly marking the body with ink; throughout his first three books, Melville exclusively refers to the Polynesian custom as tattoos and the Euromerican custom as one of the several aforementioned alternative terms. This lexical difference

demonstrates a separation not only in appearance but also in form and meaning. For the most part, sailor's tattoos, as a cultural practice, had more surface level significance: words, initials, dates, sea iconography, Christian symbols, etc. Likewise, the form arises out of the context of life at sea, such as using readily available materials during moments of repose while at sea or in port. Though Melville did not immediately appreciate the extent of their significance, as a cultural form Polynesian tattooing is, in various ways, deeply intertwined with unique island ontologies. By calling attention to this separation in form and meaning of tattoo practices, the encounter between the Queen and the sailor becomes a stage for cultural exchange.

With the stage set, Melville's rendition of the Queen's behavior is certainly theatrical. The Queen's behavior points toward a dynamic of exchange that highlights commonality, what Stanley Orr, Matt Rollins, and Martin Kevorkian describe as "a means of forging connections... to subvert the hierarchies presumed by the colonizer" (Kevorkian et al. 261). Thrown into a landscape of French colonization, both the King and Queen are shown as symbols of forced assimilation: they are used as political symbols of successful 'civilization' via displays of dress and appearance aboard the American frigate. Melville's rendition of the Queen's excitement in seeing a tattooed Westerner can be read as a relief from the expectations of assimilation. By revealing the sailor's tattoos and subsequently displaying her own tattooing, the Queen finds a means of cultural comparison, whereby her own cultural volition is reinscribed. Sostene Zangari reads the Queen's behavior as "a double act of defiance: on the one hand, it is directed against the Western sense of prudery, while on the other, it is a metaphor for the liberation from the status of colonized subject" (Zangari 37). In this sense, the practice of

tattooing serves as common ground where cultural contact could dissolve the hierarchical power structures of colonization; instead of seeing the supposed promiscuity of her display as the impetus for French retreat, we might read their horror as a recognition of the faulty logic of imperial superiority. The comparison of disparate tattooing practices thus serves as a symbolic means of interrelation that calls attention to mutual humanity amid a landscape of colonial domination. Contrastingly, we might just as easily read the scene as an extension of the “Abstract of a Cruise,” where Melville’s rendition of the Queen’s ‘uncivilized’ promiscuous display validates French domination. After all, he is using heavily racialized language to satirize a carnivalesque scene of colonial occupation. So, how do we read Melville? How do we read his tattooed bodies?

Charting the Course

The question I am really asking is: what does it mean to do Melville studies? In answering this question for myself, I have leaned heavily on the insights of Cody Marrs. In the introduction to his edited collection *The New Melville Studies*, Marrs puts his finger on the pulse of where the field of Melville studies is coming from, and where it is moving towards. He writes, “regardless of how [literary criticism] morphs, or which theories rise or fall, interest in Melville never seems to wane. However, the nature and terms of that interest *do* change... and a new Melville studies, suited to a different set of assumptions – is undoubtedly occurring” (Marrs 2). Marrs sees the field coming from “reading Melville against the grain” (2). He offers that “the flowering of New Americanism” showed the way Melville’s works were “shaped in complex ways by their discursive and historical circumstances... as a means of cultural diagnosis and political

critique,” disclosing “the intricate capillaries of Melville’s world, showing us how his writings stage subtle dialogues with racial discourse, class formations, and sexual practices” (2-3). By contrast, and gesturing toward the current shift in the field, Marrs asks “What might it mean – and what would it look like – to read Melville *with* the grain?” (3). He sees the collection reading “Melville from positions within or next to Melville’s works” (3). “Two modes of reading come into focus:” what Marrs calls “Feeling with Melville” and “Thinking with Melville” (3-4). I have positioned my own ship of a project on this very current: sailing from a “New Americanism” toward a “New Melville Studies.” Or, to use the sea metaphor more aptly, I chart this project’s voyage from the well-trodden context of American cultural studies to a ‘new’ port: “feeling” and “thinking” alongside Melville. Though as Marrs qualifies, this is not all that new of a concept.

I begin with a study of the tattoo as a historical cultural artifact that existed at the cross section of transnational exchange in the Pacific. Waylaid by a teleological history of colonialism and nationalism, I argue the tattoos of laboring Euromerican seafarers have not received due attention as a culture that influenced Melville. A robust body of scholarship exists concerning his engagement with Pacific tattoo culture. Yet, oftentimes, these studies fail to mention Euromerican maritime tattooing, or even misidentify the practice as an appropriation of Pacific tattoos. In chapter one, I identify the trends that have led to the limited study of the unique Euromerican maritime tattoo tradition. Analysis of 19th-century Western-Pacific exchange has tended to view the Euromerican ship as an extension of the national interior. However, I argue the ship itself constitutes a ‘contact zone,’ which resulted in a hybrid shipboard culture. Amidst this culture,

tattooing manifested as form of expression defined by seafaring labor, cosmopolitan exchange, and prevailing racial constructions. Euromerican tattoos become marks of contested meaning, both within and outside national discourse: pulling sailors toward and away from a perceived fitness for social reproduction, at once citizen and renegade.

The second and third chapters then ‘apply’ Euromerican maritime tattoo culture to Melville’s early sea fiction, by which I mean his first six novels: *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847) *Mardi* (1849), *Redburn* (1849), *White-Jacket* (1850) and *Moby-Dick* (1851). However, this study is not so concerned with diagnosing the texts. Rather, I go in a ‘new’ direction and read tattoos with Melville. In chapter two, I rely more heavily on Euromerican maritime tattoos as a cultural phenomenon, because I engage his semi-fictional works, which are directly drawn from his personal experience as a sailor and rover. I begin with *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*. In those two texts the allusions to tattooing are exclusively embodied by white seafarers. However, rather than prescribe cultural authority to how Melville understands these marks, we see that his treatment of Euromerican maritime tattooing takes on symbolic significance that intersects with the ‘real’ practice. In *Typee* and *Omoo*, we find ourselves in the Pacific, navigating two novels that portray Pacific Islanders, their practices, and colonization through the eyes of white narrators. As readers, we are somewhat forced to gaze on the bodies and culture of the ‘other.’ Yet, we also witness the psychological transformation of the narrators ‘self.’ Tattoos serve as a locus by which Melville explores the colonial encounter. They draw us in to an understanding of how his narrators navigates and develops because of these interactions. We enter the discursive field of the marked body via common American sailors. Here, Euromerican maritime tattoos serve as an important back drop in the

psyche of the texts. However, Pacific Islander tattoos are the primary subject matter. By illuminating how Melville engages, writes, and is transformed by these practices we see a burgeoning transgressive consciousness, chafing against the spreading 'modern' world. The last chapter turns to his more creative fictions *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*. Both texts contain important tattoo references that develop Melville's symbolic association to the practice. In fact, the texts seem to speak to one another. In *Mardi*, tattoos become a symbol that demonstrates the way hierarchical systems of power inscribes identity. In *Moby-Dick*, tattoos bulk back against that power. Here, the 'real' cultural phenomenon of Euromerican maritime tattooing recedes into the background, only emerging as a temper by which to test out critical readings of tattoo symbolism. Much like the operation of a tattoo itself, an ink tipped needle repeatedly piercing and dotting the skin to create a cohesive mark, this study pricks at Melville's texts through the lens of the marked body. What emerges is an image of development: his narrators morphing and evolving to demonstrate his own metamorphosis as a writer.

Race and class also undergird this study. However, I do not apply wider theoretical impositions as lenses by which to understand Melville's fiction. There are countless influential and insightful studies that illuminate how these social constructions influence his texts. Nor do I apply these social formations as critiques; Melville had his shortcomings, and these problems will emerge naturally through prolonged discussion. Rather, drawing on contemporary scholarship, I seek to illuminate how Melville engaged race and class on his own terms, and how these engagements influenced the symbolic function of tattooing in his texts. This study sits down next to Melville and reads his books with him. At first glance, as a critical practice, this might seem too self-contained.

However, I intend that through an intimate reading practice, and Melville does certainly beckon us to know him intimately, we might make some small sense of the lasting power of his work. By this I don't mean his canonization, but rather, to answer the question: why does Melville still speak to so many of us? Why, in a critical age somewhat concerned with reading against the canon, or at least challenging it, does he remain influential? Why does he appeal to so many scholars, across so many fields? One answer might be that he invites us along as he strives to make sense of his world, and in so doing he invites us to make sense of our own. By sitting down with his tattooed characters, thinking on the meaning of their symbols, feeling the marks on their skin, we learn quite a great deal about Melville, his world, his art, and perhaps a little something about what it means to be human.

CHAPTER I

SHIPBOARD EMBODIMENTS: CHARTING MELVILLE'S SEA CULTURE

It is now a well-established truism that the historical archive is constructed by systems of power that must be critically engaged. These systems of power dictate the terms of what is and is not recorded. Looking at the general blueprint of 19th-century Euromerican presence in the Pacific, the story is told through ships logs, travel narratives, journals, letters, and the accounts of supernumerary voyagers such as anthropologists, philologists, and ethnologists. As is much of the case with American history, the American Pacific archive is primarily written by those who are empowered by colonial systems of hierarchy and domination. Melville has been constructed as one of the central pillars of the American canon; as such, it is tempting to factor him squarely among the contents of this archive. After all, he was called to the Pacific by texts such as *Two Years Before the Mast* and “Mocha Dick” (Parker 181). However, approaching Melville’s work through the archive presents subtle challenges, especially involving the topic of tattoos. Kristin Knopf’s “‘An Interminable Cretan Labyrinth’: Tattoos as Text in Melville’s Sea Fiction” perfectly illuminates these challenges and pitfalls. In aim, her chapter is a near-perfect mirror image to my project. However, Knopf’s implicit reliance on the Euromerican archive of 19th-century Pacific colonization introduces a bias into the cultural context that Melville was writing from. At the beginning of her chapter, she asserts that Melville’s “representations of tattoos” in his early sea fiction “are shaped by Western attitudes towards the practice and show a development from ethnographic character, where the tattoo operates as an index of the construed dichotomies of savagery

and civilization, to a deconstructive character, where the tattoo becomes a vehicle to undermine and disturb notions of Eurocentric cultural superiority” (Knopf 124). Here, there is an implicit synthesis between the “Western attitudes,” the same forces that shape the archive, and Melville’s own cultural milieu. Of course, these two things ought not be entirely disentangled. Rather, on the topic of tattooing, atemporal colonial biases have tinged established perceptions of the practice. By thoroughly examining 19th-century Euromerican maritime tattoo practices, I strive to reconstruct a better understanding of the shipboard culture which Melville draws upon as source material.

To that end, this chapter will make two primary claims: first, the Euromerican ship itself must be imagined as a ‘contact zone’ with its own hybrid culture. Here I use Mary Louise Pratt’s definition of contact zone as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (Pratt 34). I follow Marcus Rediker in viewing “maritime history from below” and theorizing the ocean and ship as “a real, material place of human work and habitation, a place where identities have been formed, where history has been made” (Rediker 2-3). Because trade, whaling, and naval power were some of the primary modes of 19th-century Euromerican colonialism in the Pacific, the historiography of ships, notably including American whale ships, has construed sea life as primarily an agent of Western modernity. This has resulted in an emphasis on beaches, ports, and islands as primary contact zones, where Euromerican and Pacific cultures clashed. By theorizing the ship as an equally active contact zone, I attend to the cosmopolitan realities that shaped Melville’s engagement with sea life and cultural contact; for example, these realities illuminate his proclamation in the last

chapter of *Omoo*: “sailors belong to no nation” (NN *OM* 313). Second, amidst this dynamic shipboard milieu, I will build on the somewhat scant scholarship of Euromerican maritime tattooing to portray an active and unique culture. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, Euromerican maritime tattooing was an independent subculture that collided with Polynesian tattoo practices in the Pacific. However, the archive itself has somewhat perpetuated the erasure of this practice, resulting in the pervasive misconception that Euromerican maritime tattooing was entirely defined by Pacific encounters. Rather, by engaging the seeming lack of archival reference to independent pre-contact European tattoo styles, it becomes apparent that the colonial logic of superiority helped erase and misconstrue Euromerican maritime tattoo culture. By rendering this practice as uniquely existing within the cosmopolitan contact zone of the ship, fresh insights emerge regarding Melville’s relationship to tattoos within the body of his early sea fiction.

Euromerican Ships: A Floating Contact Zone

For many histories of whaling and American maritime empire more broadly, it is a standard practice to invoke Melville as an entryway to discussing whaleman and sailors as a laboring class. Brian Rouleau’s introduction to *With Sails Whitening Every Sea*, turns directly to Melville after stating “Sailors exposed trends, tension, and disagreements within the republic’s nascent maritime empire that, when considered as a whole, represent a crucial if overlooked component of early U.S. foreign relations” (Rouleau 15). Melville becomes an authority for imagining what role sailors and whalers played in the 19th-century Pacific political sphere. By contrast, the very first words of Edward

Sugden's book *Emergent Worlds* quote the first lines of *Moby-Dick*, and his chapter on the "Chaotic Pacific" situates his history through Melville's works. Importantly for Sugden, Melville offers a means of theorizing the queer migrant: "exemplary Pacific citizens" that "prided themselves on the capacity to manipulate space and time and, by so doing, radically transform labor and power relations in that great ocean" (Sugden 43). I find it compelling that in these two projects – both concerned with writing "maritime history from below" – the invocation of Melville serves near opposite purposes (Rediker 2). Rouleau positions mariners as perpetuating agents in the spread of Manifest Destiny. Sugden rejects this proposition and reimagines the mid 19th-century ships deck as "spatial imaginaries, what we might term 'revolutionary countersites,' ... intensely redolent with political potentiality" (Sugden 44). How does the world of Euromerican sailors in the Pacific depicted by Melville lend itself to such divergent interpretations? The answer, I suggest, is the liminal and pliable state of Euromerican shipboard culture in the mid 19th-century Pacific.

This slippery space requires further spatial-temporal definition. The culture that I am concerned with existed within the physical space of the Euromerican ship. Yet, the global nature of shipping and the cosmopolitanism of the labor force diverge from any neat national narratives, though, as we will see, studies of American whaling have been inflected with a nationalist historiography. Without imposing strict boundaries, I predominantly narrow in on American whaleships to get a sense of the maritime culture that most directly influenced Melville. However, for consistency and to attend to the porous nature of mid 19th-century sea life, I widen this spatial imaginary to the broader zone of the 'Euromerican ship.' Additionally, I generally situate these ships in a Pacific

context for two reasons: first, the nature of mid 19th-century American maritime endeavors, Melville's personal experiences, and the geographic positioning of his novels all tend toward the Pacific. Second, the overarching nature of this project deals with encounters between Euromerican and Pacific tattoo cultures. Thus, the Pacific, by which I mean the Pacific Ocean and its constellation of islands, is a dominant force that shapes my engagement with Euromerican shipboard culture.

Temporally, this project engages Melville's early sea-fiction: that being his first six novels published between 1846 and 1851. Moreover, his days before the mast as a common sailor range from 1839 to 1844. This twelve-year span, 1839-1851, offers a preliminary temporal boundary to investigate. The 1840's are a crucial moment in the development of American maritime empire in the Pacific. By 1846, the American whaling fleet grew to 736 ships: it's largest number; the early 1850's heralded the industry's highest market value (Busch 3). An economic depression at the end of the 1850's, the introduction of kerosene, and the American Civil War, all gradually precipitated the decline of deep-sea whaling, leading to practical termination by WWI (4). Thus, the late 1840's can be seen as the climax of the American whaling industry, which depended heavily on Pacific hunting grounds. However, Sugden reminds us that this moment was not a foreclosed conclusion of Euromerican colonization in the Pacific. He writes, "in the years prior to 1848, there raged a vast and systemic uncertainty that created a heightened capacity for historical speculation or, if you want, a certain intensified receptivity to 'chance.' This was a realm in which, for a number of reasons, political life seemed particularly rife with potentiality, with the capacity for sudden jarring social change and structural reformulation" (Sugden 41-42). Moreover, Rodiker,

although primarily concerned with the Atlantic, envisions the “Age of the Sail,” which precipitated “the formation of empires and rise of capitalism,” as ending around 1850 (Rodiker 3). This age made way for iron and coal as the imperial maritime technological engine. Thus, the Pacific 1840’s witnesses a major historical tension: the end of a culturally solidified sailing age, the crystallization of maritime globalized capitalism, and the divergent social potential of “chance.”

With these loose guideposts in place, below I will trace some trends in the history of American whaling that have rendered it a primarily national narrative. I argue these trends have limited the ways in which scholars have generally engaged with the physical space of the Euromerican ship, preferencing questions of integration and racialization over the dynamics of culture formation. Disentangling these historiographic impositions leads us to a contested climate, where constructed American racial hierarchies modulate interdependent identity formations. Thus, the contact zone of the Euromerican ship comes into view: contrasting cultures grappling together amidst uneven relations of power and conditions which demand mutual survival.

In his book *Double Ghosts*, which tells the history of “Pacific Islanders who crossed the beach to counter explore Euromerican shipping,” David A. Chappell notes the difficulty of tracing Pacific Islander sailing stories through the archive (Chappell xv). He writes, “by mid-nineteenth century, perhaps as many as one-fifth of the sailors in the American whaling fleet were so-called *kanakas*,” however, telling their stories “is more difficult, because the oral traditions about their journeys are scattered across a vast sea of islands, and the written data are fragmentary and dispersed through hundreds of journals, logs, and memoirs” (xv-xvi). This observation draws attention to the racial plurality of

the labor force and the limitations of historicizing those pluralities through the archive, penned by the literate, often white, captains, officers, and the like. This narrow archival view creates the conditions for treating Euromerican Pacific whaling, and shipping more broadly, as a nationalist endeavor.

Within American whaling history, there has been a general emphasis on the industry's domestic impact which oftentimes sidelines the local realities aboard the ship. David Haines observes this phenomenon, stating that "the field of whaling history has been slow to embrace the recent turn towards the global in both maritime history and the histories of empire" and that "it is still framed almost entirely in terms of either the economic development of colonial New England or the importance of the American whaleman as a symbol of national identity in literature and popular culture" (Haines 161). Moreover, the general body of whaling literature has deployed the cosmopolitanism of the labor force as a means of perpetuating imperial and racial dominance. Jennifer Schell shows that whaling literature created indelible cultural linkages between white whalers and American identity. She argues that white authors used "discourses of effacement and containment" when expounding the cosmopolitan nature of whaleships (Schell 177). Such rhetoric positions white whalers as exclusively emblematic of national identity. Thus, the whaleship was broadly used in literature as a stage for the ideology of colonialism, where the white American whalers contained the danger of the 'other' to allow for colonial progress. Thus, the pressures of archival, historic, and literary obfuscation have narrowed the ways in which scholars have approached the cosmopolitan whaling labor force.

As a result of these limiting pressures, the historic narrative surrounding American whaling's cosmopolitanism has somewhat solidified around the question of how race was engaged aboard the ship. In *Whaling Will Never Do for Me*, Briton Busch argues "from the standpoint of onboard race relations, it is more useful to return to the concept of the whaleship as an isolated total society" (Busch 35). By isolating the "total society" of the ship, he parses the "complex" pressures of racist American ideologies and the harsh realities of mutual dependence for survival at sea. However, he castigates "historians and social critics who ignore the same complexity from another standpoint, and, perhaps influenced by the unforgettable crew of the Pequod, make of whaling that which it was not: a fully integrated enterprise" (33). For Busch, the whaleship is an enclosed space where various racial groups are coerced into mutual survival, but dominant racial hierarchies are perpetuated that impose separation. He sees any genuine interracial fraternal relation as an exception. Busch's primary source material is staggering, and it would be difficult to refute his overarching claims on the nature of shipboard race relations. Yet, the extent of his analysis is contained to individual behavior and attitudes in the "isolated total society" of the whaleship. It does not expand into the question of how these contested and complex interactions influenced culture aboard. This rigidly applied analysis highlights the necessary intervention of theorizing the Euromerican ship as a contact zone.

This contact zone expands the space of the ship to account for the ways in which culture shaped along contested racial lines. Chappell approaches the general process of cultural exchange within these constructed hierarchies through the mode of mimicry, which derives from the liminal condition of being at sea. For Chappell, Pacific Islander

voyages aboard Euromerican ships can be understood as a version of initiation rituals. He echoes the anthropologist Victor Turner defining these rituals as a process of separation, liminality, and return. Here, liminality serves a double function: as a component of ritual and as the material experience at sea (Chappell xvii). The liminal experience of sailing voyages operates beyond being in-between two distinct geographical places, to include cultural, relational, metaphysical etc. Within this destabilizing context, “Euromerican shipping relied on a resident labor force that developed its own communal identity and language” (42). Identity formation becomes a mode to cope with an unbounded liminal experience. Moreover, indentarian integration into shipboard culture was a tangible means of surviving the dangers of the industry and the implicit militaristic hierarchy aboard. To be termed a landsman at sea was social demise.¹ Chappell turns to mimicry as one means of integration that was employed by Pacific Islanders serving aboard Euromerican ships (Chappell 59). However, beyond a survival mechanism, mimicry likewise functioned as a mode of cultural exchange within the forecandle.

The term mimicry needs further analysis. Chappell deploys the term with its standard definition: “The action, practice, or art of copying or closely imitating, or (in early use) of reproducing through mime; esp. imitation of the speech or mannerisms of another in order to entertain or ridicule” (OED). He offers several recorded examples of Pacific Islanders mimicking Euromerican mannerism, speech, dancing, etc. However, he does not directly engage the postcolonial model where mimicry, as Homi Bhabha argues,

¹ Busch outlines the hierarchical and militaristic structure under which common sailors required social cohesion for survival. In *Omoo*, Melville comments on how the incompetent sailor, termed landsman, was ostracized, making conditions near unlivable. See chapter fourteen and the character “Rope Yarn.” Likewise, in *Redburn*, he offers a first-person portrait of the difficulties of assimilation. See chapters twelve and thirteen.

“emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (Bhabha 126). Immediately, mimicry as survival mechanism fits squarely within this model: functioning “like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression of difference, but a form of resemblance that differs/defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically” (131). Bhabha adds: “Its threat... comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory ‘identity effects’ in the play of a power that is elusive” (131). In this framework, the mimicry outlined by Chappell becomes a “camouflage” that reinscribes colonial domination, forcing Pacific Islanders to participate in their own ‘othering,’ and codifying shipboard racial hierarchies. Yet, this theoretical intervention does not attend to the nuance of such encounters in the forecabin, which have been obscured by the unilateral vision of Euromerican recording. Chappell writes, “Euromerican accounts themselves emphasized the exotic, so the actions of our double ghosts are at least twice-translated. Yet through all the layers of imposed otherness resonates a dynamism, distorted by and subtly disturbing to the white chronicler” (Chappell 61). This distorted and disturbing dynamism, I argue, results from the liminal state of life at sea, which necessitated mutual survival. In this context, Bhabha’s version of mimicry is not unilaterally imposed by colonial perceptions, but rather is dynamic and reflexive.

White sailors, though not to an equal extent, had to acquiesce their identities to fit the necessities of shipboard life. The implied dynamism of mimicry offers a glimpse into how this process took shape in the form of cultural contact amidst a cosmopolitan labor force. Although, as Busch reminds us, the destabilizing effects of sea life did not facilitate cohesive racial integration aboard Euromerican ships, the universal need to

assimilate to sea culture created a milieu where cosmopolitan exchange caused a mutually hybrid culture. The hybridity of 19th-century Euromerican shipboard culture emerges in James Carr's *Hawaiian Music in Motion*. He argues that "understanding the interactions between American sailors and their non-Western Others in the liminal context of the whaling ship leads to insights about the function of mimesis as a social and artistic phenomenon" (Carr 64). Taking chanties and recreational music as his source material, Carr examines the syncretic elements of American and Hawaiian music that coalesced aboard American whaleships. Notably, this was a mutually dynamic exchange, where both Hawaiians and Americans mimicked and integrated elements of the other's musical culture. One such example is the hauling chanty "John Kanaka," which infused Hawaiian language commands to signal for the crew to pull a rope in unison (73). Carr's analysis reveals how culture was hybridized in the cosmopolitan space of the whaleship; in broad terms, mimicry directly functioned as an apparatus of cultural exchange.

A narrative of the contact zone has begun to emerge aboard. Disentangled from the archival, historic, and literary pressures that have construed American whaleships in nationalist terms, we find an enclosed space, drifting at sea, populated by a diverse labor force, influenced by racial ideologies, militaristic hierarchies, and professional dangers. Amidst this environment, communal identity formation served as a means of survival. As such, mimicry was deployed as one tool of acquiescence, which resulted in dynamic cultural exchanges. I have focused on mimicry because it presents a unique challenge in the space of the ship: it defies nationalist and postcolonial models alike. Though mimicry certainly calls attention to the colonial and racial logic which constructs power hierarchies, it brings us to the local hybridized realities of the Euromerican ship, where

identity was formed through a milieu of cosmopolitan exchange. Yet, mimicry was only one of many ways in which cultural exchange and identity formation took place. From this floating contact zone, a new question emerges: how were these hybrid identities expressed?

Identity Expression at Sea and the Euromerican Maritime Tattoo

Amidst the moments of intense action that defined life at sea, there were also many listless hours where sailors aboard Euromerican ships would engage in an array of non-labor specific activities. Naturally, such downtime invited personal expression. Carr situates music amidst a wide array of artistic expression.

Aboard American whaling ships a variety of art forms were highly developed, including material arts like scrimshaw (etching into whale ivory), building ship models, and fancy knot work (commonly known as macramé). Verbal art like “yarn spinning” (the telling of “tall tales”) was highly valued and played a central role in the social life of the ship. Singing and other forms of music making were among the favorite pastimes, giving the members of whaling crews a means of communicating and bonding with one another that transcended language or nationality. (68)

Here, artistic expression takes shape within the cosmopolitan conditions aboard Euromerican ships and serves as a means of integration that shaped communal bonds and social structures. Chappell likewise touches on “yarn spinning” as a salient means by which Pacific Islanders acquiesced to Euromerican shipboard culture: “Storytelling was another Oceanian talent that fit in well with life among sailors. Tall tales helped seaman make their lives more exciting and passed the time on watch.” (Chappell 60). I suggest that like music, yarn spinning, and the other listed forms of expression that took root in Euromerican ships, tattooing was an equally present art form shaped by the floating contact zone.

In chapter forty-two of *White-Jacket*, Melville situates “tattooing, or pricking” as one of the “method[s] adopted” for “whiling away the long tedious hours in harbor” (NN WJ 170). Here, we see tattooing among the many modes of expression that defined Melville’s man-o-war world, including sewing, polishing “bright-work,” and promenading. Down time invited unique expressions that emerged within the context of cosmopolitan exchange.² Some recent scholarship also supports the association between tattooing and a wider array of Euromerican maritime expression. Tattoo scholar Anna Freedman links together the emphasis on tattooing as self-expression and the material conditions of life at sea. “Tattoos were a way to both pass the time and fulfill artistic leanings, in a way that did not result in material goods that would have to be carried around or stowed somewhere” and “all sailors had ready access to needles for sail making” (Friedman 43). Matt Lodder qualifies tattooing as firmly rooted in a wider maritime visual culture. He argues, “counter to claims for tattooing’s special status as particularly authentic, superstitious, or extraordinarily self-expressive, in proving direct analogies between designs I want to demonstrate that tattooing should be understood primarily as a mark-making process much like any other” (Lodder 205). He compares tattoo images with other image making processes such as scrimshaw. Such connections position tattooing as a mode of identity expression, uniquely situated within the context of shipboard life.

Demonstrating that tattoos were a means of self-expression opens a series of further questions. What were the styles of tattoos? What types of identities were

² Despite being a US Naval frigate, Melville paints the man-o-war as a cosmopolitan space in *White-Jacket*. Among the crew of white Americans, his cast of characters include a Pacific Islander, several black characters, an enslaved person, and several European nationalities, each contributing a unique cultural context to the ship.

expressed? How did cosmopolitan exchange shape these identities? The answer to these questions lies in the somewhat obscured genealogy of Euromerican maritime tattooing. Chappell briefly alludes to a helpful jumping off point regarding identity formation and tattoo exchanges, arguing that Pacific Islander “tattooing attracted the attention of white seamen, who had their own heritage of body marking” (Chappell 68).³ He sees one facet of these exchanges as mutual expressions of manhood within the space of Euromerican ships. Though masculinity is a helpful touchstone to investigate, given the nature of Chappell’s project he does not analyze the 19th-century Euromerican maritime tattoo culture in depth. In fact, scholarship of this history is still very much contested. Like the floating contact zone of the Euromerican ship, Euromerican maritime tattooing has been obscured by archive and historiography. However, unlike American whaling for example, which has a large body of archival documents, archival references to Euromerican tattooing are somewhat scant. Below, I flesh out how such obfuscation has tinged general assumptions about the nature of this tattoo culture. To correct these assumptions, I track how Euromerican tattoo history, a generally understudied body of work, has highlighted Captain James Cook’s late 18th-century voyages in the Pacific as a moment of quasi-inception of the practice. Rather, the history of the practice stretches further back. By extracting this long but marginal history, we return to the mid 19th-century Euromerican ship with a tattoo practice evolving from European contexts within a space of cosmopolitan exchange and proliferating from cross-cultural encounters with Pacific tattooing. Parsing this nuance proves essential to understanding how the culture of the

³ In making the distinction between Pacific Islander and Western tattoo practices, Chappell anticipates the discourse which I sketch out below. He is therefore one of the first scholars to emphasize the fact that Euromerican maritime was a unique body marking tradition.

Euromerican ship informed white sailor's perception of the practice, perceptions which were staged and transformed within Melville's body of early sea fiction.

Discourse around the development of Euromerican maritime tattooing, a practice that largely became archivally visible through the 19th-century, has coalesced around the nature of exchange between the West and the Pacific in the late 18th-century. Until roughly the last 20 years, historians have almost singularly perpetuated what Friedman calls "the Cook myth," the idea that tattooing was dormant until its reintroduction to European society from Captain James Cook's encounter with tattooed Tahitians.⁴ This 'origin story,' though tenuously challenged by 21st century scholarship, has colored most accounts of Euromerican maritime tattooing. One of the few studies that directly interrogates this exchange is the 2005 book *Tattoo, Bodies, Art and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*, which proves seminal in theorizing the genealogy of Euromerican maritime tattooing because it emerged at a moment where archival discoveries began to cast significant doubt on the Cook myth. However, it also undercut this momentum. By excavating the historiography of this discursive moment, we see how prefiguring the late 18th-century European-Pacific exchange has drawn attention away from a small but unique European tattoo practice, a practice which, though barely glimpsable, I argue dictated the terms of this exchange for common white Euromerican sailors.

Prior to the 21st century, the Cook myth was widely perceived as true, resulting from a lack of visible archival references to the practice. In a 1989 article, Ira Dye voiced a speculative position of dissent. He writes, "the evidence that European, and later

⁴ Anna Friedman, among others, traces one aspect of the perpetuation of this myth to late 19th-century anthropological accounts such as those by Cesare Lombroso. Such discourse solidified lines between the western self and marked 'other' in terms of atavism, criminality, and savagery.

American, seafarers had a continuous tradition of tattooing from early times into the modern period is fragmentary, but the inference is strong that the custom persisted among seafarers who comprised a subset of the lower classes” (Dye 522). Dye’s source material deals with American sailors from 1796 to 1818. Thus, he is unable to make any direct commentary on the veracity of the Cook myth. However, he posits that the volume of recorded tattooed sailors emerging as early as 1796 and the relative uniformity of style points to a continuous practice existing prior to Cook’s voyages. Jane Caplan’s edited collection *Written on the Body*, published in 2000, substantiates this claim with various essays attending to the archival, albeit marginal, presence of European tattoo practices. She offers that Christian Pilgrimage tattoos among “other evidence converges to suggest that the return of tattooing to European culture and/or the reinvigoration of indigenous European practices can be pushed back two centuries before the Pacific expedition” (Caplan xvii). For Caplan the supposed archival discontinuity in European tattooing is “emblematic of the nomadic and contested status of the European tattoo itself, its character of always being in transit from or to the multiple horizons of a self-centered world, of circulating most actively on the margins where it is least visible” (xv). European, and later American, maritime tattoos factor squarely into this marginal context. At the fringes of cultural production, maritime tattooing proliferated not as nationally emblematic, but as a local labor specific mode of expression.

Though in Dye and Caplan we see a portrait of Euromerican maritime tattooing as a marginal but salient subculture that would be influenced by Pacific tattoo practices, *Tattoo, Bodies, Art and Exchange* returns to European-Pacific contact as definitional. In the introduction, Nicholas Thomas acknowledges Caplan’s reading of an existent unique

European maritime tattoo practice but stages a challenge along methodological lines. Though careful to not essentialize an origin story, referencing Dye, he returns to the archive to suggest “it cannot be argued credibly that a highly distinctive form of body adornment was ‘a common and well-established practice at the time of Cook’s voyages and probably long before’, or even one that was occasionally encountered – yet never remarked upon and never depicted” (Thomas 14). Here, Thomas turns to the tone of novelty that inflects descriptions of Tahitian tattooing recorded from Cook’s voyages as primary evidence. Similarly, Joanna White’s chapter in *Tattoo, Bodies, Art and Exchange* deflects references to pre-Cook European tattoos appearing in London shipyards. She writes, “The relative scarcity of such references – among copious records – indicates that this practice was not widespread, and was likely to have been customary only among a minority of sailors and those with associations with sea-faring world, rather than belonging to a linear tradition” (White 67). The noted reference material she invokes is from the London Marine Society Records, documenting a fourteen-year-old boy, Henry Rawlins, who had his name tattooed on his arm prior to being recorded in 1763, six years before Cook’s encounter with Tahitian tattooing. (Pietsch 156). These examples show how *Tattoo, Bodies, Art and Exchange* seems to delimit the role of a unique European maritime tattoo culture to highlight the impact of European-Pacific exchange as formative. The reverberations of this approach over approaches such as Dye and Caplan have influenced subsequent scholarship.

This brief historiographical sketch shows how these two prominent early 21st century studies of Euromerican tattoo history navigated archival material which contradicts the Cook Myth. The main tension coalesced around how to engage the rapid

proliferation of source material and seeming attitudes of novelty toward tattooing after Cook's voyages. In recent scholarship on Melville and tattoos, it seems that *Tattoo, Bodies, Art and Exchange* has 'won out.' As we will see, some of the scholarship of tattooing in *Typee* places an almost reductive emphasis on European-Pacific exchange as a means of approach. However, I also suggest more broadly, that rather than highlighting the importance of European-Pacific tattoo exchange, by delimiting the salient role of independent European tattooing *Tattoo, Bodies, Art and Exchange* has unintentionally perpetuated the assumptions of the Cook Myth into contemporary discourse.⁵ By calling attention to some more recent studies that continue to assert the prevalence of an established pre-Cook European tattoo culture, scholars are still contending with a body of tattoo scholarship that has not yet reconciled its history.

Anna Friedman's 2012 dissertation, the same work which coins the term 'Cook Myth,' is one of the first strong counters to *Tattoo, Bodies, Art and Exchange*. Alluding to the various archival pre-Cook tattooed European figures, she sees the emergence of a constancy in practice, writing,

When we look at other types of travelers—especially those who sailed as a way of getting to non-island destinations where they then switched modes of transportation to continue their journeys—combined with the well-documented tradition of religious tattoos and yet-to-be-properly-researched history of secular identificatory and romantic tattoos, a continuity emerges to ascribe the roots of mariners getting tattooed in the Pacific to long preexisting European practice, not Polynesian novelty. (Friedman 22)

Guido Guerzoni finds a similar consistency in Italian devotional tattoos. Comparing sixteenth century tattoo tablets and 19th-century anthropologic sketches of tattoo practices, he finds an unabridged tradition. Such sources, he argues, "invite us to

⁵ For example, Juniper Ellis' insightful study of Pacific tattooing, published three years after *Tattoo, Bodies, Art and Exchange*, proclaims: "Modern tattoo begins in the Pacific" (Ellis 1).

reconsider mainstream nineteenth century theories and scholars, which stated that tattoos appeared in Europe only after the travels of Cook and Bouganville to savage Polynesia” (Guerzoni 122). Here, Guerzoni is challenging the origins of the Cook Myth – such as the 19th-century anthropologic studies of Lombroso– rather than making direct comment on the contemporary body of historic scholarship. However, the effect is the same: we are confronted with a marginally visible continuous tattooing tradition that existed outside the bounds of the European social center.

Joel Konrad approaches the continual marginal presence of European tattoos from a different perspective. He sees the general dichotomy between an emphasis on Cook’s voyages and the presence of European tattoo practices as obscuring “explorations of corporeal alteration in the two preceding centuries by creating unhelpful dichotomies of origin, rather than examining the complex cultural and intellectual responses to the marked body in early modern England” (Konrad 31). He directly challenged the emphasis Nicholas Thomas placed on the tone of novelty recorded during Cook’s voyages, observing a longer English colonialist tradition of differentiating the self from the bodies of the tattooed ‘other.’ Echoing Konrad, I agree the question of origin should not be highlighted. Rather, by insisting on the importance of a continuous marginal tradition of European tattooing, we return to the late 18th-century European-Pacific encounter with fresh eyes and modified questions: why did European maritime tattoo culture widely proliferate because of encounters in the Pacific? How did the practice change and develop?

Without fresh source material, answering these questions remains primarily theoretical. However, existing records and studies of Euromerican maritime tattooing

offer some clues as to how and why the practice proliferated and developed. In Dye's study of American seafaring tattoos, 1796-1818, he sees a consistency in style: "considered as an item of folklore or as an art form, seafarer tattooing appears to have been fixed and stylized from its initial appearance in these records, indicating that the custom was well established, and that any experimentation or innovation had taken place at some time in the past" (Dye 528). He cornicles the styles of tattoos broadly into categories in order of prevalence, including "initials, names, dates, words, letters" and "things of the sea" as the two most prevalent. In Dye's sources, roughly 10% of all recorded American seafarers had tattoos. Interestingly, additional source material referenced by B. R. Burg, recorded from 1885-1889, corroborate the consistency of iconography and the overall statistic quantity of marked sailors (roughly 10%) with a notable exception: a decline in the prevalence of 'initials, names, dates, words, letters.' Echoing Dye, Burg suggests the decline through the 19th-century of tattoos such as names and initials could be the result of no longer fearing impressment or death at sea, two compelling arguments as to why initials and names factored heavily among early American seamen (Burg 72). It could also represent a burgeoning aesthetic affinity for imagistic self-identifying marks rather than strictly written ones.

Simon Newman offers a cursory analytical reading of the styles of early American maritime tattoos. He situates the practice as primarily emerging from the class of career sailors, which he contextualizes as an impoverished laboring class. For Newman, several reasons for tattooing emerge including masculinity, identification, and vocational badges. However, most importantly, he argues "their tattoos furnished them with a vibrant form of self-representation" and that "Pride is one of the most striking traits seen in the tattoos:

pride in country, pride in craft, pride in relationships with loved ones, and pride in religious belief” (Newman 79-80). These symbols of pride constitute an externally marked embodiment of the self. Often as literal as one’s own name, Euromerican maritime tattoos emerged as symbolically replicating personal meaning. In this way the marks can be read within a capitalist humanist context, linking external representation to self-agency, and selfhood as the locus for social reproduction, while reinforcing the atomized body: externally marking the self as seafaring laborer. Here, I use humanism in its broadest sense as a way of describing the vein of late modern philosophy, both religious and secular, that foregrounds the individual in society. I include the various axes of social exclusion, including class, race, gender, and sexuality, in my broad use of the term ‘humanism’ because the national subject of the modern era was very much defined against the terms of exclusion.⁶ Thus, Euromerican maritime tattoos can be broadly defined as a marked form of capitalist humanist embodiment derived from the uniqueness of the seafaring labor class.

Seeing the practice as an embodied humanism requires further qualification. Returning to White’s chapter in *Tattoo, Bodies, Art and Exchange*, she calls attention to the ways tattooing figured prominently as identity expression. “In the case of more transient, visiting sailors, cross-cultural encounters in the Pacific exposed them to the potential for tattooing to express their own individual and collective relationships and new expertise to facilitate this expression. Seafarers rapidly established ownership over this practice which became a symbol of their trade” (White 85-86). Here I make two key

⁶ I tentatively use these terms of periodization; however, in deploying terms as such ‘late modern’ and ‘humanism’ I aim to capture the Western ontologies that defined Euromerican national formations, rather than reify a teleological view of history.

points of distinction. First, exposure to Pacific tattooing did not constitute an incipient engagement with marking the body as self-expression. Let's return to Henry Rawlins, the tattooed English boy buried in the notes. Amidst rote description, and an emphasis on prevalence, frequency, and the like, it is easy to forget that tattooing is first and foremost an act of bodily marking: living people making the choice to modify their bodies in a certain way, in certain societal contexts. Henry Rawlins, at a very young age, made the choice to undergo the painful process of having his name inscribed upon his arm. Although there may have been several varying motivations for doing so, including the threat of impressment in the British Navy, this is a prototypical example of marked self-expression. At the same time, it is hard to imagine his tattoo existing in a vacuum. It seems evident that his mark making process existed within a broader context, including labor, class, politics, etc.⁷ By looking directly at Rawlins, we see that tattooing was already a means of self-expression prior to Cook's voyages. Therefore, Pacific encounters did not expose sailors to mark making as a means of personal self-expression. Rather, it reified this link through encounters with new modes of tattooing. Secondly, and most importantly, the early potential for tattoos as expressive of "collective relationships" seems to have been a very fleeting moment and would not persist into the 19th-century. White offers a convincing analysis of John Elliott's account of Cook's second voyage. She argues that "observation of the elite group *arioi* in Borabora" led to widespread

⁷ There are a few factors to address as to why Henry Rawlins chose to tattoo his name on his arm. First, impressment, or being forced into naval service, was an active practice deployed by England in the late 18th-century. See "The Cost of Impressment During the Seven Years War." Mariners could avoid impressment with recent maritime service (Neal 45). The tattoo, in this sense, could function as a proof of self/proof of service. Since Rawlins was recorded in 1763, this would line up neatly with the Seven Years War. Second, and this is mostly speculative, but there seemed to be a readily established practice that would have influenced Rawlins. Identifying marks could have already been a means of avoiding impressment and could have already been understood as a symbol denoting maritime service. It is hard to imagine that at fourteen years old, Rawlins thought up the notion completely on his own.

adaptation of a black star as souvenir tattoo, which symbolically functioned as communal affiliation (White 69). However, by 1796, the beginning of Ira Dye's source material, there was not a single Polynesian motif on the bodies of American sailors. Thus, where late 18th-century encounters in the Pacific partially exposed European sailors to "tattooing as an *institution*," the practice did not develop in this way (68). Instead, Euromerican maritime tattoos proliferated along individualistic atomized lines, featuring marks of personal significance and seafaring labor.

In analyzing the symbols of early American maritime tattoos, Newman highlighted the career sailor as a disenfranchised class. Seafaring labor becomes central to theorizing the proliferation of Euromerican maritime tattoos as capitalist humanist marks. In a more recent work primarily concerned with Beachcombers – sailors who left their ships to live on proto-colonial Pacific Islands – Joanna White turns to liminality to describe their experiences. Through Beachcombers, she describes how "movement across geographical and cultural space can not only lead to novel forms of corporeal engagement and expression, but also, in certain cases, a transformation of cultural categories, a 'newly acquired lens,' and hence different forms of embodiment" (White, "Cross-Cultural Bodies" 74). By theorizing the ship as a floating contact zone, the previous section established how liminality defined the experience of shipboard life, which transformed the "cultural categories" of the maritime labor force through cosmopolitan exchange. Likewise, I argue the liminal conditions of seafaring labor facilitated "different forms of embodiment:" namely, the maritime tattoo as capitalist humanist embodiment. A career at sea for poor white sailors, and to a certain extent other racially marginalized sailors, could be seen as a means of joining the ranks of a wider

proliferation of the capitalist humanist engine of modernization. The Euromerican tattoo, then, could serve as a physical embodiment of white sailors' inclusion within the wider humanist project: the march of 'civilization.'⁸ In this way, marks of self-representation, for white sailors especially, may serve as a link to wider Western ontologies. On the other hand, maritime tattoo reifies the atomized body: marking the self as seafaring laborer. Importantly, Western primitivist discourse sought to distance and 'other' the marked body itself. (Konrad) Thus, tattoos symbolically reinforce sailors' position as central to, but kept separate from, Western social reproduction and the virulent spread of modernity and globalism. Through class distinction, they become marked for marginality, kept outside the national interior.

These tensions coalesce around constructions of race. As David Roediger argues, "the ideological connections of whiteness with independence and with ability... had been hard-wired into antebellum US nationalism," and, echoing Cheryl Harris, whiteness itself constituted a form of property (Roediger 68-69). In this sense, the antebellum white sailor was offered the psychological reconciliation, the "wages of whiteness," for their own meager material conditions through the logic of white supremacy. Yet, as we have seen, the conditions of seafaring life and labor depended on cosmopolitan mutual survival, creating tensions that in some ways undercut the logic of white supremacy. I argue that these are crucial factors that led to tattooing proliferating as an alternative humanist embodiment. Marking the body can be seen as a visible symbol for white sailors to reaffirm their fitness for social reproduction. Yet, turning to a physical mark making

⁸ In chapter three of *With Sails Whitening Every Sea*, Brian Rouleau makes a convincing connection between sailors and the discourse of Manifest Destiny. Specifically, linking together the ways sailors deployed attitudes and stereotypes toward Native Americans as a lens to understand contact with Pacific Islanders.

process, that is, turning to visibility, as a form of social inclusion creates further tension within the 19th-century racial paradigm. Amidst technological developments such as the daguerreotype and photograph and a wide proliferation of visual culture, Shirley Samuels argues “to inhabit the United States in the nineteenth century, whether in a house, a field, a city, or a state, those who would be citizens work to become visible” (Samuels 3). We might see mariner tattoos as symbol of laboring class visibility that in some ways contradicts the entrenched associations between the marked body and a racial ‘other.’ Maritime tattoos as marked visibility highlights seafarers labor as central to social reproduction over assimilation to nationalist discourse that construct whiteness as the locus of inclusion. Put simply, Euromerican maritime tattoos as vocational marks prefigure labor as the site of social inclusion, both with and against 19th-century racial constructions.

These divergent possibilities make sailors’ motivations for embodying this peripheral cultural practice difficult to pin down. However, in the space of the floating contact zone of the mid 19th-century Euromerican ship we see a poor seafaring labor force engaging in alternative modes of embodiment through marks of personal significance and self-representation. These embodiments coalesced amidst capitalist humanist ontologies and were modulated by racial constructions, cosmopolitanism, and the liminal conditions of shipboard labor. Thus, I offer that Euromerican maritime tattooing can be defined as a ‘liminal humanist embodiment.’ Etymologically, liminality signifies a threshold (OED). The ship itself functions as a kind of threshold between disparate geographic, cultural, and metaphysical locations. Marking this threshold on the body constitutes a form of embodiment, where sailors identified themselves via tattoos

with symbols that gesture towards the nature of their labor. This embodiment emerges out of a context that locates the individual atomized humanist subject, racially constructed as white, as the site of social inclusion. Maritime tattoos constitute a divergent form of embodiment primarily because the marked body in the early 19th-century was tenuously castigated to the role of the ‘other,’ lines that would become clearly defined by the end of the 19th-century through discourse surrounding cultural atavism and criminality (Friedman 381). In these ways, the ‘liminal humanist embodiment’ is a unique Western embodiment which both reifies and diverges from discourse (re)forming the individual humanist subject.

By the time Melville set out to sea in 1839, what I term the ‘liminal humanist embodiment’ was an established practice. However, as Edward Sugden demonstrates in *Emergent Worlds*, the “dynamic, fluid, and vibrant ecosystem” of the “Chaotic Pacific” had not yet “hardened into a more ossified form,” a form that forecloses emergent possibilities to colonial domination (Sugden 41). Thus, the potential for new embodiments, divergent spatial imaginaries, and original ontologies was still an active reality. In parsing the history of Euromerican maritime tattoos and defining them as a ‘liminal humanist embodiment,’ I have attempted to demonstrate how this mark making process developed out of the crosscurrents of capitalist humanist ontology, 19th-century racial constructions, and a cosmopolitan seafaring labor force. Briefly returning to Melville’s tattoo encounter in the introduction – the royal visit and the interaction between the Queen and the sailor – we see a more nuanced version of exchange taking shape: a marginal and unique form of Euromerican embodiment re-encountering Pacific embodiments. Rather than coloring the scene with a neat Western-Pacific dichotomy, the

interaction is staged between Euromerican tattoos, emblematic but separate from a hegemonic view of the humanist subject and a present but ununderstood Marquesan embodied ontology. In the following chapter, I will analyze Melville's use of tattoos with these nuances of cultural contact in mind.

CHAPTER II

SETTING SAIL: DESTABILIZING THE EMBODIED SELF

The obvious place to begin this chapter would be with *Typee*. It is Melville's first book, and it treats the subject of tattoos most extensively; following Samuel Otter's example in *Melville's Anatomies*, *Typee* has served as a foundational text for recent scholars who wish to explore questions of tattoos, skin, and bodies in Melville's works. However, this has generally placed a large emphasis on his treatment of tattooing in *Typee* as an incipient engagement with the practice. Yet, in *Redburn*, we see the fictional rendition of Melville's first voyage as a common sailor; in *White-Jacket*, we see his last. It is hard to imagine that as he took to the pen in 1844 to write about his experience in the Taipivai valley, his whole career as a sailor was not on his mind. This proves true: the royal visit from the opening chapter of *Typee* was a scene from his homeward bound journey. How did his experiences as a sailor prime his experience as a beachcomber on Nukahiva? How did the Euromerican marked body influence his engagement with Taipi tattooing? Does Melville see a continuity in symbolism between the two practices? To answer these questions, I take Euromerican tattoos as my point of departure.

In *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* we find a small but salient discussion of maritime tattooing. Much as the conflicted nature of the 'liminal humanist embodiment,' Melville finds in the practice a mark of sailors' unique embodiment, drastically effected by dehumanizing labor conditions and atomization born out of capitalism. These marks undergird Tommo's views of tattooing in *Typee*. Yet, I will demonstrate how asymmetrical contact with the Taipi destabilized his perceptions of the marked body.

Following Geoffrey Sanborn, in *Tommo* we begin to feel an ephemeral “outsideness” that reveals Melville’s own destabilized consciousness (Sanborn *TY* 3). Although *Tommo*, in the end, clings to his Western subjectivity, his experiences lead him to view Taipivai tattooing as an alternative ‘illegible’ embodiment: at odds with both the hegemonic Western perception of the marked body and the ‘liminal humanist embodiment.’ Following Kristin Knopf’s analysis, in *Omoa*, Melville portrays Typee as ethnographic character. Confronted with the transculturation of Lem Hardy the beachcomber, complete with Polynesian tattooing, Typee supposedly gains an appreciation for the alternative embodiment of Marquesan tattoos. He then attempts to authoritatively read the tattoo culture of Hiva Oa, rendering it a ‘legible’ practice.

As Otter insightfully suggests, “Melville examines how the surfaces of bodies become saturated with meaning” (Otter 90). Taken together, these tattoo references become layered with cultural context, exchange, perceptions, desire, and many other cross currents. Yet, in all these varying angles and complexities toward tattooing, we still feel Melville anxious and at odds with his characters and the worlds they inhabit. Where do these anxieties and tensions lead us, and lead Melville? In a broad sense, the answer to this question is why readers and scholars return again and again to his work: his philosophies, his humor, his tragedy, his sympathy, and his striving to make sense of the world. In a more direct sense, they lead us to see the possibility of contact, and the disaster of colonialism; the prism of approaches to tattoos in these texts show us a world of power imbalance, subjectivities formed and reformed by hierarchies of domination, characters navigating their lives with sympathy and indifference; and above all we feel with Melville the beauty and injustice of his world.

Melville's 'Liminal Humanist Embodiment'

In 1839, a young Melville boarded the merchant vessel *St. Lawrence* in New York and sailed to Liverpool (Parker 145). Though he may have already encountered sailors with marked bodies beforehand, the 1839 voyage marks his initiation into shipboard culture. In all probability, Melville would have become accustomed to tattooing during this voyage. However, through *Typee*, Pacific tattooing has been highlighted as the main stage for interrogating how he engages the practice. The scene from the introduction demonstrates why further attention to Euromerican maritime tattooing is needed when theorizing Melville's engagement with the marked body. As the first developed reference to tattoos in his fiction, the interaction between the Queen and the sailor draws attention to both Euromerican and Polynesian tattooing. Sostene Zangari argues the interaction between the Queen and the sailor "anticipates the pattern of conflict between Western representations and native reactions that will be central to the development of the narrative, a strategy employed by the author to question attempts at imposing static roles and attitudes on the indigenous inhabitants of the island" (Zangari 37-38). However, in this insightful reading, the sailor becomes a point of comparison: his tattoos provide a mirror that challenges Western representation of the marked body as the 'other.' Looking at the ways in which Euromerican tattooing as 'liminal humanist embodiment' factors into Melville's early sea fiction allows for a more robust understanding of the symbolic function of the marked body. It likewise serves to illuminate the complexities of how Melville engages transnational exchange.

The American sailor at the beginning of *Typee* is portrayed as having “many inscriptions of India ink as the lid of an Egyptian sarcophagus” (NN TY 8). Although here a minor reference, as John Birk demonstrates, in “Unsealing the Sphinx: The Pequod’s Egyptian Pantheon” Melville places a significant emphasis on excavating ancient Egyptian motifs to render his characters in *Moby-Dick*. Birk links together a cultural fascination with ancient Egypt in antebellum American, the antiquity of Egyptian myths, and theological anxieties as reasons why Melville relied on such descriptions (Birk 297-298). The question of theology is particularly insightful because it strikes a chord with Melville’s oft cited burgeoning religious doubts. Birk argues that “Christians in Egypt found in Osiris ‘the prototype of Christ’” and that for Melville, “displaying a marked iconoclasm... uncovering of a far more ancient ‘prototype of Christ’ must have borne immense implications” (298). Here, ancient Egyptian symbolism functions to exasperate a secular preoccupation with the foundations of spirituality. Thus, on the body of the tattooed American sailor in *Typee*, we see a symbol which points toward a worldliness that undercuts the foundation of religious belief. This brief reference places the Euromerican marked body within larger questions of secularism, suffering, and belonging. Yet, given the minor nature of the reference and the limited function of the unnamed American sailor in the narrative, the stand-alone description of Euromerican tattoo in *Typee* does not lend itself to a broader understanding of how the practice functioned in Melville’s early sea fiction.

A second limited reference to Euromerican tattoo appears in *Omoo*. Though much as the unnamed American sailor in *Typee*, the reference is minor and only hints toward the symbolic role of maritime tattooing. When Wilson, the Tahitian consul, comes

aboard the *Julia* to address the mutinous crew, Melville describes the first mate Jermin.⁹ He writes, “By the side of Wilson was the mate, bareheaded, his grey locks lying in rings upon his bronzed brow, and his keen eye scanning the crowd as if he knew there every thought. His frock hung loosely, exposing his round throat, mossy chest, and short and nervous arm embossed with pugilistic bruises, and quaint with many a device in India ink” (NN *OM* 78). The description of Jermin’s tattooing is merely that: a description; however, as a symbol of Jermin being a career sailor, the tattoo helps illuminate some trends in how the practice defined sea life for Melville. He portrays Jermin as an able sailor and first mate: “So far as courage, seamanship, and natural aptitude for keeping riotous spirits in subjection were concerned, no man was better qualified for his vocation than John Jermin” (11). Jermin also successfully heads the vessel to Tahiti when the captain falls ill. Lending to his aptitude and respect, when he sides with Wilson during the events of the mutiny, none of the crew contradict his character, which forecloses their aspirations. Thus, Jermin proves both the crew’s salvation in steering the ship safely to Tahiti, and their foil when they are imprisoned for mutiny. These contradictions speak to the challenges of seafaring labor: one of sailor’s primary modes of integration onboard was sailing proficiency, yet emphasizing ability undercuts a wider labor solidarity by reifying hierarchy. Thus, Jermin’s role as respectable career sailor further atomizes and subjugates the crew, leading to their imprisonment. The brief allusion to his tattoos shows how a ‘liminal humanist embodiment’ factors into this dynamic labor context; the marks

⁹ The character Jermin was based on James German, a career seaman that Melville served under in the *Lucy Ann*; the mutiny described in *Omoo* is based on the mutiny of the *Lucy Ann*, in which Melville took part (Howard 132; Parker 225).

of his arm are both symbols of seamanship and individuality, self-expression of capability and reification of the crew's subjugation.

Redburn and *White-Jacket* are perhaps the best texts that illuminate the cultural influences of the forecastle that imbricated Melville's treatment of tattoos and sailing life.¹⁰ *Redburn* chronicles the inaugural voyage of the young first-person narrator Wellingborough Redburn aboard the merchant ship *Highlander*. He signs on in New York, travels to Liverpool, and then returns. On the return journey the *Highlander* is outfitted as an emigrant ship; amidst squalled conditions a fever breaks out. Several immigrants and one of the sailors die, but Redburn returns home safe. *White-Jacket* details the homeward bound journey of the narrator, nicknamed White-Jacket. In the Pacific, he signs aboard the *USS Neversink*, an American man-o-war. The primary goal of the narrator is to describe in detail the lifestyle of Naval service, including prolonged discussions of flogging. By attending to Melville's treatment of sailing culture in these texts as a precursor to engaging Pacific tattooing in *Typee* and *Omoo*, a better picture of tattoo contact and cultural exchange comes into focus. In *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, tattoos are tied into the wider discussions of seafaring life. A few prevailing trends in these texts illuminate Melville's perceptions of the Euroamerican ship culture I outlined in the first chapter. These include: the difficulties of seafaring labor; the racial pluralities of sailors; and the tension between romantic possibility and material reality of life at sea.

¹⁰ *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Redburn*, and *White-Jacket* are all semifictional; that is, they are fictionalized accounts of Melville's lived experiences. In the NN editions, the "Historical Note on the Text," across all four texts, highlights these connections. Being that *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* are both primarily concerned with life aboard American merchant and naval ships respectively, they are the texts that best illuminate Melville's 'real' shipboard cultural influences.

The nature of seafaring labor is a crucial underpinning that defines all aspects of sea culture. In *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, Melville's rendition of seafaring labor primarily focuses on their tangential position within the Western 'civilized' world. In chapter twenty-eight of *Redburn*, Melville writes, "sailors only go *round* the world, without going *into* it... They but touch the perimeter of the circle; hover about the edges of terra-firma; and only land upon wharves and pier-heads" (NN *RB* 133-134). He further elaborates on sailor's exclusion from the national interior of the 'civilized' world in the following chapter:

There are classes of men in the world, who bear the same relation to society at large, that the wheels do to a coach: and are just as indispensable... sailors form one of these wheels: they go and come round the globe; they are the true importers, and exporters of spices and silks; of fruits and wines and marbles; they carry missionaries, ambassadors, opera-singers, armies, merchants, tourists, scholars to their destination: they are a bridge of boats across the Atlantic; they are the *primum mobile* of all commerce. (139).

Melville then asks his reader: "And yet, what are sailors?" only to answer, "they are deemed almost the refuse and offscourings of the earth" (140). Here, Melville is creating a clear class critique through the lens of sailors. They are an instrumental laboring class to the accumulation of national wealth: "the true importers, and exporters." Yet, they are kept separate from social reproduction, being held in the margins, at "the edges of terra-firma."

Poverty and class define Melville's portrayal of seafaring labor. He illustrates sailors as being recruited from the ranks of the impoverished. Robert Levine points out that *Redburn* is "motivated by financial necessity to take to sea, and the novel, by mentioning the narrator's later voyage on a whaler (typically presented in Melville as a last resort for those who are down and out in capitalist society), suggests that financial

necessity will remain an important part of his life history” (Levine 104). Redburn comments on his own poverty on his trip to New York at the outset of the narrative; the well-off passengers of the riverboat “gaze” at him when he cannot pay the ticket fare (NN *RB* 13). Likewise, his English companion Harry Bolton, who he meets in Liverpool, turns to a life before the mast out of the mysterious conditions of losing his wealth and status. Bolton’s lack of prospects in New York drives him to ship aboard a whaler where he meets his demise (311-312). Beyond sailor’s, Melville makes wider commentary on poverty through his descriptions of port cities and immigrants. Commenting on the commemorative statue of Admiral Nelson in Liverpool square, Levine argues, “Class is indeed a vital part of the novel, and Giles is right in remarking that the statue speaks to ‘the oppressions of the class system as it manifests itself in Liverpool,’ which become even more evident when the novel depicts the struggles of the Irish emigrants who arrived there during the 1840s” (Levine 107). Melville’s lengthy description of Liverpool’s poor –a dying mother and her three daughters, the rows of beggars soliciting the sailors, and the shipboard conditions of the immigrants – highlights the maritime class separation that drives national wealth accumulation. The poverty of Liverpool and the shipping networks is juxtaposed with the scene of lavishness in London. Redburn comments, “spite of the metropolitan magnificence around me, I was mysteriously alive to a dreadful feeling, which I had never before felt, except when penetrating into the lowest and most squalid haunts of sailor iniquity in Liverpool... the serpent of vice is a serpent still” (NN *RB* 234). In this way, the destitution of the maritime laborers and port cities functions in perpetual motion: the inequality resulting from capital accumulation

within the national interior forces sailors to sea, which, borrowing Melville's useful metaphor, keeps the 'wheels of the coach' turning.

Redburn's most humorous, and perhaps most telling, indictment of class, inequality, and wealth occurs in the forecabin. He is gifted "*Smith's Wealth of Nations*" as reading material for his journey by his oblivious New York friend Mr. Jones (86). He "expected to reap great profit and sound instruction" from reading the book; "Pleasant, though vague visions of future opulence floated before me, as I commenced the first chapter" (86-87). But he finds even the title of the chapter "Dry as crackers and cheese" (87). He continues: "Dryer and dryer; the very leaves smelt of saw-dust; till at last I drank some water, and went at it again. But soon I had to give it up for lost work" (87). Redburn wonders, "whether any body had ever read it, even the author himself; but then authors, they say, never read their own books; writing them, being enough in all conscience" (87). In a final twist of irony, the book affords him a sound night sleep, and he resorts to using the book for a pillow. Ending his commentary, Redburn states that in using the book as a pillow, he "sometimes waked up feeling dull and stupid; but of course the book could not have been the cause of that" (87). As an exposition on the function of capitalism, the book fails to assuage his material conditions even when used as a pillow. It is thus utterly useless in granting him "profit and sound instruction," the very thing he needs to relieve his own destitution. Thus, humor aside, the scene locates the function of capital accumulation as the very thing which renders his necessity, implicitly damning capitalism as the engine of 'civilization.'

In both *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, Melville finds the lot in life of sailors as a touchstone for wider condemnation of slavery.¹¹ At times, the association is troubling, verging on comparison; however, a nuanced reading of these connections demonstrates a discursive condemnation of slavery through the broad lens of labor. Commenting on *Moby-Dick* as “the epic history of the American Worker” Paula Kopacz argues that “Melville’s deep empathy for these laborers’ work constitutes the foundation for his opposition to slavery. Rather than rail against the South’s “peculiar institution,” Melville makes a clever but indirect tactical move: he makes his readers sympathize with other forms of exploited labor” (Kopacz 74-75). In *Redburn*, the ‘tactile’ connection between exploited labor and slavery is made most overt in the penultimate chapter when Redburn is denied his wages by the captain for having gone to London without permission. Melville writes, “here was this man actually turning a poor lad adrift without a copper, after he had been slaving aboard his ship for more than four mortal months” (NN *RB* 307). In sympathizing with Redburn’s exploitation, the reader is forced to consider the far more insidious conditions of slavery. Kopacz argues that in *White-Jacket*,

Class status, or as Melville says... “great gulf between the American Captain and the American sailor” facilitates an entirely unacceptable situation on board ship, whereby the common sailor is completely subject to the tyranny of the captain... Melville advances his objection to the abuse of authority and the resultant exploitation of the working sailor in the language of antebellum slavery. (Kopacz 82-83)

The role of flogging in *White-Jacket* links the captains abuse of authority to slavery through more than language. As Samuel Otter convincingly demonstrates, the narrative

¹¹ Robert Levine argues, “Melville explores the interconnections between slavery, race, and nation in the larger transatlantic context of Irish emigration. In doing so, Melville... supplies at least one possible answer to the question of what is the white American: he is a cruel American desperate to hold onto the fiction of the white sovereign nation” (Levine 104). He demonstrates how Melville’s portrayal of the Irish immigrant reflexively condemns slavery and the wider construction of whiteness as the site of social reproduction.

functions as an “extension of black slavery to the decks of United States naval frigates and to the backs of white sailors” (Otter 50). The seminal tension arises when Melville juxtaposes Rose-Water, a black sailor who is flogged and White-Jacket, who escapes the same fate. Otter argues that “Melville opens and closes and opens again the distance between ‘sailor’ and ‘slave.’ The analogy—if not exactly between sailor and slave, since Rose-Water is not a slave but a ‘free’ mulatto, then between white and black oppression—retains a verticality” (84). Redburn had only “been slaving aboard” without pay; White-Jacket escapes flogging. For Melville, Whiteness proves the foil in the analogy of sailor as enslaved.

In fact, through flogging Melville portrays a sentiment akin to Roediger’s concept of “wages of whiteness.” In describing the broad argument of *Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger, following Du Bois, writes, “whiteness was a way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline” (Roediger, “Wages” 13). In an almost mirror image, White-Jacket reflects: “Thank God! I am white. Yet I had seen whites also scourged; for black and white, all my shipmates were liable to that. Still, there is something in us, somehow, that, in the most degraded condition, we snatch at a chance to deceive ourselves into a fancied superiority to others, whom we suppose lower in scale than ourselves” (NN *WJ* 277). Melville’s discussion of the psychological “wage” of whiteness, as Otter shows with Rose-Water and White-Jacket, maintains the “verticality” between white seafaring labor exploitation and black oppression.

In *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, Melville portrays these unique axes of subjugation through his portrait of black sailors. Redburn reveals his own internalized racism when he

sees the “black steward, dressed very handsomely, and walking arm in arm with a good-looking English woman” (NN *RB* 202). He notes “In New York, such a couple would have been mobbed in three minutes” (202). His own “local and social prejudices” lead him to question the Stewards amiable treatment in Liverpool, but then offers “it was but recognizing his claims to humanity and normal equality” (202). Levine analyzes the rest of the passage, writing,

Redburn pointedly remarks that “we Americans leave to other countries the carrying out of the principle that stands at the head of our Declaration of Independence” (202). A bold statement indeed, but Melville’s treatment of slavery and race in the novel is complicated by the fact that, as Wyn Kelley observes, “Melville is breaking down racial stereotypes even as he seems to reinforce them.” (Levine 105-106)

Beyond his racial stereotypes, Melville troublingly locates the Stewards claim to humanity in his access to the company of a white English woman. Perhaps here Melville is implicitly acknowledging that in 19th-century social configurations, as Roediger argues, there were “reflexive nativist connections” between “white women, social reproduction, and the nurturing of republican freedom” (Roediger 136). Thus, lurking behind Redburn’s acknowledgement of the Steward’s right to social reproduction is the very ideology that render his oppression: white males as the exclusive national subject, constituted by their exclusive access to white women’s bodies for racial perpetuation. In *White-Jacket*, the forms of black oppression that take shape aboard the *Neversink* are more explicit. Black sailors were made to engage in “*Head-bumping*” which “consists in two negroes (whites will not answer) butting at each other like rams” (NN *WJ* 275). This was done for “the benefit of the Captain’s health” (275). The forced combat causes a rift between Rose-Water and May-Day that leads to a fight, which Rose-Water answers for by being flogged. Thus, what Otter observes as the “verticality” of white and black

oppression in the context of flogging is further born out from the singular subjugation of the black sailors: being made to fight for the pleasure of the captain.

The question remains: how does the above discourse illuminate Melville's symbolic use of tattooing? The concept of 'liminal humanist embodiment' I developed in the first chapter and Melville's wider discourse of race and labor converge around the concept of whiteness. Euromerican maritime tattoo culture is intrinsically wrapped up in racial constructions, capitalist atomization of the humanist subject, and identity. Yet, where do these connections lead Melville? In *Redburn*, the answer is death. The first reference to Euromerican tattoos seems innocuous; Redburn comments on a "little brig from the Coast of New Guinea" (NN *RB* 174). He describes their crew as "a bucaniering looking set; with hairy chests, purple shirts, and arms wildly tattooed" (175). Despite being an offhanded reference, tattoos become important in that Redburn juxtaposes the "reprehensible" behavior of the crew with their proximity to the "Floating Chapel" (175). Here, there is a thread linking back to the unnamed American sailor in *Typee*, with his "many inscriptions of India ink as the lid of an Egyptian sarcophagus," which connected Euromerican tattooing with religious doubt (NN *TY* 8). Redburn's rhetoric toward the crew positions them as the "sinners" that the Church ought to bring "to repentance" (NN *RB* 176). Yet, Redburn has already foreclosed the possibility of religion for improving the conditions of sailors. In chapter twenty-nine, Melville asks the reader: "But can sailors, one of the wheels of this world, be wholly lifted up from the mire? There seems not much a chance for it, in the old systems and programmes of the future" (140). He morbidly locates their recourse in "Time," which will "prove his friend in the end" and

“that God is the true Father of all, and that none of his children are without the pale of his care” (140). In short, he locates death as the material recourse for sailors.

Melville makes the link between death, salvation, and tattoos explicit with his second reference to the practice. Following his allusion to the “Floating Church,” Redburn is reminded of “the ‘*Old Church*,’ well known to the seaman of many generations, who have visited Liverpool” (177). Located “in the basement of the church is a Dead House, like the Morgue of Paris, where the bodies of the drowned are exposed until claimed by their friends, or till buried at the public charge” (178). When Redburn chanced to view inside the doors of the dead house, he “saw a sailor stretched out, stark and stiff, with the sleeve of his frock rolled up, and showing his name and date of birth tattooed upon his arm. It was a sight full of suggestions; he seemed his own head-stone” (178). Full of suggestions is perhaps an understatement. Here, tattoos become a symbolic “head-stone” for the degradation of sailors as a class, and the church can offer little more than storage for dead bodies. Sailor’s dead bodies themselves are even commoditized. At the end of the chapter, Redburn describes the “horrid old men and women” who “are constantly prying about the docks, searching after bodies” in hope of a reward for the recovery of drowned laborers (179).

Euromerican tattoos also define this commodification of dead sailor bodies in Melville’s third and last reference to the practice in *Redburn*. After shipping out on their return journey, “some of the men observed a strange odor in the fore-castle” (244). At first attributed to a dead rat, Jackson discovers that the smell is originating from a sailor who had been carried aboard for the return journey. One of the crew brings a lantern close to investigate the man and his body shockingly catches fire. Redburn describes “One arm,

its shirt-sleeve rolled up, exposed the man's name, tattooed in vermilion, near the hollow of the middle joint; and as if there was something peculiar in the painted flesh, every vibrating letter burned so white, that you might read the flaming name in the flickering ground of blue" (244). Redburn goes on to state:

what most astonished me, and seemed most incredible, was the infernal opinion of Jackson, that the man had been actually dead when brought on board the ship; and that knowingly, and merely for the sake of the month's advance, paid into his hands upon the strength of the bill he presented, the body-snatching crimp had knowingly shipped a corpse on board the Highlander, under the pretense of its being a live body in a drunken trance. And I heard Jackson say, that he had known of such things having been done before. (245)

Melville doubles down on the association between Euromerican tattooing as a mark of death. The first and most apparent reading of the marks symbolic role is tying together the prominent role of seafaring labor as a form of bodily commodification that signals sailors for expiration. In other words, Euromerican tattooing functions as an occupational badge that gestures toward exploitation: marking death as the invariable conclusion of being used as 'a wheel for the carriage' for 'civilization.' We might also return to the link between the 'liminal humanist embodiment' as a faciliatory emblem of inclusion within a wider nationalist project. As we have seen, Melville subtly links labor subjugation to questions of racial construction and slavery. Thus, Euromerican tattooing, as a symbol of racial and national reification, could symbol disaster for white sailors. In other words, by distinctively marking themselves as a means of identification with a broader white nationalism, white sailors' tattoos undercut a cosmopolitan labor-based solidarity within the forecastle.¹² Despite these somewhat divergent readings, it is clear that in *Redburn*,

¹² This aligns with how tattoos on Jermin functioned as marks of ability that undercut the mutiny in *Omoo*. Though in the case of Jermin, the connection was not a racial one.

Euromerican tattoos function as symbolic markings of the seafaring class that ominously signal death.

In *White-Jacket*, the symbolic association between tattoos and death is continued, both literally and metaphysically. Two references to the practice occur in the book. The first describes the “prickers” that would render their services for payment aboard the man-o-war, collecting “upward of four hundred dollars” by “the end of the cruise” (NN *WJ* 170). *White-Jacket* explains the various symbols received by the sailors, which echo the style’s outlined by Ira Dye’s study: “They would *prick* you to order a palm-tree, an anchor, a crucifix, a lady, a lion, an eagle, or any thing else you might want” (170). Melville continues the association between religion, labor, and tattoos found in *Redburn*. *White-Jacket* explains “The Roman Catholic sailors on board had at least the crucifix pricked on their arms, and for this reason: If they chanced to die in a Catholic land, they would be sure of a decent burial in consecrated ground, as the priest would be sure to observe the symbol of Mother Church on their persons” (170). This directly mirrors European pilgrimage tattoos, which were oftentimes received to mark the body for a Christian burial should Pilgrims die while traveling. The continuity in practice reinforces the link between maritime tattoos and a longer marginal European tradition (Freidman). *White-Jacket* continues, stating that non-Catholic sailors were also “anxious to have the crucifix painted on them, owing to a curious superstition... if you have that mark tattooed upon all four limbs, you might fall overboard among seven hundred and seventy-five thousand white sharks, all dinnerless, and not one of them would so much as dare to smell at your little finger” (171). Here the marks function as reassurance in case of death or disaster resulting from sea labor. Both religious and superstitious, tattoos offer a

psychological comfort for the fate of sailors' bodies. Tattooing and seafaring labor become explicitly linked when White-Jacket describes "one for-top-man" who had "an endless cable *pricked* round and round his waist, so that, when his frock was off, he looked like a capstan with a hawser coiled round about it" (171). The marks symbolically render him as the device, a "capstan" and "hawser," that moors a ship. He quite literally becomes marked as a tool of his profession.

The second allusion to Euromerican tattoos speaks to a more metaphysical vein in Melville's writing: the contradiction between the transcendent potential of seafaring and its material realities. A prominent motif that recurs throughout Melville's work is the dissolution of reverie. In many of Melville's characters the sea offers romantic possibility.¹³ For Redburn, "ship advertisements... possessed a strange, romantic charm" (NN *RB* 3). He would fall into "long reveries about distant voyages and travels" (5). The model of "an old-fashioned glass ship" is the principal object which converted his "vague dreamings and longings into a definite purpose" of setting out to sea (7). When underway he describes the "wide heaving and swelling and sinking all over the ocean... It made me almost dizzy to look at it; and yet I could not keep my eyes off it, it seemed so passing strange and wonderful" (64). These sentiments clash with Redburn's tumultuous initiation into sailing labor: "People who have never gone to sea for the first time as sailors, can not imagine how puzzling and confounding it is. It must be like going into a barbarous country, where they speak a strange dialect, and dress in strange clothes, and live in strange houses" (65).¹⁴ White-Jacket describes this tension more acutely: "I am of

¹³ Perhaps best demonstrated in the memorable first chapter of *Moby-Dick*.

¹⁴ Not unlike Tommo's experiences in *Typee*. In fact, this is most likely a call back to his first book: an easter-egg for his more faithful readers.

a meditative humor, and at sea used often to mount aloft at night, and, seating myself in one of the upper yards, tuck my jacket about me and give loose to reflection... And it is a very fine feeling, and one that fuses us into the universe of things, and makes us part of the All” (NN WJ 76). He contemplates the companionship between sailors roving the world and the stars, then proclaims “Oh, give me again the rover’s life – the joy, the thrill, the whirl! Let me feel thee again old sea!” (77). White-Jacket describes one night, he was aloft, “entranced; now dozing, now dreaming; now thinking of things past, and anon of the life to come;” he is wrenched from his position when “the yard dropped under me” (77). He clings to the “tie” and prevents himself from falling to the deck. For both Redburn and White-Jacket, the ocean presents a transcendent potential, but the material realities of seafaring labor waylay prolonged revery.

In a similar attitude, White-Jacket describes “the chains” as a place of retreat: “gazing broad off upon a placid sea... here would I recline – if not disturbed – serenely concocting information into wisdom” (322). However, he laments “there are plenty to divide a good thing with you in this man-of-war world” and that “Often, when snugly seated in one of those little alcoves, gazing off to the horizon... I have been startled from my repose” (323). One of the principal offenders is “the tattooing artists” who “would crawl over the bulwarks, followed by his sitter; and then bare arm or leg would be extended, and the disagreeable business of ‘*pricking*’ commence, right under my eyes” (323). The connection between maritime tattoos and labor previously established takes on metaphysical importance. Not only do the marks symbol the bodily degradation of sailors as a class; but here, they also signal the dissolution of transcendent revery afforded by the

sea. Tattooing constitutes a kind of philosophic death, tearing White-Jacket away from his ability to concoct “information into wisdom.”

Together, *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* constitute Melville’s most prolonged engagement with Euromerican maritime tattooing. The practice engages the crosscurrents of labor, race, and belief, reflexively triggered by his treatment of class-based subjugation and slavery, leading sailors toward both material and metaphysical death. Much as Euromerican maritime tattoo culture was a marginal practice in the national interiors, these references are also somewhat marginal in the text. However, I argue that they prove seminally important for reading *Typee*: Melville’s most prolonged engagement with tattooing. Most scholarship on tattooing in *Typee* delimits the role of the Euromerican marked body. Yet, if we are to ‘think’ and ‘feel’ alongside Melville, as Cody Marrs would have us do, we must look at Taipi tattoos with the same eyes as Tommo. The scene between the Queen and the American sailor was pulled from Melville’s naval service: the experiences that populate *White-Jacket*. Melville sailed to Liverpool before he sailed to the Pacific: the experiences that populate *Redburn*. In Melville’s prism of characters, characters who converge and diverge from his own lived experience, it is not so far of a jump to suggest that Tommo, before ever setting foot in Taipivai, had encountered the Euromerican marked body.

Confronting Whiteness: Tattoos in *Typee*

Typee is a narrative that details the experiences of the first-person narrator Tommo, who deserts his whaleship with his companion Toby at Nukahiva and ventures into the Taipivai valley. Tommo describes at length his experience living in the village.

He begins to feel that he is not entirely free to leave the valley and believes himself to be a prisoner. Thus, the novel ends when he eventually succeeds in being rescued by a whaling ship in need of men that sends a group to retrieve him. One of the seminal questions in approaching *Typee* is how to define Tommo. Kristin Knopf makes several compelling distinctions between Tommo's representation of Pacific Island tattoo culture and the real histories and contexts of those practices, a comparison which furthers her reading of Tommo functioning as "ethnographic" character. Although at times his statements certainly fit the description, Sostene Zangari demonstrates the "techniques of subversion used by Melville: the presentation of Tommo not as an exploring subject, but as an object investigated by the natives, and the presentation of the natives that defies accepted notions of savagery" (Zangari 38). I join Zangari's assertion of not reading Tommo as an ethnographic character by demonstrating how his relationship to Marquesan tattoo practices develops throughout the narrative in comparison to the 'liminal humanist embodiment.' I do not suppose that his descriptions warrant accurate depictions of Marquesan tattoo practices; among his contemporary readers, Melville's descriptions of Taipivai in all probability would have contributed to Western primitivist perceptions of the Pacific Islands and tattoo practices. Yet, the goal here is to read from a position inside the text, and Tommo's perceptions of tattooing develop over the course of the narrative. Thus, to properly address how the symbol of the tattoo functioned in Melville's early sea fiction, what Tommo makes of encounters with Marquesan tattoo culture is foundational.

In his introduction to *Typee*, Geoffrey Sanborn lays some critical groundwork that similarly disrupts reading the text through a neat ethnographic Western lens. He broadly

shows how the text approaches the humanist subject in relation to 19th-century racial constructions, American expansion, and colonialism. Drawing on David Roediger's "wages of whiteness," Sanborn places Melville amidst a culture which offers white men an alternative to "the rivalries and anxieties that accompanied their actual public exchanges" (Sanborn *TY* 2). Noting Melville's own early life experiences, Sanborn writes, "it would have been the easiest thing in life for Melville to have become a pledge in this symbolic fraternity," referring to the amalgamizing ideology of white supremacy and American expansion (3). However, *Typee* shows his rejection of such a fraternity. "In place of the dream of the progressive white spirit, he offers a dream of recumbent non-white bodies" (3). Yet, beyond simply "locating wholeness and fullness in the bodies of Polynesians" where "a sojourn among them will heal the wounds of modernity," Melville "calls that equation and that assumption into question" (3). For Sanborn, "Beyond the outsidership of his fantasy island lies another kind of outsidership, barely glimpsable, mute, and massive. Very like a whale" (3).

This other kind of "outsidership" constitutes a schism from "the progressive white spirit" at large in the colonial endeavor. It is achieved through internal development: showing a humanist subject dislodged from his own certainty. Thus, this outsidership could best be described as a destabilized consciousness. Sanborn writes that, in *Typee*, Melville's "primary goal is to convey the vicissitudes of a certain kind of consciousness – his own at the time of writing as well as the time of his stay" (10). In portraying his own destabilized consciousness, Melville subtly achieves that barely glimpsable outsidership; at work here are the initial pangs of what would grow into his deep and "ultimately tragic" philosophy, what Sanborn describes as an "incrementally transformative"

development of the self that “drove toward emptiness” (11). Discourse of the skin, and marking the skin, bring the internal and external into direct dialogue. In this way, Melville grapples with the internal and psychological freedom associated with being white within the American racial paradigm; that is to say, he directly confronts whiteness as a prerequisite of inclusion for the 19th-century humanist subject. Together with Melville’s destabilized consciousness, introducing the ‘liminal humanist embodiment’ into *Typee* both reifies these 19th-century constructions and troubles them. It is a contested symbolic mark of membership within “the progressive white spirit,” violently globalizing, modernizing, and colonizing the world, while also constituting an alternative form of humanist embodiment, one defined by cosmopolitanism, cultural contact, and liminality. These symbolic tensions are literally grafted onto the surface of the skin. The ‘liminal humanist embodiment’ as a lens of approach helps ground my analysis of Melville’s slippery and unstable outsideness. Here, it is also worth pointing out why I do not rely heavily on Otter’s *Melville’s Anatomies*, a definitional engagement with tattooing in *Typee*. In raising the idea of outsideness, we find an emergent thread that will multiply throughout this study, moving toward *Moby-Dick*. We will see these threads spinning together to create a new form of embodiment. However, Otter mostly casts Tommo’s eventual reaction to facial tattooing along binary racial lines, and this is right. Yet, there is something else hovering here too, that outsideness: maybe a far-off glimpse of a whale spout. It is this small vision I wish to bring into focus, if only a speck in our spyglass.

Several minor references to tattooing weave throughout the narrative that helps construct Tommo’s attitude toward the practice. Knopf calls this attitude “ambiguous, oscillating between admiration and disgust” (Knopf 130). However, when amassed as a

cohesive system of repeated imagery, I argue that his attitude is not defined by oscillation but rather uneven development. The first small reference occurs in the first chapter where Melville relates “strangely jumbled anticipations” as they approach the Marquesas: “strange visions of outlandish things... Naked houris – cannibal banquets – groves of cocoa-nut – coral reefs – tattooed chiefs – and bamboo temples” (NN *TY* 5). The primary function of this passage, especially given its location at the beginning of the text, is to invite the reader into Tommo’s initial psychological figurations. These imaginings of the island offer a preeminent colonial vision, what Zangari calls “an imaginary landscape that the narrator/protagonist is supposed to rely on to find his way into the complexities of the unknown environment” (Zangari 41). In this context, tattooing is simply one of many “outlandish things” that is found in the Pacific. Similarly, when attempting to dissuade his crew from taking shore leave in chapter six, the captain gives a speech telling a story of how white men had been taken captive from a vessel that visited the same port prior. One man who was rescued had been subjected to facial tattooing. The captain uses the threat of a face tattoo to instill fear of the Islanders, foreshadowing the same way Tommo will initially perceive the threat from Karky later in the narrative: “his face damaged for life” (NN *TY* 34). Taken together, these two references constitute Tommo’s initial imagined perception of the tattooed Islanders: at once ‘outlandish’ and dangerous, Tommo firmly deploys a colonialist vision of the exoticized ‘savage.’

Chapters ten, eleven, and twelve all have descriptions of various tattooed Taipi, which constitute his initial direct observations of the practice. Upon first arriving in the village, Tommo makes note of “the naked forms and tattooed limbs of brawny warriors” (70). His description of Kory-Kory, his personal companion while in the village, is more

elaborate, but takes an ironic tone. He calls Kory-Kory's face tattoo "three broad longitudinal stripes" which he likened to "those unhappy wretches whom I sometimes observed gazing out sentimentally from behind the grated bars of a prison window" (83).¹⁵ The rest of his body is also tattooed "with representations of birds and fishes, and a variety of most unaccountable-looking creatures;" he compares Kory-Kory's body to "a pictorial museum of natural history" (83). Tommo's description of his love interest Fayaway, which devotes several paragraphs to her beauty, adds a brief portrait of her tattoos – "three dots no bigger than pin-heads decorated either lip" and "upon the fall of the shoulder were drawn two parallel lines half an inch apart, and perhaps three inches in length, the interval being filled with delicately executed figures" (86). Though more generous in his portrayal of Fayaway, perhaps as a justification for his attraction to her, Tommo still refers to her tattooing as a "barbarous art" (86). In the following chapter he notes a handful of

hideous old wretches, on whose decrepit forms time and tattooing seemed to have obliterated every trace of humanity. Owing to the continued operation of this latter process, which only terminates among the warriors of the island after all the figures sketched upon their limbs in youth have blended together – an effect, however, produced only in cases of extreme longevity – the bodies of these men were of a uniform dull green color – the hue which tattooing gradually assumes as the individual advances in age. (92)

This cluster of descriptions appears at the beginning of his sojourn in the village. What joins them together is his disparaging preoccupation with their appearance.

In this early cluster of descriptions, it is evident that the practice does not appeal to his tastes, especially when practiced in excess, on the face, and on women. Here, I argue Tommo's perception is born out of the 'liminal humanist embodiment.' As we have

¹⁵ Michael Frank convincingly links this description with wider symbolic associations between tattooing and captivity (Frank 55).

seen, Euromerican tattoos were primarily a practice of individual expression. Meaning was personal and emerged from the realities of shipboard life. The tattoos were also somewhat clandestine: typically consisting of small oftentimes concealable marks on the arms and hands of male sailors. In each of the above examples, Tommo's observations focus on the highly visible nature of the tattoos. In other words, they contradict the appearance and form of the 'liminal humanist embodiment.' The initial shock between the desperate nature of Euromerican and Taipi tattoo cultures felt in these descriptions reaffirms in Tommo the logic of colonial separation between self and 'other.' Moreover, given the symbolic associations between Euromerican tattooing and death outlined in the previous section, the widespread tattoo custom among the Taipi might function for Tommo as doubly shocking: the practice triggering self-referent reflection on tattoos as marks of labor subjugation.

As Tommo becomes accustomed to life among the Taipi, his descriptions of tattooing gain more depth, and are less focused on the shock of their appearance. The description of Mornoo in chapter eighteen offers a counterpoint to the highly disparaging initial remarks toward the practice. Melville writes, "The artist employed must indeed have excelled in his profession. Traced along the course of the spine was accurately delineated the slender, tapering, and diamond checkered shaft of the beautiful 'artu' tree... this piece of tattooing was the best specimen of the Fine Arts I had yet seen in Typee" (136). Tommo goes on to state that the tattoo had "an unique and elegant effect" (136). The shift in aesthetic appreciation could simply be explained by the high quality of Mornoo's tattoo. However, I argue the shift in descriptive terms are indicative of an internal shift toward a more nuanced understanding of the practice. Specifically, he uses

the term ‘artist’ and ‘Fine Arts’ (seemingly unironically) as opposed to earlier terms such as ‘barbarous art.’ Moreover, Tommo begins to attach social conventions to tattooing rather than perceiving them as individual marks of expression. He lists Kolory’s “mystic characters which were tattooed upon his chest” as one indicator of his status as “a soldier-priest” among the Taipi (174). Connecting the mystic characters of tattoo to Kolory’s authoritative social position, though subtle, demonstrates that Tommo is slowly grasping a different form of social embodiment in Taipivai, separate from the ‘liminal humanist embodiment.’ Two chapters later he connects the institution of marriage and tattoo: “having the right hand and left foot most elaborately tattooed” was for women, “according to Kory-Kory, the distinguishing badge of wedlock” (190).

Tommo is in a transformative psychological state: beginning to feel the larger social structures present in the valley peeling away the ‘outlandish visions’ of his colonial perception of the ‘other.’ Geoffrey Sanborn argues that, for Melville, tattooing was a means of interrogating “the relationship between individual expression and social convention” (Sanborn *TY* 343). This discourse revolves around a perceived lack of fixity in the Taipi customs, resulting from a colonial vision of ‘savagery.’ Although Tommo’s observations still tenuously insist on a lack of social cohesion and fixity, he is invariably linking tattooing to social structure: an indelible embodiment that undermines his wider claim of undefined cultural fluidity. As Jason Berger claims, “the tattoo is troubling because its form seems to exceed or resist Tommo’s perceptive categories” (Berger 103). Staged through these small references to tattoos, Tommo is slowly dismantling his externally imposed colonialist ideas about the Taipi in favor of more lateral observations

based on direct engagement. In other words, his personal perceptions are being restructured by interrelation.

This shift is brought to a head when Tommo encounters the tattoo artist Karky. Tommo and Kory-Kory happen upon the artists hut and watch as he touches up a man's faded tattoo. Melville describes the practice in operation, focusing on the various tattooing implements and the contents of the ink. He compares the "strange instruments" to "that display of cruel-looking mother-of-pearl-handled things which one sees in their velvet-lined cases at the elbow of a dentist" (NN *TY* 218). Knopf makes note of how his description of the process "fuels fears of the Native 'other' and Native violence" (Knopf 131). However, the parallel between tattoo instruments and dentists' instruments is particularly striking because it implicitly casts the tattoo operation as a kind of socially necessary violence, much as a trip to the dentist could be described as such.¹⁶ More and more, Tommo seems to be striving to make sense of tattooing as a social function, here importing imperfect comparisons from Western modernity.

When Karky notices Tommo, he becomes excited at the prospect of giving him a tattoo. Melville writes, "The idea of engrafting his tattooing upon my white skin filled him with all a painter's enthusiasm: again, and again he gazed into my countenance, and every fresh glimpse seemed to add to the vehemence of his ambition" (NN *TY* 219). The emphasis on his white skin is related to other observations Tommo makes about the value of whiteness in Taipivai. Most obvious, is the novelty of his skin tone. In their first encounter with the village, Tommo and Toby are treated to a meal, and afterward begin taking off their wet outer garments revealing their white untanned skin. Though at first,

¹⁶ I write this after recently having a tooth pulled. Dentistry is indeed a socially necessary violence!

Tommo suggests the Taipi acted as if they had never seen a white person before, he goes on to suppose that they simply had never seen white untanned skin beneath the outer garments on account of their limited contact. Because of such limited contact, Tommo repeatedly references the value of certain European goods. Muskets, for example, are one of the most coveted items because of their utility; items of European clothing likewise are coveted as status symbols. In the final chapter, the Taipi are offered muskets and powder in exchange for Tommo, though they rebuke the offer. In this way, Karky's enthusiasm to tattoo Tommo is perceived as a means of attaining status. When Tommo refuses, Melville writes, Karky is "overwhelmed with sorrow at losing so noble an opportunity of distinguishing himself in his profession" (219). The scarcity of white skin in the valley makes it a coveted artistic template.

Outside the context of European contact, Tommo supposes that the color white also holds value among the Taipi. In chapter twenty-four, he describes the "mausoleum of a deceased warrior chief" and references "a mystic white roll of tapa" (171-2). In reference to the tapa, he notes that "White appears to be the sacred color among the Marquesans" (172). The small note is particularly intriguing because it appears among a larger discussion of religion in Polynesia. Earlier in the chapter, he derides most anthropological accounts of Pacific religions as having come from "retired old South-Sea rovers, who have domesticated themselves among the barbarous tribes of the Pacific" (170). Alluding to his own shortcoming, he casts doubt on Western knowledge of Pacific religions, summarizing the body of written accounts as tall tales and yarn spinning. Thus, the small note about the sacred nature of the color white (somewhat paradoxically)

appears amidst his attempt to distance the narrative from ethnographic representations.¹⁷ In the following chapter, he also touches on his perception of Marquesan beauty. Tommo draws on various other European ethnographic travel descriptions of the Marquesas and his own observations to conclude that “the distinguishing characteristic of the Marquesan islanders, and that which at once strikes you, is the European cast of their features – a peculiarity seldom observable among other uncivilized people” (184). He further describes how Marquesan women practice skin whitening with “papa” and avoid time in the sun. Though his own racially informed beauty standards are front and center, it is noteworthy that he describes Marquesan women as actively seeking a light complexion. Tommo suspects that among the Taipi, a light complexion is a standard of feminine beauty, which seemingly makes his own complexion an even more desirable template for Karky.

Virtually every scholar concerned with tattoos in *Typee* places significant emphasis on Tommo’s reaction to the prospect of a face tattoo.¹⁸ I join this line of analysis, seeing the interaction as one of the novel’s most important scenes. However, his immediate reaction must also be tempered by an analysis of how his perception to the threat of a face tattoo shifts over time. His immediate reaction is one of racial apprehension. He laments that should he get the tattoo, he would be “disfigured in such a manner as never more to have the *face* to return to my countrymen” (219). Tommo’s association between national identity and physiognomic expression is overt:

¹⁷ Zangari demonstrates how Melville subverts the form of 19th-century travel narratives to destabilize the implicit objectivity and veracity of such accounts. By contrast, Knopf sees irony as a potential way of subverting her reading of Tommo’s implicit colonial bias but returns to his ethnographic tendencies as paramount.

¹⁸ Every scholar I have referenced in this section read the scene as definitional in the novel: Otter; Sanborn; Knopf; Berger; Frank; Zangari.

Americanness is written on a pure white face. Yet, it is not immediately apparent whether this association is a personally held belief or a broader understanding of the constructed racial schema that defined social inclusion in American society. Knopf reads his reaction as indicative of internally held “Western notions of primitivism” (Knopf 132). However, Sanborn suggests that from the encounter with Karky “he is confronted by forces beyond the personal” (Sanborn *TY* 343). These include confronting the social construction of whiteness “as the signifier of possibility and privilege, mutability and mobility,” that which is “defined against what Thomas Jefferson called ‘the immovable veil’ of blackness” (343-4). Through this lens, Tommo’s reaction to the idea of a face tattoo is not so much an internal conflict of identity, but rather a reaction against a theoretical loss of whiteness. Michael Frank furthers this reading through his study of facial tattooing, writing, “Having undergone irreversible change in the process of cultural encounter... these enigmatic ornaments [facial tattoos] were read as marks of the inscrutable other” (Frank 57). Tommo’s initial apprehension is routed in losing the very thing which enables him to freely define and redefine his internal character within the American racial schema: through a face tattoo he loses the ability to be seen as a humanist subject. As Berger suggests, “it is the West’s system of logos and identity that is shown to be lacking” (Berger 105).

Karky continues to pursue Tommo hoping to give him a face tattoo, and the entire village including Chief Mehevi join in attempting to persuade him. From this collective effort Tommo is forced to finally reconcile that the process of tattooing is a form of embodiment directly tied to Taipi social configurations. Melville writes, “the whole system of tattooing was, I found, connected with their religion; and it was evident,

therefore, that they were resolved to make a convert of me” (NN TY 220). The emphasis on religion and conversion draws attention back to the larger colonial process in the Pacific, where the engine of colonization was fueled by religious subjugation. Thus, the tattoo encounter is a reversed staging of colonization: Tommo, a white American, is subject to overwhelming influence of the Taipi. Zangari argues that Tommo “experiences the same fate that the colonial practice has imposed on the ‘other’—being made into an object of investigation, performed in accordance with the ‘local language’ of the natives” (Zangari 40). The idea that a complex culture has the power to exert significant influence on Tommo’s body, a culture which he cannot fully understand because a lack of ability to read the indigenous ‘other,’ destabilizes the ideological underpinnings of colonization: the split between a Western self and other, civilization and savage. As a discursive anticolonial critique, this encounter is troubling because it is staged along racial lines. In other words, it relies upon the notion of racially reversing the colonial encounter to destabilize its logic. Despite the shaky racial reification within Melville’s critique, tattooing functions as a discursive window into his anticolonial position. Where Knopf sees Tommo’s reaction to the threat of a facial tattoo as a perpetuation of Western primitivism, building off Sanborn and Zangari, here I see Taipi tattoos as becoming entirely disentangled from Tommo’s initial perception of the practice through the lens of the humanist self.

Throughout the narrative, interrelation has moved Tommo’s perception of tattooing away from marks of individual meaning toward seeing the practice as a social “institution,” to borrow Joanna White’s word (White 68). The facial tattoo thus functions for Tommo as forced assimilation into Taipivai society, a society whose broader

ontologies he can only tenuously grasp through the blurring vision of colonial representation and imperfect cross-cultural exchange. In this context, Tommo's perception of tattoos constitutes a mark of not-yet-legible alternative embodiment. His fear of losing "a *face* to return to my countrymen," is therefore not squarely primitivist fear of being marked as the 'other,' but a reflexive fear of being forced to embody an alternative ontology (NN *TY* 219). Tommo fears losing his privilege to be seen as humanist subject, free to define and invent the individual self, a self which constitutes the site of social reproduction. As Otter suggests, "No longer will he have a face that permits him to move undetected through American society" (Otter 41). However, it is also a fear of embodying the unknown; a fear of plunging into new 'illegible' social formations. Thus, through tattoos, Melville grapples with American racial constructs which exclude non-white subjectivities from social reproduction, while unable to grasp substitute social formations. The practice comes to represent an embodied alternative, an outsideness, a symbol of destabilized consciousness. However, the physical tattoos in *Typee* remain illegible. It would seem then, for Melville, Tommo's refusal to be marked is instructive: he maintains his position as visible humanist subject, maintains the mutability afforded by his whiteness, to plumb the internal depths of the self. Where he dives, that incremental "emptiness" that Sanborn alludes to, the possibility of new social formations, will be the subject of later analysis (Sanborn *TY* 11). However, here tattoos remain a foreclosed potential to open new ways of seeing the world. In *Typee*, tattoos mark for Melville a realm of uncharted divergent ontologies.

Ethnographic Anticolonialism in *Omoo*

The preface to *Omoo* states that the title is derived from a Marquesan word that “signifies a rover, or rather, a person wandering from one island to another” (NN *OM* xiv). As a story it accomplishes just that: following the first-person narrator, nicknamed Typee, roving between islands in the Marquesas and Tahiti.¹⁹ Although the preface denounces any direct relationship with *Typee* beyond the mere fact that the latter picked up where the former left off, it is evident that on the topic of tattooing, there is a linear thread of discussion that moves from the dilemma with Karky and the threat of a face tattoo to the beginning chapters of *Omoo*. Though Tommo clung to his racialized mobility afforded by whiteness, introduced in *Omoo* is the character Lem Hardy, who has undergone a transculturation through voluntarily receiving a Marquesan face tattoo. However, before discussing Lem Hardy the transculturite, Melville symbolically links the poles of Tommo and Hardy through the hybrid character Jimmy in the sequel to *Typee*, which chronicles the events of Toby’s rescue from Taipivai. Zangari describes Jimmy as “a white man gone native... an old sailor who could speak the Polynesian language and thus acted as mediator between the French occupants and the island tribes” (Zangari 44). The emphasis on mediator is of seminal importance, though I argue Zangari’s decision to cast Jimmy as “a white man gone native,” aside from being a troubling turn of phrase, is not fully accurate.

¹⁹ I have chosen to refer to the first-person narrator of *Omoo* as Typee because he is named as such in the book. Some scholars such as Knopf decide to refer to him as Tommo, supposing the continuity between the two texts. However, there are implicit distinctions between the two characters, especially concerning the question of ethnography, that warrants their distinction. It could even be argued that by calling himself Typee, the narrator intentionally steps into the role of ethnographer.

As mediator Jimmy is defined as neither within Western nor Polynesian cultural spheres. Unlike Hardy, he has not fully transgressed the bounds of constructed cultural divides between ‘civilized’ and ‘savage.’ Returning to Joanna White’s important chapter on Beachcombers, Jimmy is not a figure who “following some form of corporeal reconfiguration or reconstitution... is transformed into a new state,” (White, “Cross-Cultural Bodies” 81). Rather, he is a person who “exploited their ambiguous, inter-cultural status, living alongside rather than within communities and gaining material benefits from their interactions with Islanders on the one side, and visiting Europeans on the other” (77). Thus, Jimmy is not a Beachcomber transculturite akin to Hardy, as Zangari implicitly suggests, but can be read as a liminal and hybrid mediator. Melville symbolically renders his status as mediator through his tattoos. He has “the verse of a song tattooed upon his chest, and a variety of spirited cuts by native artists in other parts of his body” (NN *TY* 263) The hybridity of his tattooing – having both Euromerican style lyrics and Marquesan tattoos – outwardly represents him as a cultural mediator. However, his ability to transgress back and forth across cultural gaps places his allegiance squarely to himself, never having the interests of visiting Euromericans or Native Islanders fully in mind. Zangari writes, “His fluency in both English and Marquesan as well as knowledge of taboos and superstitions make Jimmy the only one who can interact with both parties, and thus allow him to arrange events in a way that suits his purpose” (Zangari 45). Thus, his liminality and hybridity afford him an inter-cultural “position of privilege” (45)

By contrast, early on in *Omoo*, Typee encounters Lem Hardy who embodies the transculturated beachcomber described by White. In the bay of Hiva Oa, what Melville terms La Dominica and Hivaroo, their ship is approached by a canoe of Islanders. Typee

states, “with them also came a stranger, a renegado from Christendom and humanity – a white man, in the South Sea girdle, and tattooed in the face” (NN *OM* 27). The character Hardy plays upon the anxieties of the face tattoo in *Typee*. Typee and the crew “gazed upon this man with a feeling akin to horror, no ways abated when informed he had voluntarily submitted to this embellishment of his countenance” (27). The voluntary nature of the tattoo is a key distinction that creates contrast between Hardy and Tommo. Whereas Tommo’s encounter with Karky cast a destabilizing anxiety over his own perception of whiteness, Hardy’s voluntary tattooing puts direct pressure on Western notions of racial separations. As Knopf writes, he is viewed as having “crossed the border between ‘civilization’ and ‘savagery’” (Knopf 139). It is revealed that he deserted a trading vessel and became a warrior for the tribe. He met with huge success in his campaigns, and as a result he was given the hand of a princess and placed under sacred protection. Knopf convincingly demonstrates how this history succeeds in “stylizing [Hardy] as the European hero of the Natives in a ‘white man going Native’ romance” (140). However, beyond the racial placating – elevating Hardy to status of romantic hero – Knopf does not interrogate the underlying cause of Hardy’s transculturation.

Typee explains why a ‘civilized white man’ might undergo such a change: “thrown upon the world a foundling, his paternal origin was as much a mystery to him as the genealogy of Odin; and, scorned by every body, he fled the parish workhouse when a boy, and launched upon the sea. He had followed it for several years, a dog before the mast, and now he had thrown it up forever” (NN *OM* 28). He goes onto generalize this class of beachcombers as “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” (28). Here, Melville raises an issue that looms just behind the surface of Typee’s rhetoric on colonization throughout *Omoo*: the destitute underbelly of the promise of ‘civilization.’ As shown in the first section of this chapter, these budding anticapitalistic sentiments are more fully on display elsewhere, such as in *Redburn*. In *Omoo*, they remain buried, only partially surfacing when he asks his reader to look at the condition of the beachcomber: “glancing at their hard lot in their own country, what marvel at their choice?” (28). Again, Melville seems to be relying on the constructed racial category of white as ‘civilized’ to voice his anxieties. Namely, the shock of a white man forgoing his national and racial identity destabilizes the progress narrative of civilization only insofar as his whiteness holds a certain weight. However, by turning the question back to the reader, Melville is forcing, as he so often does, dialectic contemplation. This discursive tactic prompts the reader to interrogate the fear of racial othering by means of tattoo, a fear that Tommo directly felt, and look to its root cause. Though phrased as a question we feel here Melville moving us toward a deeper doubt of civilization, progress, and the dream of a transcendent white globalism: we feel a nascent capitalist critique staged through tattoos. By ameliorating the perceived racial transgression along class lines, Melville calls into question the fundamental construction of the capitalist subject.

Through the characters of Tommo, Jimmy, and Lem Hardy Melville weaves together a spectrum of how tattoos function symbolically within his first two texts. Wrapped up in the web of cross-cultural exchange, each character relates a disparate function of tattooing. For Tommo, the threat of a facial tattoo reflexively positions him in his own white humanist subjectivity. Jimmy deploys tattoos as a hybrid currency,

allowing him to move between cultures while remaining marginally on the fringes, akin to a beach bound 'liminal humanist embodiment.' Hardy transgresses the constructed racial boundaries to reconfigure his subjectivity within a Marquesan context. What joins these characters together is the function tattoos play in marking their subjectivities. However, it is not a neat literary tactic where external physiognomic descriptions reveal internal character. Rather, tattoos present a milieu for Melville to grapple with the essence of embodiment itself. Symbolically, tattoos trigger a discussion of bodies in relation to social formation. Yet here, they seem to remain grounded to a direct critique of Melville's lived experience: mediated and moderated by an anticipated reception of his reading public and curtailed by a desired anticolonial effect. He repeatedly deploys expected racial separations of 'civilized/savage,' 'Euromerican/other' to discursively challenge the logic of those constructions. Yet, this simultaneously relegates tattoos to the sphere of the tangible, to real cultural practices existing in Pacific and aboard Euromerican ships. It cuts short their literary potential as fictional stages for creating and investigating the nature of social formation. As we will see, when Melville branches into his fully developed fictional voice, tattooing matures into a palpable embodied philosophy. However, in *Omoa*, as I demonstrate below, this inchoate discourse stands on the shaky legs of ethnography.

In the chapter following Lem Hardy's introduction, Typee ethnographically renders the tattoo culture of Hiva Oa. Melville writes, "the tattooers of Hivarhoo enjoyed no small reputation... none but those belonging to the higher classes could afford to employ them" (30). Typee goes on to describe the tattoo houses: "Professors in large practice lived in spacious houses, divided by screens of tappa into numerous little

apartments, where subjects were waited upon in private. The arrangement chiefly grew out of a singular ordinance of the Taboo, which enjoined the strictest privacy upon all men, high and low, while under the hands of a tattooer” (30-31). Inexperienced artists practice their craft on willing commoners – “vile fellows, utterly regardless of appearances, upon who they first try their patterns and practice generally” (31). Other less skilled practitioners roam around the island offering their services “dog-cheap for the multitude” (31). Typee also describes a kind of tattoo artist guild with multiple chapters across the island. Beyond his description of the norms of the practice, he goes into detail about a kind of tattoo revolution which was born out of “the partial failure of the bread-fruit harvest for several consecutive seasons” (32). The scarcity created a depression which “brought about such a falling off in the number of subjects for tattooing, that the profession became quite needy” (32). In response the King “kept open heart and table for all tattooers whatsoever; but to entitle themselves to this hospitality, they were commanded to practice without fee upon the meanest native soliciting their service” (32). The decree was successful and “Numbers at once flocked to the royal abode, both artists and sitters” (32). The result of the decree was stamped into the cultural memory as the “Lora Tattoo” (time of tattooing). Typee also transliterates a “sort of colloquial chant” associated with the Lora Tattoo (32). The verse relates the tapping of shark’s teeth (the method of tattooing) and the joy of being tattooed. Broadly speaking, Typee describes the impact of tattoo culture. He is portraying a kind of democratization of tattooing, a symbolic opening of a previously patrician cultural practice.

Knopf makes several incisive critiques on the passages related above. Namely, she demonstrates how “Melville again misinterprets Marquesan tattooing custom, based

upon incorrect sources via Western discourse” (Knopf 140). The ethnographic nature of his descriptions is hard to ignore. Unlike Tommo, Typee does not distance himself from ethnographic veracity, taking Hardy’s descriptions as fact. Given her analysis of *Typee*, Knopf sees the ethnographic character of these descriptions as a continuity, shifting from a negative perception of tattooing to a positive one. However, because I offered an alternative reading of *Typee* that distanced Tommo from operating strictly as Western observer, the explicit ethnographic character of these descriptions is doubly important. I argue that the description of a cohesive and robust tattoo culture attempts to demonstrate how tattooing functioned as ‘social convention,’ replacing the perception of tattooing as ‘illegible’ culturally informed embodiment. Like the figure of Lem Hardy, Typee’s description of tattooing conventions reconciles another problem raised in *Typee*: the implicit anxiety around the Marquesan Islanders’ social formation. As Sanborn reminds us, the encounter with Karky challenged Tommo’s preconceived notions of a lack of social cohesion among the Taipi. The fact that all the Islanders joined together to persuade him to receive the face tattoo, a tattoo which he implicitly linked to religious and cultural practice, demonstrate a social cohesiveness that subverts his ideas of cultural mutability, and challenge the notion of tattoos as strictly individual expression. However, in *Typee*, that tension remained subdermal, a shadow cast over Tommo. In *Ommoo*, the description of tattoo culture at Hiva Oa places the practice at the center of a complex culture. Moreover, the ethnographic description not only attempts to reconcile this tension between social cohesion and mutability but elevates the tattoo practice to a force in Hiva Oa that quite literally structures and restructures life. Thus, it seems through faulty ethnography, Typee is trying to read the previously ‘illegible’ marks of Marquesan

tattoos. He is attempting to chart the island embodied ontologies and make sense of alternative social formations.

Though these two consecutive chapters offer the only extended passages related to tattooing in *Ommo*, this conceptual shift toward tattooing as a 'legible' social formation is important because it highlights a notable absence when Typee arrives in Tahiti. In chapter forty-seven, he discusses the dress and appearance of native Tahitians, which was highly regulated by missionary efforts. He relates that the Tahitians were banned from making tappa and wearing traditional dress. Bridging off this colonial imposition he also states that several other cultural customs such as "sports and pastimes" were banned, including "foot-racing, throwing javelin... archery... dancing, tossing the football, kite-flying, flute-playing, and singing traditional ballads" (NN *OM* 183). These impositions on daily life stem from missionary efforts that aimed to stamp out any 'pagan' practices, because these practices were associated with various Tahitian festivals. Amid this discussion, Typee states, "Against tattooing, of any kind, there is a severe law" (183). Juniper Ellis illuminates the "severe law" against Tahitian tattooing custom: "Some nineteenth-century Christian missionaries banned tattoo, declared the practice dead, and in Tahiti even flayed tattooed skin to enforce their ban" (Ellis 96). She goes on to write, "as a result 'foul blotches' are left in place of 'beautiful patterns.' The despoiled tattoo pattern serves as shorthand for outsiders' interventions into Tahitian ways" (97). Typee makes no direct commentary on the flayed skin, but in his observation of "the considerable number of sickly or deformed persons" in Tahiti from contact with foreign diseases, he notes "this, and other bodily afflictions, were unknown before the discovery

of the islands by the whites” (NN *OM* 127). The ambiguous “bodily afflictions” could be a reference to the “foul blotches” from Christian missionaries flaying tattooed skin.

The lack of references to Tahitian tattoos brings Typee’s ethnographic descriptions of Hiva Oa into new light. Melville’s reference to the Tahitian restriction of tattooing itself is very brief, perhaps because a fuller rendition of the law – that is, detailing the abhorrent practice of flaying tattooed skin – would raise severe criticism from his contemporaries. However, Typee importantly groups tattooing with integral indigenous cultural practices to pre-colonial Tahitian life. Together with his earlier treatment of tattooing in Hiva Oa, Typee portrays tattooing as an integral cultural practice, one which is wrapped up in his imperfect criticism of colonization. Where previously Tommo’s anxieties of tattooing as an ‘othering’ practice reflexively trigger a dialectic engagement with the privileges of whiteness constructing the humanist subject, Typee’s attempt to render tattooing as ‘legible’ cultural practice raise a critique of colonial cultural imposition. The fear of losing the privilege of whiteness is replaced with the fear of global annihilation of indigeneity.

This ethic is managed and massaged through the placating rhetoric Melville overtly uses to appease an ostensibly white Christian reading public, and perhaps to ease his own internal conflict. Typee repeatedly makes assertions such as the one found at the end of chapter twenty-seven describing the missionaries restriction on Tahitian cultural practices: “in thus denationalizing the Tahitians, as it were, the missionaries were prompted by a sincere desire for good; but the effect has been lamentable... the Tahitians, who require more recreation than other people, have sunk into listlessness, or indulge in sensualities, a hundred times more pernicious, than all the games ever celebrated in the

Temple of Tanee” (183). Typee further discusses this listlessness in chapter forty-nine, where the effects become explicitly racialized. Speaking broadly on colonization in the Pacific, he writes,

every evidence of civilization among the South Sea Islands, directly pertains to foreigners; though the fact of such evidence existing at all, is usually urged as a proof of the elevated condition of the natives. Thus, at Honolulu, the capital of the Sandwich Islands, there are fine dwelling-houses, several hotels, and barber-shops, ay, even billiard rooms; but all these are owned and used, be it observed, by whites. There are tailors, and blacksmiths, and carpenters also; but not one of them is a native. (190)

However, immediately following this, he calls Pacific Islanders “an indolent people... calculated for a state of Nature” which renders them unfit for the “mechanical and agricultural employments of civilized life” (190). Thus, Typee states, “as a race, they can not otherwise long exist” (190). We see here Typee tip toeing around dominant racial ideologies, and not firmly settling on a particular stance. On the one hand he renders racial segregation as the root cause for a lack of adaptation to ‘civilized’ society. Then turns back and uses racial rhetoric to cast the blame back on Pacific Islanders.

By the end of the chapter, he settles on the “vast preponderance of evil” brought by general contact with Europeans, chiefly that of venereal disease, as the primary driver of depopulation. Here, we again see Typee struggling to express an implicit doubt in the very notion of Western progress and ‘civilization’ by relying on widely understood constructed racial schemas. Just as the figure of Lem Hardy provoked a reflexive doubt of the humanist subject, Typee’s reliance on racist presuppositions about the ‘indolence’ of Pacific Islanders directly points to the ‘civilization’ progress narrative as the fundamental issue in the colonial Pacific. Rather than expanding upon the racial segregation he describes in Honolulu, he turns to the understood racial codes of the mid

19th-century to illicit anticolonial sentiments. Of course, in these highly explicit discursive reflections on colonization, Melville is curating his discussion to a particular audience for a particular effect. Especially after the revisions imposed upon *Typee* and the vast difference in tone of these earlier works to his more unfiltered texts such as *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, it is difficult to say whether we are seeing Melville the intrepid thinker exploring his thoughts on the realities of the Pacific, or a more political Melville making sacrifices in form and content to drive home a message. I would suggest it is the later.²⁰

The second and last minor reference to tattooing after Hiva Oa occurs in the penultimate chapter. Trying to gain an audience with the Queen, Typee befriends the Marquesan Marbonna, “who officiated as nurse to [the Queen’s] children” (307). Having been carried to Tahiti by way of a French whaler, he was not subject to the strict tattooing restriction in Tahiti. As such “Marbonna’s face, tattooed as it was in the ornate style of his tribe, was as good a picture book to these young Pomarees” (307). Though the reference is very brief, the character Marbonna highlights the concept of cultural capital: an idea James Carr alludes to in his study of musical cultural exchange aboard Euromerican ships. Echoing Carr, I use cultural capital to explain the relational currency derived from intercultural exchange, the ability to move through different cultural contexts (Carr 66). This concept appears in two different veins: Typee being able to speak some of the Marquesan language and recognizing the tattoos, and Marbonna himself embodying tattoo culture for the Queen’s children. For Typee, his experience in

²⁰ See NN “Historical note on the Text” in *Typee, Mardi, and Moby-Dick*. The NN editors demonstrate how *Typee* was heavily revised even before initial publication. *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* constitute the two projects in his early sea fiction where he explored writing on his own creative terms.

the Marquesas gives him access to Marbonna, who, as a foreigner himself, offers to help him because of the trans-cultural connection. For the Queen's purposes, the presence of a tattooed Islander in her court helps to maintain a tangible relationship to the Tahitian past. For her, Marbonna's tattoos also serve as an in the flesh picture of what a tattooed Islander body looks like. This gains him his position in the royal court. His tattoos become a way of counteracting "the influence of the English missionaries at Tahiti" which "has tended to so great a diminution of the regal dignity" (NN OM 306). Here, Marbonna's tattoos as cultural capital, for both Typee and the Queen, is predicated on their legibility.

Tattoos in *Omo* affirm Typee's role as ethnographer. In contrast to Tommo, Typee can supposedly 'read' their function. As Knopf reminds us, Typee, and thereby Melville, got the details wrong. In so doing, he reifies a colonial ethnographic viewpoint as he makes his anticolonial critique. In Lem Hardy and the laws against tattooing in Tahiti, Typee finds reason to deride the 'civilization' progress narrative. In his treatment of Hiva Oa tattoo culture, he finds a life affirming practice. However, these sentiments are built on cross-cultural tattoo legibility, a notion which Melville will lead us to explicitly reject in *Moby-Dick*. But even in *Omo*, Melville hints at the failure of ethnographic legibility. By properly assessing Marbonna's tattoos Typee elicits his help in gaining an audience in the Queen's court. But as we see at the end of the narrative, he is promptly thrown out without a word. Typee's supposed ethnographic authority, in the end, gets him nowhere. Thus, *Typee* and *Omo* do not stand in binary opposition in their treatment of tattoos, rather it seems Melville is leading us through different ways of navigating cross cultural contact through the lens of tattooing. In this way, Tommo and

Typee, one an object of fascination, the other ethnographer, in the end both fail to present a successful means of navigating cultural exchange. Both characters never find themselves on equal footing with island culture. Tommo is subject to Taipi authority; Typee maintains a colonial position of separation. However, what we see in Tommo and Typee, much as we found in Redburn and White-Jacket, are characters grappling with the asymmetrical structures of their world.

CHAPTER III
TATTOOED IDENTITY IN MELVILLE'S WATERY WORLD

There are two paramount reasons why I pair together *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* in this final chapter. The first is compositional. Parker explains that in *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville “had voyaged through the composition guided by his own experiences and his previous tellings of his story” but in *Mardi*, “he was seeking a new world, ‘the world of the mind’ (Parker 591). This was prompted by his belief that “only a romancer and poet could do justice to the matter of Polynesia” (590). What follows is his first plunge into a world of complete fiction. At times influenced by the demands of his publishers, and at times in spite of them, Melville composed *Mardi* with his own “dangerous theory of creativity – one which would lead him to the creation of at least one masterpiece of world literature but which would destroy his career” (591). *Mardi* failed, and Melville again turned to his personal experience to compose *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*.²¹ Then, as the story goes, while composing a whaling narrative after his own experiences in the fishery, Melville met Nathaniel Hawthorne, and decided again he must pursue his true literary urges.²² From a compositional perspective, *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* are his first two, mostly fictional, creatively rendered texts. Ironically, they are also the least ‘put together.’ The pressures of publication and his own personal challenges – financial, relational, creative etc. – are marked in these texts by their experiments, inconsistencies,

²¹ Stephen Olsen-Smith, the Melville scholar and curator of Melville’s Marginalia online, would affectionately refer to these texts as “potboilers” in a class he taught on Melville. They brought in the money but were somewhat stymied by the expectations of publication.

²² This is an oft remarked upon relationship. For in depth biographical analysis see *MD NN* “Historical Note on Text” or Hershel Parker’s Biography, chapter thirty-seven “Writing at Arrowhead.”

and sprawl; but they also show the fire of Melville's literary passion. In this sense, there is a palpable creative continuity.

This leads us to the second reason I group the texts together. Despite their inconsistencies, in *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, Melville develops some seminal artistic threads that define his life work. In these texts, he pursues a metaphysical definition of the world; and he pursues what it means to pursue that definition. In Taji and Ahab, we get our first portraits of monomaniacal truth seekers: characters who relentlessly seek to know the world, and who meet their demise because of it. On the topic of tattoos, there is also a striking consistency. In *Mardi*, tattoos present a symbolic context that illuminates the role of power in determining identity. Here, that power seems insurmountable. In *Moby-Dick*, we see a path forward: through tattoos, the novel shows that we must live on, despite such insurmountable determinism.

Mardi's Anatomy of Disembodiment

Mardi presents several challenges for this project. Unlike *Typee* and *Omoo*, which are grounded in real island geographies, and thus lend themselves to direct cultural analysis, the island geography in *Mardi* is entirely fictional. Moreover, islands are seemingly used as an allegorical device. Therefore, any cultural analysis of Melville's fictional archipelago returns to his metaphorically rendered ontological pursuits. That is to say, the ties between Melville's real experiences with Pacific Island cultures are twice removed in *Mardi*. Another challenge is the decidedly prolix quality of the text. In explaining *Mardi's* exclusion from *Melville's Anatomies*, Otter writes, "the verbosity in *Mardi* serves merely as self-display or pedantry or excess for the sake of excess, rather

than also serving as the object of analysis” (Otter 6). In page after page, the characters meander through dense philosophical debate. Perhaps only *Clarel* can rival *Mardi* in its insistent academic headiness. A third challenge is a body of scholarship somewhat insistent on highlighting the formal discontinuity in *Mardi*.²³ Michael Berthold summarizes this scholarly tradition around the question of “the books seeming formlessness” and a “desire to find some centralizing design for the novel” (Berthold 16). Otter argues the “shapelessness” – the seemingly discontinuous spatial and corporeal elements of the text – “renders it a less revealing work” compared to where it leads: “*Mardi* seems to have energized [Melville’s] rhetoric and intellect and enabled the palpable achievements of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*” (Otter 7). John Evelev locates the “novel’s sprawling, digressive, fragmentary form” in the shifting tides of Melville’s “distinctly professional vision” toward authorship. This scholarly emphasis makes any definitive claims regarding the broad function of the text challenging at best, or worse, prescriptive. Yet, as Berthold argues, “geographical guides are still needed for negotiating the novel’s abundances and sprawl” (Berthold 16).

With these difficulties in mind, I find it necessary to ground my approach to tattoos, culture, and embodiments in a broader reading of *Mardi* as a cohesive allegorical novel. The narrative chronicles the adventures of Taji, who abandons a whaler bound for the arctic in one of its whale boats. Trying to find land, alongside his two companions Jarl and Samoa, they encounter a procession of canoes and ‘rescue’ Yillah, an enigmatic and somewhat mythic woman, from being sacrificed. Then coming ashore on the fictional Mardian archipelago, Yillah goes missing. Together with a new train of companions,

²³ Some traditional scholarship sees the text as three separate books in one: south sea adventure, satirical travelogue, and allegory. See NN edition “Historical Note on the Text.”

including King Media, Babbalanja the philosopher, Mohi the historian, and Yoomy the poet, they travel from island to island in search of Yillah. Each island they touch upon has unique cultures and circumstances that prompt the travelers into high minded discussion. In the end, Taji fails to locate Yillah and leaves his companions behind to continue the pursuit into an unknown ocean. At times, especially toward the latter half of Taji's island hopping, the allegorical component of the narrative is quite discernable. Yet at other times, especially before reaching Mardi, it would be hard to claim any formal allegorical components. Yet, there are specific through lines that suggests narrative congruity. J. Michael Sears finds circular imagery throughout the text as one means of establishing a formal continuity that leads to

Neoplatonic implications: there is an inner drive to keep circling and striving in one's sphere of existence, an attempt to advance from one sphere of existence to the next, a hunger to unite with and understand the almost unobtainable One, Truth. When Taji's voyage is closely traced, it becomes evident that the narrator has not 'chartless voyaged' (p. 556); in fact, his journey from the opening chapter to the closing scene meticulously conforms to an accurately charted path. (Sears 412-413)

In a similar vein, I read *Mardi* as a continuously charted path, born out by allegory. Sears invocation of Neoplatonism is useful, but somewhat restrictive in that it implies boundaries to the philosophical drive of the text. Rather, we might see *Mardi* as its own textual philosophy: the book itself seeks to define a cohesive ontology. My analysis converges with Julie Johnson, who argues that "Melville depicts this inward quest in *Mardi* by externalizing it in the manner of allegory: the internal state of the quester is projected upon persons and objects, creating an external metaphoric structure" (Johnson

221). Thus, Taji's voyage becomes a hunt for existential understanding, for 'Truth,' allegorically rendered in his hunt for Yillah.²⁴

To narrow in on tattoos, I impose a few boundaries on the somewhat unbounded claim that *Mardi* functions as allegorical pursuit of a meaningful textual philosophy. Rather than trying to comprehensively assess the ways in which Melville deploys allegory, I focus on the role of embodiment, cultural exchange, and interrelation in developing the metaphysical probing. In doing so, following Otter, (despite his explicit exclusion of *Mardi*) I find an 'anatomy' within the text. Otter defines Melville's anatomies as "the material analyses of consciousness" (Otter 5). Drawing on Northrop Frye and Mikhail Bakhtin, he takes anatomies as a "heterogeneous, omnivorous, encyclopedic, rhetorically experimental, stylistically dense form, in which linguistic features—diction, syntax, metaphor—become the vehicle for intellectual inquiry... these features express orientations toward society, time, nation, and tradition that are laid bare in the literary anatomy" (5). Several questions arise: what kind of anatomy is present in the text? What role does the spatial and corporeal elements of the narrative play in creating its philosophies? And how should we read them? Otter does not see a sustained anatomy in *Mardi* worth analysis: "*Mardi* treats its bodies thematically rather than substantially" and the "corporeal conceits and political allegory are located in different chapters... [Melville] does not provide the kind of sustained performative critique found in his most telling anatomies" (6). For Otter, the separation between embodiment and rhetoric delimits the textual anatomies. Yet in contrast, I see this separation as sustained

²⁴ Andrew Hadfield portrays *Mardi* as shaped by Melville's reading of Edmund Spenser. Yet, he also qualifies *Mardi* as a steppingstone to *Moby-Dick*, which he calls "less indebted to his literary ancestors" (Hadfield 1208). Though Hadfield convincingly demonstrates Melville's reliance on Spenserian allegory, I read *Mardi*'s allegory on its own terms.

throughout the novel. By sustaining a separation between body and mind, a separation which begs to be dissolved within the rhetorical wanderings of the characters, I argue Melville *is* providing a sustained performative critique: something we might call the anatomy of disembodiment. In a broad sense, the characters traverse the history and geography of the allegorical Mardian archipelago, encountering injustice, suffering, hierarchy, power, and turn it all into high-minded discourse. Only in encountering the utopian island of Serenia are the characters prompted to live their ideals. Thus, disembodied rhetoric is repeatedly performed throughout the narrative. Below I flesh out how *Mardi* displays a disembodied anatomy through the lens of allegory and tattoos.

Early in the novel, Taji lays out a kind of guide for approaching the allegorical function of space and bodies in the text. He sets up an ethic of common humanity, one which is informed by the cosmopolitan mixing of the ship's forecabin. In chapter three, when describing Jarl, he creates a dichotomy between familiar American nationalist rhetoric and a global notion of unity. He begins by tethering Jarl – a white career sailor from the Scottish Skye Isle, ethnically portrayed as Scandinavian – to a common European ancestral heritage. In tracing the genealogy of the term “miscegenation,” Elise Lemire finds 19th-century “waves of anxiety about inter-racial sex and marriage” that create biologized white supremacy and “mystify the constructed nature of whiteness” (Lemire 5). These constructions pair a ‘democratic’ idea of white racial ancestry with national social reproduction, seeing the Anglo European blood as a kind of racial nobility. Thus, in Taji’s initial description of Jarl, Melville sets up the biologized construction of racial and national belonging. However, Taji goes on to state, “all generations are blended: and heaven and earth are of one kin: the hierarchies of seraphs

in the uttermost skies; the thrones and principalities in the zodiac; the shades that roam throughout space; the nations and families, flocks and folds of the earth; one and all, brothers in essence... All things form one whole” (NN *M* 12). Here, global unity, a democratization of the world, is achieved through the dissolution of constructed and biologized racial hierarchies.

The notion of unity becomes explicitly racialized later in the paragraph; Taji states, “Away with your stones and grimaces. The New Zealander’s tattooing is not a prodigy; nor the Chinaman’s way an enigma. No custom is strange; no creed is absurd; no foe, but who will in the end prove a friend” (12-13). By calling attention to the “New Zealander’s tattooing” and the “Chinaman’s way,” Melville is again deploying overtly racist discourse – separation between the white Euromerican self and racialized ‘other’ – to subvert it’s underpinning, and gesture toward a transcendent democratic ideal.²⁵ In this way, Melville seems to be grasping toward what Brigitte Fielder describes as the relativity of race: “formed through genealogies of racial inheritance, relations of racialized domesticity, and in larger structures of racial belonging” (Fielder 4). In recognizing race as relative, “produced—and reproduced—in relation,” Melville sets up cosmopolitan interrelation as a means of global democratization (4). Describing Jarl’s manner of speech in the next paragraph, Taji locates a path toward transcendent unity and a dissolution of racial hierarchies through the hybrid language of the ship. “Long companionship with seamen of all tribes: Manilla-men, Anglo-Saxons, Cholos, Lascars, and Danes, wear away in good time all mother-tongue stammerings. You sink your clan;

²⁵ Here, I echo Knopf who argues “tattoos serve as an example of what should not be seen as exotic ‘otherness’; though by using a tattooing culture in this mode, the text cements ‘otherness’ while attempting to deconstruct it” (Knopf 143).

down goes your nation; you speak a world's language, jovially jabbering in the *Lingua-Franca of the forecastle*" (NN *M* 13). Through 'melting-pot' creolization of language aboard, unity is achieved by relinquishing national and racial ties to join a new global community conceived in the ship.

In this episode, I locate the major allegorical function of the spatial and the corporeal as they relate to Taji's metaphysical search for meaning. Coded here in the sprawling description of Jarl is perhaps one of the most important philosophical questions of the book: does inter-racial understanding – global cosmopolitan relation – facilitate transcendent unity? This might be asked another way: is the promise of American pluralism utopian? Similarly, Knopf finds in this episode "a motto that could be seen as guiding the plot's quest—equality of all human beings" (Knopf 143). This question is answered in the final chapters of the novel through the utopian island of Serenia. However, before we get there, Taji travels from island to island, encountering the allegorical representations of various epochs in human history: past, present, and future. These allegorical associations are physically rendered through the Mardian island spaces and Mardian bodies. Thus, Taji metaphorically travels through world history, spatially and temporally, in his hunt for Yillah (Truth) via the embodied encounters of the Mardian archipelago. The spatial and corporeal encounters of the narrative undergird the allegorical philosophical pursuit. Yet, as previously mentioned, there is a disembodied separation between interrelation and metaphysical meaning making. This separation introduces a tension between discourse and experience which highlights the necessity of the physical and corporeal encounter. Put simply, interrelation is not a theory to be discussed, but a practice to be embodied. As Babbalanja argues, "truth is in things, and

not in words: truth is voiceless... things visible are but conceits of the eye: things imaginative, conceits of the fancy. If duped by one, we are equally duped by the other” (NN *M* 283-284).

How do these dense allegorical complexities take shape? I have made repeated reference to the various Mardian islands functioning as allegorical representations of human history. I argue Melville’s allegorical geography can be viewed through the concept of ‘archipelagic thinking.’ In *Contemporary Archipelagic Thinking* Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Michelle Stephens write

the archipelago calls for a meaning-making and rearticulation that responds to human experiences traversing space and time. Archipelagoes happen, congeal, take place... They are painful and generative, implicated in native cosmologies or cosmo-visions, or assembled as part of imperial/colonial undertakings. They can refer to multidimensional, focal, spatial forms of thinking that emerge from concrete relationships with inhabited spaces. But, as Walcott suggests, they also require a loving reassembling that signifies beyond the dehumanizing centripetal forces of globalization. (Martínez-San Miguel and Stephens 3)

Before stealing away from the whaler on course to the arctic, Taji sees the Pacific as a harbor in of itself: “once within the Tropics, the bold sailor who has a mind to quit his ship round Cape Horn, waits not for port. He regards that ocean as one mighty harbor” (NN *M* 7). Though the statement is brief and seemingly only used as a means of lending validity to the otherwise unrealistic attempt of quitting the ship while at sea, the vision of the Pacific as harbor calls attention to an archipelagic mode. The ocean is “rearticulated” as a harbor, “implicated” by “imperial/colonial undertaking” (Martínez-San Miguel and Stephens 3). This theme is further developed in the general allegorical form of his travel throughout Mardi. Geographically, Mardi is an archipelago consisting of several interconnected but independently ruled islands. However, as Taji travels between islands in search of Yillah, each island forms an allegory for a country, a philosophy, a religion,

and the like. In other words, through Taji's travels, Melville creates a romp through human history, both spatially, and, as the philosophical conversations take place among his companions, theoretically. He locates that allegorical world in an island chain: casting geo-spatial history as an archipelago. Thus, Melville's allegory displays the "multidimensional, focal, spatial forms of thinking that emerge from concrete relationships with inhabited spaces" (3). However, the disembodied anatomy of the characters' discourse waylays the "loving reassembling that signifies beyond the dehumanizing centripetal forces of globalization" (3). Thus, Taji's travels become an archipelagic experience, but that experience is cannibalized by disembodied discussion: enacting the violence of colonial observation through metaphysical musing.²⁶

The conflictual tides of archipelagic imaginaries and Western thought, interrelation and disembodied metaphysical discourse all lead to the final sequence of events in the narrative. The penultimate island of Serenia offers a utopian vision for a transcendent unified humanity. They are guided by the principles of love. They are joined in common purpose. The constructed hierarchies of global power (here, mainly class and race) are dissolved. These principles are also strictly embodied: speaking on Serenia's principles the unnamed old man, who welcomed the voyagers, states "we care not for men's words; we look for creeds in actions; which are the truthful symbols of the things within" (NN *M* 626). Importantly, Babbalanja, the travelers' resident philosopher, finds perfection in this community and revokes his inner devil to become a member.²⁷ He

²⁶ Knopf, echoing Gesa Mackenthun, sees Taji's voyage as both enacting and revealing the "ills of colonialism" (Knopf 142).

²⁷ His inner devil is best described as his impetus for philosophical discourse: a kind of personified devil's advocate. Or, to use more Melvillian terms, his inner devil is the monomaniacal drive that plunges the self into metaphysical inquiry.

rejects disembodied discourse to embody the utopian ideal. Babbalanja concedes “I now poses all which may be had of what I sought in Mardi... Taji! For Yillah thou wilt hunt in vain; she is a phantom that but mocks thee” (637). For Babbalanja, what he sought through discourse, he finds “within our hearts” (637). Thus, seemingly the answer to the guiding question of interrelation and common humanity staged at the beginning of the narrative is, after traveling the whole world and its history (Mardi), the party finally arrives at a satisfactory conclusion: a worldly egalitarian paradise; only through embodying, rather than debating, these ideals can the utopian paradise manifest.

Taji does not accept the utopian Serenia or relinquish his hunt for Yillah and ventures on to Hautia’s island Flozella (perhaps an allegory for the darker iniquity of human nature).²⁸ Thus, the hunt for Yillah (truth) takes on a tragic quality. He needs rescuing from Flozella; then having regained Serenia he suicidally departs yet again for an “endless sea” (654). In portraying Taji’s voyage as a search for existential meaning, the ending lends itself to divergent interpretations. As Johnson points out, Taji can be seen as “heroic or demonic or simply foolish” (Johnson 220). Through all the crosscurrents of allegory it is difficult to glimpse a didactic portrait of Taji. Instead, what would it mean to think, feel, and read Taji’s voyage alongside Melville? Rather than find a conclusive answer to the allegorical hunt for meaning, how might we understand Melville’s treatment of embodiment, interrelation, and cultural difference as they ultimately fail to give Taji a satisfactory conclusion? And of course, returning to the principal impetus of this study, what does all this have to do with tattoos? Here, Taji’s

²⁸ Though not within the scope of this project, the explicitly gendered dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ warrants further analysis. Here, Hautia’s island (allegorical evil, but equally important for seeking ‘Truth’) is overtly feminized. Some older scholarship casts Hautia and Flozella in Jungian terms as the archetypal Great Mother. See Julie Johnson’s “Taji’s Quest in Melville’s Mardi.”

decision to forsake Serenia leads us back to how Melville constructed the dialectic of an embodied utopian ideal and the disembodied anatomy of discourse. I argue that Taji's monomaniacal pursuit into an "endless sea" demonstrates how the embodied democratization of the island (and Melville's portrait of the creolized forecastle from the beginning of the narrative) fails to consider how power essentializes and modulates culture. By examining tattoos in *Mardi*, we see Melville depicting the structures of power that determine identity, structures that ultimately undermine a cosmopolitan utopian ideal.

Knopf's section on *Mardi* (insofar as I can tell) is the only prolonged treatment of tattooing in the text. Building from her engagement with Melville's first two books, she argues "If [tattooing] was still a vehicle to cement cultural dichotomies and Euro-American cultural superiority in *Typee* and *Omoo*, the tattoo now operates as a vehicle to satirize, frustrate, and undermine these" (Knopf 146). Knopf arrives here by reading tattooing as "appropriated from colonized and 'othered' cultures, copying Western texts onto Western people" (146). As the first two sections have demonstrated, the cultural phenomenon of Euromerican tattooing was not a unilateral appropriation of Pacific tattoo culture, *Mardi* does not constitute Melville's first engagement with marked Euromerican bodies,²⁹ and tattooing already signified a destabilized engagement with Western colonial perceptions in Melville's fiction. Though her engagement with specific tattoo references proves highly insightful, I read Knopf's overarching conclusion as informed by the historiographic echoes of the Cook myth that have pervaded into contemporary tattoo scholarship. In contrast, tattoos in *Mardi* go beyond their role "as an important part of

²⁹ I concede, the treatment of the Euromerican marked body in *Typee* and *Omoo* is very brief, but still, it is there.

Polynesian identity,” a notion I argued was problematically established by Typee’s ethnography in *Omoa*, and toward a universalized symbol of inscriptions of power that modulate identity formation (144). Put simply, in line with the allegorical function of the novel, tattoos take on metaphysical meaning that interrogate the nature of cultural contact and exchange.

The shift from tattoos as symbols of ‘real’ cultural identity toward a metaphoric symbol is engendered by the three descriptions of tattoos that occur prior to arriving in Mardi. In each of these references, tattooing is portrayed as a matter-of-fact cultural phenomenon. The first is Samoa’s tattoos which are described as “embracing but a vertical half of his person, from crown to sole; the other side being free from the slightest stain. Thus clapped together, as it were, he looked like a union of the unmatched moieties of two distinct beings; and you fancy was lost in conjecturing, where roamed the absent ones” (NN *M* 99). Taji’s comments are neither derisive nor seek to render the marks ethnographically legible. In this way, they can be seen as simply imagistic symbols that ground the narrative in a ‘real’ Pacific setting. Similarly, Knopf notes that these tattoos may “may refer to a Marquesan style where half the body of a warrior was tattooed in solid black” (Knopf 144). The next reference is a description of the tattooed men carrying Yillah aboard their canoe. The priest Aleema was “covered all over with hieroglyphical devices” and the men in his company were “all tattooed after this pattern: two broad cross-stripes on the chest and back, reaching down to the waist, like a foot-soldier’s harness” and “Marked, here and there, after the style of Tahiti, with little round figures in blue, dotted in the middle with a spot of vermillion, their brawny brown thighs looked not unlike the gallant hams of Westphalia, spotted with the red dust of Cayenne” (NN *M*

130). Again, the straightforward rendition of tattoos reflects a ‘real’ Pacific setting. However, the direct reference to Tahiti signals an intriguing shift away from Melville’s lived experience of the colonial Pacific. As demonstrated in *Omoa*, Tahitian tattoo culture was strictly regulated, thus Typee never made note of it. By calling the tattoos “after the style of Tahiti” Taji subtly enters the realm of fictional portrayal, separate from Melville’s experiences in the Pacific. Taken together, these two pre-Mardian Polynesian tattoo references tether the narrative to a ‘real’ Pacific context, while signaling a shift toward tattoos functioning as fictional symbolism.

Along similar lines Taji describes the tattoo on Jarl’s forearm, which ties his character to a tangible Euromerican maritime culture. The tattoo is described as “a characteristic device upon the arm of the wonderful mariner – our savoir on the cross, in blue; with the crown of thorns, and three drops of blood in vermilion, falling one by one from each hand and foot” (147). Through this religious mark, Knopf sees Jarl as “a representative of Christian religion and as a stand-in for Christ (after all, Jarl dies in Taji’s stead and devotedly sacrifices himself for Taji’s adventures)” (Knopf 142). Here, Knopf’s insights fit within my analysis from the previous chapter which rendered Euromerican tattoos as marks of death and religious anxieties. Thus, Jarl represents an important figure that builds from the Egyptian symbolism of the unnamed American sailor in *Typee* and moves toward the relationship between religion, seafaring labor exploitation, and death found in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*. However, Knopf sees Jarl’s tattoos as a “diametric turn... in the presentation of Euro-American tattooed sailors” (142). She notes “missionary activities throughout Polynesia must have led to incorporating the Christ figure into the body of Polynesian tattoo designs” (142). Seeing

Euromerican maritime tattooing as born out of colonial coercion and appropriation, she goes on to assert that “Melville only in *Mardi* starts crediting these cross-cultural engagements, having in *Typee* and *Omoa* still declared tattooed sailors as poor creatures irretrievably lost to Western society” (143). Here, the biases that have inflected Euromerican tattoo scholarship lead Knopf’s analysis astray. As seen in my first chapter, the genealogy of Euromerican tattooing points toward pilgrimage tattoos as one foundational aspect of the maritime practice. Moreover, as seen in *White-Jacket*, Melville knew that sailors had unique reasons such as burial rights for acquiring Christian tattoos, separate from Missionary activity, and in keeping with the tradition of pilgrimage tattoos.³⁰ The interaction between the Queen and sailor in *Typee* shows that Melville has already engaged cross-cultural tattoo encounters as two disparate body marking cultures. Thus, Jarl’s tattoo does not demonstrate a diametric turn for Melville but fits snugly within his treatment of the Euromerican marked body: symbolizing religious anxieties, labor exploitation, and death.

Jarl’s tattoo also serves a second subtle metaphysical function. Yillah is fascinated by the tattoo. Although at this point in the narrative the association between the search for Yillah and the search for truth has not been fully established, applying these nascent allegorical association demonstrates the metaphysical significance of tattooing in *Mardi*. Yillah “made overtures to the Skyeman, concerning the possession of his picture in her own proper right” (NN *M* 147). Put in allegorical terms, truth wants to be tattooed. Yillah’s desire to be marked can be read in several ways. Firstly, it draws attention to

³⁰ Though it is possible that Melville did not know the historical origins of maritime tattooing when writing his early sea-fiction, in *Clarel* he makes specific reference to pilgrimage tattoos as precursors to maritime tattoo culture when discussing Agath’s forearm crucifixion tattoo. See NN *CL* 4.2.122-124. This will be further analyzed in the Coda to this project.

race. Her phenotypical whiteness is one of the primary features which prompts Taji to kill the priest Aleema and steal her away. As a symbolic function, her whiteness builds off the importance of the color in *Typee* as a perceived symbol of status, beauty, and sacredness, and moves toward the relationship between whiteness and disaster in *White-Jacket*³¹ and the near omnipresent “obsession with whiteness in *Moby-Dick*” (Hadfield 1212).³² Thus, Yillah’s allegorical function as ‘truth’ relates to her whiteness in varied and contested ways, both reinforcing a link between the mutability of racial whiteness, and an inchoate engagement with the psychological terror of the color. In a mainstream 19th-century nationalist vision, the tattoo signifies a fixed mark: as a mark of the ‘other’ on non-white bodies and (if not explicitly racialized) a mark of labor on white male bodies. In this way, we might read the tattoo encounter as a desire to fix truth against a supposed mutability – attempting to shed the varied associations of whiteness (a positive antithesis to Tommo’s fear of being tattooed). This reading is born out later in the narrative when Babbalanja makes the case that consciousness and the body are separate: “I live while consciousness is not mine” (NN *M* 458). He goes onto argue that consciousness is a metahuman phenomenon, existing in various places including the islands themselves. The discourse shifts to how this wider notion of consciousness relates to subjectivity. Babbalanja states, “the sum of my inconsistencies makes up my consistency. And to be consistent to one’s self, is often to be inconsistent to Mardi. Common consistency implies unchangeableness; but much of the wisdom here below

³¹ The whiteness of his jacket serves as a repeated symbol of the narrator’s tribulations. In chapter twenty-nine the connection borders on racialization where the visibility of the jacket amidst the tarred uniforms of the other sailors signals him out for labor. It becomes a seeming reversal of the mutability of racial whiteness.

³² From the Melville revival onward, critics have placed significant emphasis on the metaphoric role of whiteness in *Moby-Dick* and Melville’s fiction more broadly. See Khalil Husni’s “The Whiteness of the Whale: A Survey of Interpretations.”

lives in a state of transition” (459). Comparing this discourse to the tattoo encounter between Yillah and Jarl, we see that by transferring the tattoo to her arm, truth would take on an ‘unchangeable’ identity. Yet, truth, or in Babbalanja’s words, “wisdom... lives in a state of transition.” Thus, the tattoo cannot be transferred and therefore, problematically, truth remains mutable by remaining white.

The tattoo encounter between Jarl and Yillah can also be read through the lens of bodily inscription. Seeing Jarl’s tattoo as a ‘liminal humanist mark’ might symbolically ground Taji’s metaphysical hunt for meaning in the specific labor conditions of seafarers, not unlike how many critics have approached the allegorical hunt for the whale in *Moby-Dick*. Or more broadly, tattooing as a cultural symbol could here simply locate truth as inscribed on the body. This association offers the body as a means of entry into metaphysical inquiry. Again, this reading is born out later in the text. When Media is chastising one of the canoe paddlers for bursting out into laughter, Babbalanja comes to his defense by offering that “this man’s body laughs; not the man himself” (504). He goes on to tell the king that “Our souls belong to our bodies, not our bodies to our souls” and “without bodies, we must be something else than we essentially are” (505). Locating the body as an arbiter of the soul places it at the locus of metaphysical thought. Thus, the tattoo as bodily inscription becomes an important mark because it has the capacity to reveal, modify, or is otherwise wrapped up in philosophical pursuit. Contrastingly, this reading also engages the anatomy of disembodiment raised earlier in the section. Though Babbalanja seems to give deference to the body, following the above discussion of identity and consciousness, there is an implicit separation between body and soul. It then follows, within the anatomy of disembodiment, that metaphysical truth would not be

modified by bodily inscription. Put simply, the implied separation between body and soul corroborates the anatomy of disembodiment and therefore bodily inscription does not impact the nature of internal truth. This begs the question: do tattoos mark the soul?

In perhaps one of the most oracular passages in *Mardi*, and there are a few of those to be sure, Melville gives us an answer. In a discussion on the value of teeth in *Mardi*, Taji references how “in some countries, teeth are stricken out under the sway of [grief]. To a very great extent, this was once practiced in the Hawaiian Islands, ere idol and altar went down” (206). Taji supposes how many great teeth were given at “the famous obsequies of their royal old generalissimo, Tammahammaha” (206). This is a reference to the death of Kamehameha I in 1819. Then in an unexpected turn, Taji states

Terrific shade of tattooed Tammahammaha! If, from a vile dragon’s molars, rose mailed men, what heroes shall spring from the cannibal canines once pertaining to warriors themselves! – Am I the witch Endor, that I conjure up this ghost? Or, King Saul, that I so quake at the sight? For, lo! roundabout me Tammahammaha’s tattooing expands, till all the sky seems a tiger’s skin. But now, the spotted phantom sweeps by; as a man-of-war’s main-sail, cloud-like, blown far to leeward in a gale. Banquo down, we return. (206)

First, and most relevant, Kamehameha I’s soul/ghost is tattooed, which quite directly answers the question of separation of body and soul: the disembodied anatomy is a false pretense. Metaphysical truth is impacted by embodied experience and shapes the internal self. Thus, within the novel’s epistemological framework, metaphysical truth is a real and graspable phenomenon that ‘pricks’ the ephemeral consciousness. Yet, much as Kamehameha’s tattooed specter “sweeps by,” truth is elusive and fleeting and only leaves behind an inscription on the self.³³

³³ In the essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses” Melville writes, “Truth is forced to fly like a sacred white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself” (Manuscripts and Archives Division). This poetic simile corroborates the idea that truth is a real, objective, graspable phenomenon, but is also barely glimpsable. Also, note the connection to whiteness.

Melville's treatment of Kamehameha I's ghost can also be read as a symbolic critique of colonialism. The association between Kamehameha I and Shakespeare's Banquo is somewhat unclear, insofar as Kamehameha's descendants maintained the throne when Melville lived in Hawaii. Here, I read Banquo as the foil to Macbeth, his ghost reminding Macbeth of the witches' prophecy that his descendant will not hold the crown. Melville was present for the temporary cessation of Hawaiian sovereignty to the British crown in 1843 due to the actions of George Paulet (Parker 240). Thus, the ghost of Kamehameha I as Banquo could signal a revival of pre-colonial Hawaiian monarchical rule: a rightful restoration of Hawaiian sovereignty. Taji's own position in the vision of Kamehameha I's ghost is deliberately unclear: he asks if he is "the witch Endor" or "King Saul." Thus, read through biblical symbolism, he asks if he brings about the prophecy of Kamehameha I's ghost as rightful restorer of Hawaiian sovereignty (witch Endor), or if he is the very figure who would be disposed by Kamehameha I's ghost (King Saul). Thus, Melville seems to be interrogating his own subjectivity as white observer and traveler whose writing reflects anticolonial sentiments: a figure that both reifies and counteracts colonial aspirations.

Though referenced while in Mardi, Kamehameha I's tattoos are the last 'real' allusion to Pacific or Euromerican maritime tattoo culture. As Taji travels through Mardi, his encounters with fictionalized tattooing serve allegorical purposes. Typically, the tattoos are minor cultural symbols that give imagistic validity to the allegorical tethers between islands and epochs in human history. Examples of this include when Taji realizes that the tattooing of an idle in the temple of Odo match Media's tattooing exactly, suggesting that Media himself was revered as a god; the image of the boars tusks

carved into the paddles and tattooed on the chests of Media's canoe paddlers; the arrangement of coral in the House of Afternoon that depicts the tattooing of deceased royals; Donjalolo's thirty wives who are tattooed on their arm to signify the corresponding day of the month they spend in his company; the slain prophet from the chronicles of Maramma identified by his tattoos; the exiled Fofi from King Piko's island who was disguised by tattooing himself all over; the picture of Bardianna's tattooing to sign his will. On this last example, Knopf states Bardianna's will resembles "the Polynesian custom of copying face-*moko* on legal documents" (Knopf 146). However, she concludes that "The text now writes tattoos on Euro-American bodies after Polynesian fashion, including a facial tattoo functioning as a signature" (146).

Throughout *Mardi*, Melville is very explicit with his racialization of white Euromerican bodies. Jarl's racial background is commented on extensively. Taji's whiteness is perceived as that of a demi-god. Yillah's whiteness is what draws Taji to her. And as I will later demonstrate, a fourth character is explicitly though subtly portrayed as phenotypically white. These four characters constitute the only white bodies in the narrative. By contrast, the Mardian people, including Bardianna, are ethnically portrayed as Pacific Islander. Thus, Bardianna's tattoo does not signify "tattoos on Euro-American bodies after Polynesian fashion" (146). Instead, the above list of tattoo references serves as artifacts of active fictional Mardian cultures. Though each unique instance seems somewhat minor in their own regard, taken as a whole, these references demonstrate the centrality of tattooing in creating an allegorical world rendered through the Mardian archipelago. Thus, by compiling several small and diverse references to tattoos, Melville seems to be locating the art as a seminal human practice that gets taken up in multiple

contexts across space and time; much like other seminal human functions – such as hospitality, religion, the function of the state, etc. – tattoos become a locus by which Melville allegorically interrogates the dynamics of culture.

The tattooing of King Bello most explicitly demonstrates the metaphysical function of tattoos in the narrative. Their role as allegorical markers of Mardian cultures is expanded to interrogate the role of power and the state in identity formation. King Bello, the sovereign of Dominora, “functions as an allegory to the British Empire, exploring, charting, and conquering much of Mardi’s world” (Knopf 144). Before being introduced to Bello, Taji lists various other Mardian Kings that stand in for the constellation of European monarchs in the mid 19th-century. Though brief, a few of these Kings are described by their tattoos as a means of portraying their national character. He describes the King of Franko (France) as “finical in his tattooing;” the King of Ibeereea (Spain) with “his limbs all over marks of stakes and crosses;” “the priest king of Vatikanna [the pope]; his chest marked over with antique tattooings” (NN *M* 467). These brief descriptions, which directly tether national character to tattooing, function as a prelude to King Bello. Taji describes the allegorical English King’s tattooing in depth:

The broad chest of Bello was the chart of Mardi. Tattooed in sea-blue were all the groups and clusters of the Archipelago; and every time he breathed, rose and fell the isles, as by a tide: Dominora full upon his heart. His sturdy thighs were his triumphal arch; wheron in numerous medallions, crests, and shields, were blazoned all his victories by sea and land. His strong right arm was Dominora’s scroll of Fame, where all her heroes saw their names recorded. – An endless roll! Our chronicler avouched, that on the sole of Bello’s dexter foot was stamped the crest of Franko’s king, his hereditary foe. “Thus, thus,” cried Bello, stamping, “thus I hourly crush him.” (476)

Each of these tattoos are explicit symbols of English empire. Knopf writes, the tattoos become “a bodily metaphor for both the empire’s imperial identity and the assumed right

and authority to colonial domination” (Knopf 145).³⁴ This “bodily metaphor” proves seminal in navigating the faulty disembodied anatomy amid the wider allegorical project of the novel.

Together with the allegorical European kings, tattoos become an embodied marker of national identity transposed onto the body of Bello. As previously demonstrated, one of the main tensions of the allegorical hunt for meaning is the disembodied anatomy, where discourse is kept separate from experience. In the utopian Serenia, all the surviving characters, save Taji, reconcile this tension by embodying a transcendent ideal of democratization and unity. Yet, Taji suicidally sails on. In Bello’s metaphoric embodiment of national character, I argue Melville locates the underlying anxiety that leads Taji to continue beyond utopia: the inescapability of power in defining identity. Through an embodied cultural symbol, Bello’s body becomes the site of cultural expression which is defined by the character of the state. In other words, systems of power define the expression of culture by reinforcing a national identity. Here, Melville is most attuned to the ways in which identity is formed through the (re)production of national belonging, deploying tattoos as a symbol akin to what we might now see as biopolitics.³⁵ Bello’s tattoos thwart the transcendent notion of an embodied self-realization through democratic unity; instead, they prefigure identity as a contested space of power seeking to recreate national belonging. Thus, the democratic utopian ideal in *Mardi*, conceived through cosmopolitan interrelation (of Serenia and the forecastle), something like the promise of American pluralism, does not transcend systems of power

³⁴ She goes on to argue “In light of Melville’s satirical treatment of Bello... Melville mocks the idea of putting imperialist claims in ‘writing’ and marking them on skin as if to thus enhance their legality” (Knopf 145).

³⁵ As demonstrated in Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*.

that control identity formation. Through Bello's tattoo's we feel Melville rail against these deterministic forces.

Melville ties together tattoos, embodiment, determined identity, power, and a dissolution of the transcendent democratic ideal in his treatment of Vivenza, an allegory for the United States, and his commentary on slavery. Though not as prominent as King Bello's tattooing, the chiefs of the temple of freedom (the US government) are described as "presenting strange contrasts in their style of tattooing" (NN *M* 515). This quote is reminiscent of the previous descriptions of the contrasting tattoos of the allegorical European Kings. Thus, the contrast in tattooing delineates the various identities of the US States. Given the political context in which *Mardi* was written (1849) and given Melville's not-so-allegorical engagement with slavery, which I briefly describe below, the most explicit difference that the tattoos ought to represent is the various views on that institution. In other words, Melville sets up the contrasting styles of tattooing as an allegorical representation of the divergent ideologies regarding slavery in mid 19th-century America. However, he instead chooses to dissolve the allegory and use race itself as the distinction.

After visiting the temple of freedom, the travelers come across a crowd gathered around an anonymous letter that had mysteriously appeared affixed to a palm tree. The letter is a lengthy treatise that points out the clear paradox of a free republic that legalizes enslavement. The treatise, spanning five pages, includes lines such as: "he who hated oppressors, is become an oppressor himself"; "civilization has not ever been the brother of equality"; "your temple of freedom was the handiwork of slaves" (526-8). The letter is deplored by the crowd and torn to shreds. The travelers then discuss who could have

written it but come to no conclusion. Though Melville does not reveal the author, the conversation about its origin seems to hint toward Taji, or, if not him as narrator, then reflexively points to Melville himself. The travelers journey to the “Extreme South of Vivenza” and encounter the institution of slavery firsthand. Tattoos are replaced by phenotypical racial identifiers to create the identities of the enslaved (who are referred to as the tribe of Hamo) and their southern enslavers.³⁶ Thus, the fictionalized critique of national power determining identity, rendered through Bello’s tattoos, is transformed into a more direct critique of 19th-century racial constructions.

Describing the scene of enslavement in the Extreme South of Vivenza, Taji states, “hundreds of collared men were toiling in trenches, filled with the taro plant; a root most flourishing in the soul. Standing grimly over these, were men unlike them; armed with long thongs, which descended upon the toilers, and made wounds” (532). He sets up a clear distinction of appearance between the enslavers and the enslaved. He goes on to describe Nulli, one of the enslavers, as “a cadaverous, ghost-like man; with a low ridge of forehead; hair, steel-gray; and wondrous eyes; – bright, nimble, as the twin Corposant balls, playing about the ends of ships’ royal-yards in gales” (532). Echoing a longer tradition, Steven Olsen-Smith and Joshua Preminger argue that “Melville provided for John C. Calhoun in the character of the heartless overseer, Nulli” (Olsen-Smith and Preminger 56). I argue that Nulli as allegorical portrait of John C. Calhoun, a staunch mid-century proponent of slavery, is explicitly racialized as white in order make an explicit link between the role of power in identity formation and US racial constructions. The adjectives “cadaverous” and “ghost-like” point toward the man being phenotypically

³⁶ Of course, calling the enslaved ‘Tribe of Hamo’ is an overt signal that we should understand them as African, though Melville does not racialize them through direct description of their bodies.

understood as white, though these descriptions may describe his comportment rather than his appearance. More directly, the allusion to “Corposant balls” to describe the man’s eyes are a better sign of his racialization. Corposant is another term for St. Elmo’s fire, a rare blue electrical phenomenon that has been observed coalescing around the top masts of ships. In the context of 19th-century racial classifications, blue eyes are indicative of European ethnicity. Coupled with a lack of reference to distinctions in tattooing, which thus far have signaled differences in culture, class, nationality, etc., these subtle phenotypical descriptions cast the difference in appearance between Nulli and the enslaved along racial lines. The use of racial as opposed to allegorical distinction is perhaps a means of highlighting the severity of his moralizing claims throughout the episode. If for King Bello tattoos functioned as inscriptions of power, here, the replacement of allegorical tattooing with explicit racialization drives home a central premise of 19th-century American national reproduction: white supremacy. In other words, by shifting from tattoos to race in the scene of enslavement in Vivenza, Melville is demonstrating the process by which American national identity coalesced around the construction of whiteness to reproduce state power.

There is hardly a cohesive way to summarize this section. In attempting to read alongside Melville, I have certainly reproduced some of that meandering prolixity which makes *Mardi* challenging. Yet, this too might be an important quality of Melville’s engagement with tattoos in the text. They are not a cohesive symbol, made readily legible by attentive scholarship. They are sprawling, contrasting, and difficult, much as his wider allegory. What can be distilled is that tattoos give Melville a lens to explore bodies, relation, and cultural imposition. They are a visible mark that expresses how his

characters exist in the world, a world rife with hierarchy, power, and coercion. Much as his treatment of Euromerican maritime tattoos, the marked body in *Mardi* reminds us of the presence of subjugation in identity formation. In fact, looking back to the previous chapter, what might be cohesively argued about tattoos in his first five books, is that they remind us we are all marked by simply being in the world. Tattoos make visible those invisible ties of culture, authority, and relation that determine our identities. As Knopf insightfully suggests, “they merge the meaning and symbolism of the cultural text with human bodies; the tattoos thus transform into bodily metaphors for cultural concepts and ideas” (Knopf 154). In a way, marked or not, Melville’s symbolic use of tattoos reminds us that bodies are perpetually inscribed by the very nature of existence. Looking ahead, *Moby-Dick* offers a tenuous resolution: a chart for navigating the determinism of identity. We find in the tattoos of Queequeg and Ishmael, not a transcendent symbol, but an embodied mark of interrelation as a transformative force.

Tattoo Metamorphosis in *Moby-Dick*

By placing *Moby-Dick* as my last section, I have somewhat reproduced a critical fallacy engrained in the historic body of Melville scholarship and canonization: reading *Moby-Dick* as Melville’s paramount achievement. However, by arriving at *Moby-Dick*, I do not mean to suggest that Melville arrives at his literary genius in this text, nor do I suppose that here we arrive at some conclusive engagement with tattoos. Instead, by ending with *Moby-Dick*, I propose that the text, in some ways, weaves together the various tattoo ‘yarns’ spun together in his first five books. Like *Typee*, tattoos in *Moby-Dick* have received a significant amount of critical attention. Yet, most of this attention

has remained internal to the text, prefiguring Queequeg, Ishmael, and the symbolic ramification of their tattooed kinship. What new insights emerge when we see tattoos through the lens of symbolic development through his first five books? How do these symbols change in *Moby-Dick*? How should we read Queequeg and Ishmael's tattooed relationship? To answer these questions, I first look at how Melville and his progeny of scholars have taken up tattoos. The narrative follows Ishmael, an experienced seafarer but first-time whaler who signs aboard the *Pequod*, a whaling vessel captained by Ahab. Ahab leads the cosmopolitan crew in a monomaniacal hunt for the white whale Moby Dick, who had previously taken Ahab's leg. They track the whale over the globe only to meet disaster, Ishmael alone surviving the wreck. Three major avenues of approach toward tattooing exist in the text: the evolving descriptions of Queequeg's tattoos, Ishmael's whale tattoo, and the transposed tattoo inscriptions on Queequeg's coffin turned life buoy. Scholars tend to tie together each of these examples to demonstrate how tattoos, on Ishmael, reflect the impact of his relationship with Queequeg.

A survey of how Ishmael physically describes Queequeg's tattoos demonstrates transformation. In their first encounter at the Spouter-Inn, Ishmael exclaims, "Such a face! It was of a dark, purplish, yellow color, here and there struck over with large, blackish looking squares" (NN MD 21). He misperceives Queequeg's facial tattooing as bandages, then supposes the "stains of some sort or other" were akin to those of "a white man – a whaler too – who, falling among the cannibals, had been tattooed by them" (21). Finally, he is shocked to realize Queequeg is a Pacific Islander. In this initial encounter, Ishmael takes us through stages of recognition. His perception of Queequeg's tattoos unfurl before the reader. This theme is furthered: "he continued the business of

undressing, and at last showed his chest and arms. As I live, these covered parts of him were checkered with the same squares as his face; his back, too, was all over the same dark squares... Still more, his very legs were marked, as if parcel of dark green frogs were running up the trunks of young palms” (22). Here, Ishmael’s initial perceptions of the tattoos illicit fear. “It was now quite plain that he must be some abominable savage... I quaked to think of it” (22). Yet, this racial apprehension gives way shortly thereafter. “For all his tattooings he was on the whole a clean, comely looking cannibal... the man’s a human being just as I am” (24).

The following morning, after the best sleep of his life, Ishmael finds “Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife” (25). He likens Queequeg’s arm tattoos to the bedspread:

this arm of his tattooed all over with an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a figure, no two parts of which were one precise shade – owing I suppose to his keeping his arm at sea unmethodically in sun and shade, his shirt sleeves irregularly rolled up at various times – this same arm of his, I say, looked for all the world like a strip of that same patchwork quilt... they so blended their hues together. (25)

Interestingly, the marks have been stamped by seafaring labor, even if they do not originate from that cultural context. Through unfurling observation of Queequeg’s tattoos, Ishmael unfurls his own racial apprehension and leads toward romantic embrace. Knopf compares these descriptions to a brief reference later in the narrative. She writes, “Ishmael still thinks Queequeg ‘hideously marred about the face—at least to my taste’; but he approaches the matter with his newly learned lesson of cross-cultural tolerance and cultural relativism (Knopf 148). She echoes H. C. Brasher’s influential study which argues that Queequeg’s tattoos contain a series of lessons that Ishmael learns. In these

unfurling initial descriptions we feel Ishmael's psychological transformation taking shape, leading toward, as Knopf suggests, "tolerance and cultural relativism."

In a similar vein, Ishmael's continued focus on Queequeg's tattoos not only demonstrates his internal transformation but sets the stage for his developing perception of Queequeg's internal characteristics. Continuing from the passage Knopf quoted, Melville writes,

his countenance yet had something in it which was by no means disagreeable. You cannot hide the soul. Through all his unearthly tattooings, I thought I saw traces of a simple honest heart; and in his large, deep eyes, fiery black and bold, there seemed tokens of a spirit that would dare a thousand devils... there was a certain lofty bearing about the Pagan, which even his uncouthness could not altogether maim... Queequeg was George Washington cannibalistically developed. (NN *MD* 50)

This scene appears when Ishmael returns from the chapel and Father Maple's sermon.

The stately description gives way to a more affection in bed, "chatting and napping at short intervals, and Queequeg now and then affectionately throwing his brown tattooed legs over mine, and then drawing them back; so entirely sociable and free and easy were we" (53). Their playfulness keeps them awake and they decide to smoke together.

Passing back and forth the tomahawk pipe, Queequeg gives Ishmael his backstory, though it is not fully comprehended and proves a "mere skeleton" of his biography.

Melville writes, "Queequeg was a native of Kokovoko, an island far away to the West and South. It is not down on any map; true places never are" (55). Ishmael states that "in Queequeg's ambitious soul, lurked a strong desire to see something more of Christendom than a specimen whaler or two. His father was a High Chief, a King; his uncle a High Priest... There was excellent blood in his veins" (55). Ishmael also reveals how Queequeg had smuggled himself aboard a whaler: "he was actuated by a profound desire

to learn among the Christians, the arts whereby to make his people still happier than they were” but “the practices of whalers soon convinced him that even Christians could be both miserable and wicked... Thought he, it’s a wicked world in all meridians; I’ll die a pagan” (56). Ishmael’s observations, initially wrapped up with an emphasis on tattooing, yield Queequeg’s backstory.

The final direct reference to tattooing before embarking on the *Pequod*, occurs when Queequeg and Ishmael sign aboard. Bildad and Peleg, the ship’s principal owners, question whether Queequeg has converted to Christianity before letting him ship. Peleg suggests “he hasn’t been baptized right either, or it would have washed some of that devil’s blue off his face” (88). Ishmael invokes the common failings of spirituality to convince the owners: “the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world; we all belong to that; only some of us cherish some queer crotchets noways touching the grand belief; in *that* we all join hands” (88). Bildad and Peleg relent and allow Queequeg to sign the ship’s documents. For his signature, he “copied upon the paper, in the proper place, an exact counterpart of a queer round figure which was tattooed upon his arm” (89). Knopf argues Queequeg’s signature follows “Polynesian tradition” and “renders his tattoo as text in a concrete legal context” (Knopf 150). It is also reminiscent of Bardianna’s will in *Mardi*. Matthew Frankel points out that, in an editorial misstep, both the Norton and Northwestern-Newberry editions of *Moby-Dick* do not reproduce the mark Melville copied down on the manuscript. He argues, inclusion of the true mark would “[clear] a seat in the representational order of the novel for a character who must express himself or not at all. The signature Ishmael attempts to replicate exactly evinces a faithfulness to Queequeg’s otherwise distorted visibility—a

self-imposed check to his narrative privilege that disrupts the racial unconscious of his representative designs” (Frankel 137).³⁷ Frankel parses the ways in which Queequeg is “distorted” through representation. If tattoos help to reveal Queequeg’s character, they do so only through Ishmael’s perceptions. Thus, the image that we are presented of Queequeg is only the impression he left in Ishmael’s psyche. Yet, through direct moments of agency, such as the tattooed mark as signature, or, as we will see, his coffin, Queequeg achieves “undecipherable” self-representation in the text (135).

Much later in the narrative, Queequeg’s tattoos receive further comment. Ishmael describes him laboring in the hold: “the tattooed savage was crawling about amid the dampness and slime, like a green spotted lizard at the bottom of a well” (NN *MD* 477). From this he catches a fever and “waisted away in those few long-lingering days, till there seemed but little left of him but his frame and tattooing” (477). Feeling the lingering presence of death, Queequeg commissions a canoe-coffin, so that he might “not unlike the custom of his own race” be “stretched out in his canoe... to be floated away to the starry archipelagoes” (478). In a rather enigmatic turn, he “made up his mind to live” and recovers speedily (480). Following the recovery, he converts the coffin to “a sea-chest” (480). Ishmael states:

Many spare hours he spent, in 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. And this tattooing, had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the

³⁷ The true mark in the manuscript looks something like a lower-case theta (θ), whereas in the NN critical edition, the mark appears as a thick cross.

last. And this thought it must have been which suggested to Ahab that wild exclamation of his, when one morning turning away from surveying poor Queequeg – ‘Oh, devilish tantalization of the gods!’ (480-481)

In this passage, Ishmael’s perceptions of Queequeg, rendered through tattoos, reaches its final act. Where before, Ishmael only felt Queequeg’s nature concealed behind his tattooed body, here, his body itself becomes a mappable artifact of his lofty atmosphere. Scholars have approached this passage, and Queequeg’s tattoos more broadly from several perspectives. Brashers argues that the illegible tattooed treatise constitutes a lesson for Ishmael, “which correspond to the two phases of meaning... contained in his tattoos: (1) the mystic art of attaining truth, i.e., evaluating experience, and (2) a theory of the heavens and the earth, i.e., placing one's self in the scheme of the universe” (Brashers 138).

In stepping through the way Ishmael’s perception of tattooing develops, Brashers demonstrates the various ways these lessons are learned. Generally, he describes the tattoo lesson plan as “a matter of maintaining one’s identity and judgment in the face of mild chaos and all its contradictions” (142). This is learned in phases through “tolerance” (143); by removing dogmatic “belief” and applying “morality” in interpersonal interactions (145); and “consciously maintaining balance” between existing and finding meaning in the world – a lesson monomaniacal Ahab precipitously fails to learn (146). In Brashers formulation, “the mystic-religious lesson in Queequeg's tattoos... has been psychically transferred to Ishmael's personality... though both of them are unconscious of the lesson and of the act of teaching. Ishmael's experiences with Queequeg figuratively tattoo his soul with the forgotten meaning of the tattoos” (137). There are a few problematic assertions in this theory to be addressed; however, in the notion of tattooing

the soul with “mystic-religious” lessons, I see an important consistency developing from Melville’s earlier works. First, Melville’s oracular portrayal of Kamehameha I’s tattooed soul reminds us that tattooed inscriptions penetrate beneath the body; physical cultural markers quite literally inscribe and form the self. Second, Typee’s tenuous observational legibility of tattoos through ethnography from *Omoo* has seemingly been abandoned by Ishmael, preferring instead tactile relation, allowing the tattoos here to remain illegible on the surface. Finally, the nature of Queequeg and Ishmael’s relationship is portrayed as egalitarian, thus dissolving the palpable hierarchies of tattoo exchange most notably exhibited in *Typee*. Only through this progression of Melville’s first-person narrators does Ishmael arrive at a place where he can learn the lessons of the tattoos without deciphering their meaning.

Despite Brashers’ useful theory of tattoo lessons, he assumes Ishmael’s narrative certainty, and posits Queequeg as unable to read his own marks. He also calls Queequeg “not a thinking man... rather a man of feeling” (139). More recently, and from a different perspective, Geoffrey Sanborn asserts “Queequeg’s tattooing may be said to communicate... ‘nothing more serious than itself,’ just as a ‘live heart’, by means of its beatings, communicates nothing more – or less – serious than its own vital presence. The primary alternative to Ahab’s obsession with interpretation is modeled by Queequeg” (Sanborn 124). Other contemporary scholars have taken issue with these suppositions. Knopf demonstrates that tattoos “are depicted in semantics referring to a writing culture and are themselves seen as Polynesian world philosophy— oral cultural knowledge compactly reduced to signs and figures on Queequeg’s skin” (Knopf 150). Here, it is Ishmael’s unfamiliarity with “Polynesian world philosophy” that infers Queequeg’s

illiteracy in deciphering the marks. Observing Queequeg inscribing the coffin with his tattoo symbols, Birgit Rasmussen instead asks: “Can we imagine Queequeg as a literate user of an indigenous system of writing, a reader and writer just like Ishmael? (Rasmussen 113). For her, the affirmative answer to this question, despite Ishmael’s assertion to the contrary, is born out of Melville’s descriptive terms: “tattoos as ‘hieroglyphic marks’ that are ‘written’ on the ‘parchment’ of the harpooneer’s skin” (113). Coupled with his ability to “offer interpretations of the markings on a gold doubloon,” Rasmussen suggests “The contradiction between Ishmael’s assertion that Queequeg cannot read the ‘mystical treatise’ that is ‘written out on his body’ and Melville’s use of terms such as ‘written’ creates a space in which to imagine the encounter between Ishmael and Queequeg as one between readers and writers” (113). What these interventions suggest is that rather than an undecipherable lesson in existence, the supposed illegibility of Queequeg’s tattoos reflects the nature of Ishmael’s relationship to the harpooner. Taking Queequeg as tattoo literate, and a thinking man, we see that he is not un/subconsciously teaching Ishmael a lesson as Brashers suggests. Rather, we see Ishmael spinning his own ontology of interrelation and cultural exchange, one standing on the shoulders of Melville’s previous first-person narrators. In contradistinction, Sanborn would have us return to Queequeg as a foil to Ahab’s monomaniacal drive toward metaphysical interpretation. The question remains, how are we to read Queequeg?

Sanborn makes several incisive additions to understanding Queequeg’s tattoos and to reading *Moby-Dick*. He asserts, “We are used to thinking of Melville as a democratic humanist, a celebrant of the ‘common dignity of manhood’, and to a certain

degree, he is. But we miss something important about him if we overlook his attraction to ‘ancient dignity,’ the grand, primal quality that he associated with ‘certain phenomenal men’” (Sanborn 96). This is perhaps one of the most important theoretical injunctions in understanding the symbolic development of tattoos in Melville’s early sea fiction. Thus, far, humanism, the ‘liminal humanist mark,’ and an egalitarian approach to humanity have all defined my, and Melville’s, engagement with mark making. What we found at the end of the previous section was the ontological pitfalls of a democratic pluralism through the inescapable auspices of power in identity formation. If Ishmael is to present a redemptive quality through interrelation, signified through tattoos, it is perhaps only realized through that ‘ancient dignity.’ Sanborn furthers this point: “If one of the novel’s basic moves is to remind us of our weakness and brevity, in the context of the vast, stolid, heartless, murdering world in which we find ourselves, the move that immediately follows from that one, in the order of Melvillean logic, is the absurd but indispensable assertion of the glory of ‘man, in the ideal’” (106). Thus, without delimiting the potential that Queequeg is literate in his own cultural inscriptions, I offer instead that we read him as deliberately unconcerned with deciphering them. Or, that he already has deciphered their meaning and is living out their creed. In both cases, to analyze Queequeg’s tattoos, we must look to his actions, and how Ishmael perceives them.

In treating Queequeg’s tattoos, Sanborn finds source material that develops Melville’s compositional relationship to the harpooner which underpins Ishmael’s descriptive progression toward the marks. He writes, “Apparently as a result of his encounter with *The New Zealanders*, Melville developed an understanding of Maori tattooing that was distinctly different from his understanding of tattooing elsewhere in the

Pacific... He interpreted it, after 1850, as Craik does: as a vital element of the Maori rivalry for *mana*” (106). Therefore, the development of tattoo descriptions that was taken as a ‘lesson’ in cultural contact within the narrative, are derived from Melville’s developing understanding of the Maori marked body. Sanborn argues that “Queequeg’s tattooing, as it is described after chapter 4, is part of the special category of signs in *Moby-Dick* that compellingly manifest the presence of great power and worth. Such signs ‘say’ nothing more than ‘I am here’ and ‘I defy you,’ but by saying it in no uncertain terms, they create a space in which our ‘ancient dignity’ may be maintained” (106-107). Here, the redemptive process of interrelation takes a new turn; rather than appraising tattoo encounters, and thereby cultural contact, as redemptive, Ishmael’s relationship to Queequeg becomes redemptive insofar as, according to Sanborn, he is a great man.³⁸ Thus, the lessons of Bello’s tattoos in *Mardi* – that insurmountable determination of power in creating the self which drove Taji to an “endless sea” – is counteracted with the defiance to exist in spite of it.

Sanborn reads Queequeg as representative of ‘ancient dignity’ somewhat against the grain. He writes, “Queequeg is, above all else, an embodiment of... glory, not – as so many critics have argued – an embodiment of love” (106). He locates his argument in the persistent emphasis Ishmael places on the harpooner’s gallant character, juxtaposed to the passing romantic and loving relationship at the beginning of the narrative. He continues: “It is as if critics of *Moby-Dick* have tacitly agreed to underplay the fiery, bold, lofty, uncringing, dauntless, unbudging, and disdainful aspects of Queequeg’s character, even

³⁸ It is not my aim to paint over the clearly “masculinist” or “elitist” nature of this dynamic, as Sanborn calls it. Rather, let’s remain alongside Melville and see where he takes us. For an in-depth discussion see *Whipscars and Tattoos*, 111-113.

though those are the aspects that Ishmael emphasizes most” (111). That Melville highly valued such characteristics seems true. To give a small example, in his copy of *King Lear*, he annotated Edmund’s arrest in Act V, writing “The infernal nature has a valor often denied to innocence” (Marginalia).³⁹ One intriguing and lesser commented on tattoo description gives credence to Sanborn’s analysis. In “The Candles” the *Pequod* experiences the rare phenomenon of St. Elmo’s fire. Melville writes, “while lit up by the preternatural light, Queequeg’s tattooing burned like Satanic blue flames on his body” (NN MD 506). Sanborn suggests, “By means of the *moko* gleaming in the light of God’s weird fires, Melville lets us know that Queequeg, like Ahab, is ‘a true child of fire’, that he responds to the threatening breath of fire by breathing back the fire of which he is made” (Sanborn 122). This reading is expanded if we return to the grotesque tattoo description in *Redburn*, where the dead sailor’s body caught aflame. In that scene the sailor’s tattoos burned white against a blue flame. Here, Queequeg’s tattoos burn blue against the “tapering white flames” (NN MD 505). We might take the color inversion of these linked scenes to further signify Queequeg’s vitality: he quite literally reverses the symbolism of death. For Ishmael, Queequeg becomes a symbol of that ‘ancient dignity’ and ‘glory’ to defy the inescapable and destructive power of the world.

In a more recent countercurrent to Sanborn, Emily Butler-Probst sees “Ishmael’s multicultural companionship with Queequeg” as “a redeeming experience” where “Queequeg becomes a Christ figure who introduces Ishmael to cultural otherness and relativism, saving him mentally from the hellish madness experienced by Ahab” (Butler-

³⁹ Although there is no inscription that denotes the exact date Melville purchased the book, the editors have deduced that he bought the collection in 1849. Thus, it is highly plausible, if not certain, that he read and annotated this passage before composing *Moby-Dick* (Marginalia).

Probst 2). Following Otter's analysis of "The Squeeze of Hands," a chapter in which Ishmael breaks down his social and sexual barriers and finds communion with the crew, she argues that Ishmael's relationship with Queequeg imbricates him in "a wider web of human interconnectivity" (11). She posits that interconnectivity becomes "a means of ameliorating" Ahab's "obsession" (12). Reading Ahab's "fiery hunt" for the whale as a symbolic hunt for absolute truth (NN *MD* 195), Butler-Probst suggests "Ishmael's embrace of cultural syncretism" is "an embrace of a pragmatic approach to truth which emphasizes the importance of community... and a rejection of the concept of absolute truths" (Butler-Probst 13). Here, the "blurring and merging of hierarchies and cultural boundaries" move Ishmael beyond "the limitations of objective analysis... free from the pitfalls of absolutism" (13). I do not see Sanborn and Butler-Probst divergent readings necessarily as a tension between love and the "fiery, bold, lofty" etc. aspects of Queequeg's character (is it not fiery and bold for a 'savage' to casually love a white man in the mid 19th-century?). Rather, in parsing these critical currents, it would seem the tension coalesces around where to locate the transformative power of interrelation.

How might we navigate these tensions? I argue that by looking back on Melville's previous novels we have the answer, one which reconciles Sanborn's 'ancient dignity' and 'glory' with Butler-Probst's 'interconnectivity' and 'community.' *Mardi* is perhaps the most instructive. If the anatomy of disembodiment was the foil to communal bonding while in pursuit of Yillah, by forfeiting the embodied utopian Serenia, Taji demonstrated for us that it is not 'interconnectivity' alone that gives purpose to the metaphysical hunt. Reaching even further back, that barely glimpsable 'outsideness' we felt in Tommo, here comes into focus. In Lem Hardy, Tommo turned Typee was not just given a positive

reformulation of his own racial fears, he was also given a fantasy of Serenia.⁴⁰ He was given the alternative social formation Tommo could not fully grasp in Taipivai. Why did he continue to rove? What drove Redburn back to the sea after witnessing the stark degradation of capitalism? How does White-Jacket find redemption in the hellish man-of-war world? For Melville, it would seem, interrelation only gains transformative power *against* the axes of domination. The *Pequod* is no utopia. It is a vessel under the domination of Ahab. This is the quality that gives “The Squeeze of Hands” its beauty and power. Transcendent community (read here as the promise of pluralism), when actualized, is itself the downfall of that human ‘glory’ alluded to by Sanborn. In other words, for Melville, humans need the “fiery hunt,” they need something to strive against. Yet, for Taji, Ahab, and the whole line of monomaniacal characters in Melville’s fiction, to hunt alone is to meet disaster. Thus, I would qualify both Sanborn and Butler-Probst’s assertions: one needs the other. Community does not free Ishmael “from the pitfalls of absolutism,” he too joins (and needs) the pursuit of absolute truth (13). Nor does Queequeg’s defiance of the world remove him from the community, after all we cannot write off the impact of his affection for Ishmael. I argue that in conjoining these critical tides, we unfold the descriptive sway of Queequeg’s tattoos, his relationship with Ishmael, and glimpse the drive of Melville’s whale of a text *Moby-Dick*.

Given the crosscurrents of glory, community, tattoos, and the transformative beauty of Ishmael’s relationship to Queequeg, it is no wonder critics have given

⁴⁰ We know, of course, that this is a fiction of Western primitivism. The Pacific Islands were not utopian societies. But, as many critics have pointed out, Melville is not disentangled from such notions, even as he attempts to deconstruct them.

considerable attention to Ishmael's own tattoo despite only being mentioned once.

Ishmael reveals that his knowledge of "The skeletal dimensions" of a whale

are copied verbatim from my right arm, where I had them tattooed; as in my wild wonderings at that period, there was no other secure way of preserving such valuable statistics. But as I was crowded for space, and wished the other parts of my body to remain a blank page for a poem I was then composing – at least, what untattooed parts might remain – I did not trouble myself with the odd inches (NN *MD* 451).

In line with my synthesis of Sanborn and Butler-Probst's treatment of Queequeg's transformative influence on Ishmael, though preceding both critics, Frankel suggest "Ishmael's tattoo is both at once, work of art and monument of human struggle... the struggle for as-yet-unthought-of forms of self-creation...an aesthetic composition, we might say, of subjectivation and solidarity. (Frankel 142). Here, Frankel alludes to Ishmael's body as a testament to both Queequeg's 'glory' and 'interconnectivity.' The immediate question that follows this analysis is: when did Ishmael receive the tattoos? Or more accurately, when did Melville begin to view Ishmael as tattooed? The answer to this question is seminal in mapping the impact of Queequeg's influence on Ishmael.

In engaging this question, several scholars suggest that Ishmael's tattoos are a symbol of national and racial disidentification.⁴¹ If one of the primary drives of this project is to demonstrate the role of Euromerican maritime tattooing in Melville's symbolic treatment of the marked body, then it necessarily follows that this critical vein which queers Ishmael's race and nationality does not come to fruition. In fact, as we have seen, in being a sailor Ishmael is already somewhat disidentified from national belonging (recall Redburn's carriage metaphor; or even further back, Sugden's queer migrant).

⁴¹ Butler-Probst sees the tattoos as "cultural syncretism" (10); Kellen bolt reads the tattoo as a "dissociation from Americanness" (294); Frankel goes as far as arguing that Ishmael is "approximating as best he can what it would be like to live in Queequeg's skin" (138).

Likewise, the presence of bodily markings on white bodies, though culturally renegade, only constitute a perceived racialization in the extreme such as facial tattooing (Tommo offered both arms to Karky in lieu of his face). Thus, I argue, Ishmael's tattoo should not be read through the lens of racial or national disidentification, although we might look elsewhere and see this theories come to fruition. Yet, if the tattoo does not queer race or national belonging, it certainly does queer temporality. Kellen Bolt suggests there are "two Ishmaels... The Ishmael character is a young unnamed New Yorker and a green hand at whaling" who mistakes Queequeg's tattoos for bandages (Bolt 318). "The Ishmael narrator is a heavily tattooed and well-seasoned sailor" (318). Yet, the temporal clues of the narrative suggest that his stay in the Arctics (Solomon Islands), where he received the tattoo, occurred prior to the narrative of *Moby-Dick*.⁴² Thus, much as Melville's reading of *The New Zealanders* affected the development of Queequeg's tattoos, it would seem at some point during the composition of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael becomes retroactively tattooed. Bolt's first Ishmael becomes the second through Melville's own development rather than chronological elapse. In this way, according to Frankel, Ishmael "signals a series of dynamic movements immanent in the narrative itself. The tattoo Ishmael proposes at once diagrams these movements within the act of writing, inscribes their intensive patterns upon his living flesh" (Frankel 127). In other words, the "poem" Ishmael "was then composing" to tattoo on his body becomes *Moby-Dick*; and by composing *Moby-Dick*, the "admeasurements of the whale" become tattooed on his body (NN MD 451). This queered moment of temporal reflexivity

⁴² In the first chapter, Ishmael tells us that he had repeatedly "smelt the sea as a merchant sailor" before ever shipping as a whaler (NN MD 7). He acquired the tattoo "years ago, when attached to the trading-ship Dey of Algiers" (449).

infinitely circles in on itself: the tattoo of the whale becomes the poem becomes *Moby-Dick* and back again.

We might rescue Ishmael's tattoo from spiraling out into meaning everything, and thereby nothing, by applying K. L. Evans' insights on the "Cetology" chapter. He argues, "Melville's great accomplishment is to have convinced his readers that even though there is nothing in the natural world to which the word or concept 'whale' directly corresponds... this concept is sufficiently deserving of the label 'real' to drive out the worry that it is the mere projection of a human mind" (Evans 17). In a similar vein, through a queered temporal reflexivity, the tattoo does not correspond to anything directly, but remains 'real.' So, what on earth is it? Clearly, it is not a simple tattoo existing on Ishmael's arm. In interpreting how Queequeg interprets the whale, Sanborn points us toward an answer. He writes, "Why does Queequeg focus on the 'twiske-tee bewisk' pattern of the harpoons in the whale's 'hide'? Because he himself is covered with 'twisted tattooing.'" (Sanborn 125-126). He applies a similar formulation to the other harpooners. We might take this one step further and suggest that in interpreting the whale, each character projects themselves. For Ishmael then, as Derek Woods suggests, Ishmael's efforts to interpret the whale through measurements, inscribed via tattoo, "can be read as an index of Ishmael's development as character in his own narration" insofar as he projects himself (Woods 39). Frankel furthers this argument, suggesting that Ishmael's tattoo "reconfigures a previous exposition on eternity as an emergent composition of markings connecting the body of the narrator to his "congenial admeasurement of the whale" ... the otherwise detached human subject and distinct inhuman object enter into a new aesthetic arrangement, a 'zone of exchange between man

and animal in which something of one passes into the other” (Frankel 125). Put simply, Ishmael’s tattoo signifies his progression as narrator insofar as it reflects his metaphysical pursuit of knowing the whale; this hunt marks and transforms him.

This “new aesthetic arrangement” might also be defined as a tattoo relationship, not only because Ishmael tattoos the whale measurements on his arm, but because whales are also tattooed. Referring to the scarred lines on the skin of Sperm Whales, Ishmael argues that “those linear marks, as in a veritable engraving... are hieroglyphical... By my retentive memory of the hieroglyphics upon one Sperm Whale in particular, I was much struck with a plate representing the old Indian characters chiselled on the famous hieroglyphic palisades on the banks of the Upper Mississippi. Like those mystic rocks, too, the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable” (NN *MD* 306). Frankel points out the tattoo connection: “Ishmael likens Queequeg’s tattoos to the ‘hieroglyphical markings’ that stretch across the head of Moby Dick, a parallel that more fully extends in narratological terms the novel’s central epistemological quandary” (Frankel 138). The supposed undecipherable nature of the markings further links the whale and Queequeg in terms of Ishmael’s perception of their marked bodies; I would add the term ‘hieroglyphics’ has also been used in both *Typee* (referencing the Queen) and *Mardi* (referencing Aleema and Donjalolo’s wives) to describe tattoos. So, how does a whale being tattooed extend “the novel’s central epistemological quandary?” Because that epistemological quandary can be defined as trying to make sense of the whale, and the whale is tattooed.⁴³

⁴³ It seems Melville did not know that whales pick up these marks in battle with Giant Squids, or else we would have had at least ten chapters on the monstrous clash!

The time has come for me to cast my own harpoon at *Moby Dick* and suggest a reading of the whale. Sanborn gives us an insightful perspective. He writes, “For the most part, *Moby Dick* has been read either as an emblem of metaphysical principle or as an emblem of uninterpretability. We have not yet tried out the idea that the harpooners shadow forth: that *Moby Dick* is an inspiringly proud and defiant fellow-traveler” (Sanborn 127). One of the trackable themes that emerges across Melville’s early sea fiction is a preoccupation with relativism and absolutism on the nature of truth. As Babbalanja would have it, “truth is in things... not in words” and lives in “transition” (NN *M* 283-284). Through tattooing, each of Melville’s first-person narrators reminds us that there is something true about the nature of the world and it marks us all in varying ways. For Melville, it is the lens by which we approach that fleeting truth, and the way it in turn marks us, that is relative.⁴⁴ In this sense, the tattoo relationship between Ishmael and the whale, I argue, delimits the symbolic significance of the whale as uninterpretable, the truth of the thing is there, and by fits and starts, Ishmael grasps at it. Moreover, the whale as a symbol of “metaphysical principle” might certainly apply to Ahab. Ishmael, of course, joins his “fiery hunt,” but we ought not look at the whale through Ahab alone. Seeing the whale as a tattooed character gives further credence to Sanborn’s claim: *Moby Dick* as “proud and defiant fellow-traveler” who enters in their own way into the interconnectivity of the novel.

As previously mentioned, Ishmael’s relationship to Queequeg’s tattoos and his own tattoo both serve as indexes of his narrative development. Here, we might add Ishmael’s progressive efforts to know the tattooed whale as yet another index of his

⁴⁴ See *Melville’s Philosophies*, of particular interest is the first section of essays titled “World Making.”

narrative development. Taken together, tattoo encounters symbol Ishmael's efforts to know and feel what Sanborn calls the 'ancient dignity,' 'glory,' and the "great power and worth" of Queequeg, the whale, and himself (Sanborn 106). We might go even further: through tattoo encounters, these very lines of knowing and feeling become blurred: self, human, whale, and world all mesh together into an interconnected vitality of life. We have travelled quite far on this tattoo journey, but in some ways, we have travelled nowhere at all. In Ishmael's tattoo encounters, with both himself and others, we find the power of interconnectivity rendered through the recognition of humanity's own 'ancient dignity;' we find the will and defiance to stand against the deterministic powers of the world. But was this not here from the very beginning? In the first chapter of *Typee*, did the Queen of Nukahiva not proudly flaunt her tattoos and defy her colonial subjugators? Did she not connect with the unnamed American sailor and project the glory of her own marked body? Did she not proclaim her own 'ancient dignity'? I would suggest the answer to all these questions is that she did. In fact, I would argue that tattoos have consistently offered a context for all of Melville's first-person narrators in his early sea fiction to connect with the vitality of life and proclaim their own glory, but only Ishmael finally does so.

To close out this progression, I end where Melville leaves Ishmael: floating atop Queequeg's coffin. As we have seen, Queequeg transcribes his tattoo's and their meaning onto the coffin; the coffin itself might be seen as another tattooed character. For Brashers the coffin emblemizes how "the mystic lesson of the tattoos engraved on Ishmael's unconscious bouys him up, keeps him psychically balanced in the awful void of the universe." (Brashers 153). Butler-Probst argues that the coffin "cements... Queequeg as a

cultural Christ figure” who introduced Ishmael to “A worldview that can contain the conflicting, multicultural views of the community and still hunger for more without obsessing over truths that are unattainable.” (Butler-Probst 15). Knopf takes the coffin’s survival to signify the novel’s “cultural and narrative hybridity,” which “might be Melville’s answer to America’s colonial guilt and deep-seated cultural conflicts” (Knopf 153). Frankel reads the coffin through Ishmael’s development: it “bears the traces of a single Line moving across the waves of character: through the white whale’s ‘ubiquity in time’ to the drowned life of Queequeg and even upon the scarred body of Ahab, then outward again toward the chapters in Ishmael’s future” (Frankel 141). Might all these readings suggest one aspect of the same thing? Balance in the void of the universe, communal truth, hybridity in the face of colonial determinism, personal development toward the future, each decay an aspect of a central theme: finding a way to live despite the weight of existence. Thus, as Sanborn demonstrates, “the ‘great force’ of the rising coffin” does no less than preserve “‘life,’ understood, as it so often is in *Moby-Dick*, as a thrillingly intense vitality” (Sanborn 130). Ishmael floating atop the coffin is yet another tattoo encounter, rife with the conflictual tides and sublime verve of Melville’s watery world.

CODA: UNFURLING THE SAILS

This has become a whale of a project. Though, what strike's me is not the breadth of what's been included, but that which has been left unsaid. Even in the symbolic sprawl of tattoos in Melville's early sea fiction, we have only touched a formative chapter of his life as an author. We have set out to sea and returned; but Melville did not stop at *Moby-Dick*. What can be said of visibility in *Pierre*? What do we make of John Paul Jones's tattooed arms in *Israel Potter*? Where does Melville lead us in the American racial topography of *The Confidence Man*? How does everything change from the Civil-War in *Battle Pieces*? Why is religion marked on Agath's arm in *Clarel*? What kernels of bodily knowledge lurk in his collected poems and short stories? And as Melville sets sail on the infinite journey of death, why does he send us back to sea in *Billy-Budd*? Tattoos factor into all his works, if not directly, then by concentric returns to the body and the self. This project has only carved out a slice of that whole. We have only glimpsed the skeleton of Melville's tattooed world. And to use the whale metaphor, tattoos themselves are but a bone in the body of his Leviathan life work.

In the mid 19th-century, when Melville took to sea, the decks of Euromerican ships were hybrid contact zones, rife with the potential of cosmopolitan contact. In these spaces, identities were formed and expressed. Tattooing manifested as one such expression, becoming a unique Euromerican subculture, both with and against the prevailing social formations of the West. In his early sea fiction, Melville rubs up against the violent spread of modernity's axes of social control, portraying their impact on the various racial and national identities existing in the cosmopolitan global shipping and

whaling networks. Through the incremental and piecewise development of his first-person narrators, Melville portrays a burgeoning outside consciousness, struggling to make sense of the world. Through engaging tattoos, both as ‘real’ cultural phenomena and fictional symbolic devices, he demonstrates how the pressures of this modernizing, globalizing, and domineering world imprint the body and the soul. Through the marked body, his narrators grapple with how to make sense of the existent social formations of capitalism, slavery, colonialism, and white supremacy. They each strive to glimpse viable alternatives. In Ishmael, we seem to arrive at a lasting solution: one which joins together an egocentric humanist approach to truth, and an appreciation of communal interrelation. It is portrait of the self that reclaims humanities ‘ancient dignity,’ and plots a course to the future. These are the multivalent ways in which tattooing is symbolically taken up in Melville’s early sea fiction.

Perhaps because of my own fondness for the poem, I feel *Clarel* (1876) is the best place to end this project and look ahead to where it leads. *Clarel* is a sprawling pilgrimage poem that pursues the nature of religious doubt primarily through dialogue. It was composed while Melville worked in “New York Customs as a waterfront inspector” (NN *CL* 524-525). Though it is unknown precisely when he began working on the poem, “the best hypothesis” is 1867 (531). He drew as source material for the poem his own travel to the Levant, occurring some ten years prior. Around the same time, some of the first commercial tattoo shops were popping up in New York. Alan Govenar writes, “In the 1870s” the tattoo professor “Hildebrandt operated an atelier on Oak Street in New York (between Oliver and James Streets)” and “In 1875, Samuel F. O’Reilly opened a tattoo shop in Chatham Square in the Bowery section of New York” (Govenar 214).

Hildebrandt also is reported to have tattooed thousands of soldiers during the Civil War (214). Though little is known about these early design, the well documented flash designs at the turn of the century, what Govenar calls “American folk tattoo,” bear a striking resemblance to the early American seafarer designs (218). Thus, Euromerican maritime tattooing made landfall in the 1870’s. The subsequent decades would cement tattooing as an American cultural practice, though certainly still marginal and at odds with prevailing ideologies.

It is striking then, that as this practice began taking off in the national interior as a new embodiment, sparking some of the most intense debates about the marked body, criminality, and cultural atavism, in the following decade, Melville retreats into the old, weather-beaten pilgrim-timoneer Agath, and retreats backward in time. Agath is a critically underappreciated, and perhaps somewhat misunderstood character. Walter Bezanson, in his important “Critical Note on the Text,” places him in the “ominous sequence of monomaniacs,” and calls him “a study in survival” (NN *CL* 573;615). Yet, he is not a thinking figure; he does not maddeningly pursue truth like Taji or Ahab. Instead, he is beaten down by the world and silently persists. He has none of those ‘fiery’ characteristics of Queequeg that symbolled him out for ‘glory.’ Instead, he is an ineloquent ‘yarn-spinner.’ In telling one of his stories about a remote unpopulated Pacific Island, he sparks the entrance of Ungar, one of the most fully developed monomaniacs in Melville’s works. Agath is perhaps one of Melville’s dreariest characters: feeling all the woe of the world and none of the “fiery hunt” (NN *MD* 195). As such, it is hard to make sense of him in the order of Melvillean logic. He seemingly bares none of those

aspirational qualities Melville cherishes such as truth seeking and ‘ancient dignity.’ Looking at his tattoo helps to make sense of him.

Standing on the “promethean ledge” overlooking Mar Saba, Agath points out Jerusalem, there literal and metaphorical destination: “Wreck, ho! The wreck – Jerusalem” (NN *CL* 4.1.160;187). By pointing to the city, his shirt sleeve slackened revealing the crucifixion tattooed on his arm. Derwent, a fellow pilgrim, and pious man, calls it “a living fresco” (4.2.48). The rest of the company make note of it, and Agath, much as White-Jacket had described, calls it a sailor tradition, passed down from crewmember to crewmember. He then mentions it is “A charm... ‘gainst watery doom” (4.2.96). Rolfe, a character not unlike Ishmael, or even Melville himself as some critics suggest, comments that the crucifixion tattoo is a tradition passed down from the crusades, where the crusaders would have the cross marked as a sign of service. He states, “From these mailed Templars now the sign,/ Losing the import and true key,/ Descends to boatswains of the brine” (4.2.122-124). Clarel, the young protagonist, takes a fleeting interest in the tattoo and asks, “The import of these marks?” (4.2.129). Derwent flippantly responds by recounting the religious symbolism of the scene, to which Clarel replies “‘One might have known;’ and fell anew/ In void relapse” (4.2.136-137). In this brief tattoo encounter, Clarel’s response is of utmost importance. His character might be best understood through the lens of growing doubt. His faith is being tested by his experiences during the pilgrimage. As the poem progresses, he falls deeper and deeper into that doubt. Yet, at the same time, the communal conversations of the pilgrims, which he finds stimulating, affords him some revitalization. In this sense, Derwent’s flippant

response is aggravating, and he sulks back into private repose. Given Agath is an unthinking man, he does not know how to respond and remains silent.

The tattoo encounter gives us important insight into how Melville approaches life's tribulations from a different perspective, one which serves as a cautionary reminder. By referencing the origins of maritime tattoo practices, Rolfe reveals that Agath is quite literally marked by history. Much as Queequeg's tattoos were of cultural significance, so here too are Agath's. Yet, he has lost the "key" to their interpretation. In other words, he is not alive to the world that marks him, both on the skin, and on the soul. If in Queequeg, Ishmael, Moby Dick, and the coffin, tattoos signified the positive aspects of defying the world, in Agath Melville gives us its negative. Agath survives, unlike other monomaniacal characters. Yet, here, Melville asks us what is survival if you are not alive to the world around you, the world that marks you? In Agath's tattoo we feel the tragedy of subjugation: he was a poor sailor destined to serve as the wheels of the world's carriage. It reminds us to not while away under the yoke, to stand against the world and look for truth, and make sense of what we find on our own terms and together with others. "Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?" (NN *MD* 195).

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