

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Melville on the Beach: Transnational Visions of America

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

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December 2018

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The Dissertation of Ikuno Saiki is approved:

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## Acknowledgments

This project would not have been finalized without the invaluable assistance of many people. First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my exam advisor and former dissertation chairperson, Professor Emory Elliott. Throughout the irregular and tedious process of completing my degree, he constantly encouraged me and supported me by frequent e-mail messages, writing from his office in early morning, or from a hotel in China at midnight, until a month before his sudden demise. I learned, and am still learning, from his enthusiastic and humanitarian approach to literature and from his pure devotion to help his students.

Professor Jennifer Doyle was on my exam committee, and kindly succeeded Professor Elliott as chair. She made it possible for me to finish the dissertation within a limited amount of time, and her advice gave me a framework within which to integrate all my ideas. Professor Steven Gould Axelrod and Professor Traise Yamamoto supported me in the first difficult quarter at UC Riverside in 2001. I learned scholarship and the art of research from Professor Axelrod's meticulous and warm suggestions on my seminar papers. Professor Yamamoto, who provides energetic guidance and affectionate care for her students, is one of my unattainable role models. It was my great pleasure to have them as my readers.

Members of the Melville Society and the Melville Society of Japan have kept inspiring me with their creative scholarship and their passion for the author. Since we met in the International Melville Conference on Maui, Professor Elizabeth Schultz has been my guardian angel, and her unfailing support enabled me to achieve many professional goals, including the dissertation. I want to express my gratitude to Professor Arimichi Makino, Professor Sanford E. Marovitz, Professor A. Robert Lee, and Professor Carolyn L. Karcher for their mentorship. I thank Professor Tomoyuki Zettsu and Professor Yukiko Oshima for our long-lasting friendships and their encouragement to grow as a Melville scholar.

Matthew and Tomoko Snyder, and their adorable children, Sakura and Lennon, helped me settled in the community, especially in my third, short-term stay in Riverside. The cozy cultural mixture of the Snyders entertained me and gave me a break during the last stormy time of writing. Megumi Wakabayashi and Koki Matsuu support my life in Tokyo just like a family.

I was fortunate in my encounter with my Riverside landlady Kate Watt, and my housemate Sohrab Bodoghi. Without their care and encouragement, I could not have gotten through the last and most difficult stage of writing. They kept feeding me literally, intellectually, and spiritually. Kate spared her precious time to read the final drafts and gave me warm, perceptive comments. Our tiny, furry companion, Biscuit, offered love and affection.

I am grateful to the following people in the US and in Japan, now and in the past: Professor Weihsin Gui, Perla Fabelo, Professor Geoff Cohen, Professor Deborah Willis, Tina Feldmann, Professor Michelle Raheja, Professor Masaki Horiuchi, Professor Mikayo Sakuma, Professor Shouko Tsuji, Csaba Toth, Joon Ho Hwang, Seung Ah Oh, Ana Savic, Tokuji Tsuchiya, Matthew Diaz, Methal Al-Otaibi, Koji Yokoyama, Eriko Yamaguchi, Mie Uemura, and Hiromi Minoura.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my parents. It was their faith in me that brought me to this fruition.

The text of this dissertation, in part or in full, is a reprint of material as it appears in: “Captivated by the Other: *Typee* and the Barbary Captivity Narrative,” *Facing Melville, Facing Italy: Democracy, Politics, Translation*, edited by John Bryant et al., Sapienza Universita Editrice, 2014, pp. 197-208; “Melville on the Beach: In-Between Characters in *Typee* and *Omoo*,” *Sky-Hawk*, vol. 20, 2004, pp. 3-16; “Strike through the Unreasoning Masks’: *Moby-Dick* and Japan,” *Whole Oceans Away: Melville and the Pacific*, edited by Jill Barnum, et al., Kent State UP, 2007, pp. 183-98; “A Shadow of the Far East: Fedallah; or, a Japanese Sea Drifter,” *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies*, vol. 8, issue 3, 2006, pp. 33-42; “Mimicking Black, Fashioning White: The Spectacular of Slavery in ‘Benito Cereno,’” *Eigakuronko* [English

Studies], vol. 37, 2008, pp. 3-14; “Bartleby, the Scrivener’: The Politics of Biography and the Future of Capitalism,” *Melville and the Wall of Modern Age*, edited by Arimichi Makino, Nan'un-Do, 2010, pp. 77-96; and “From Rosmarine to Grandma’s Bible: Melville, Ikezawa, and the Otherness of Nature,” *Sky-Hawk*, no. 31, 2016, pp. 41-53.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Melville on the Beach: Transnational Visions of America

by

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University of California, Riverside, December 2018  
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### Abstract

This dissertation examines the transnational visions of America Herman Melville cultivated in his encounters with heterogeneous cultures, especially Polynesia. I name Melville's fluid, drifting mind-set as being "on the beach," where he is both threatened by and liberated from Victorian cultural codes of race, class, and gender. What is striking about Melville's writing is the rapturous delight with which he depicts being in-between, though coupled with colonial anxiety and fear. Although the joy of being on the beach dims as Melville loses hope in his country, he does not hesitate to place himself in this liminal, transnational space and to identify himself with this in-between state for the rest of his literary career.



The Introduction compares Perry Miller's coherent American nationhood with Melville's transcultural approach to the nation and the world to define Melville's transnationalism and his location in American studies. The first chapter explores how Melville uses the motifs of 'turning Turk' in Barbary captivity narratives to recount Tommo's experience of nearly going native in *Typee*. The next chapter continues to discuss the question of Western self in scenes of colonial encounters, with more focus on minor, in-between characters in *Typee* and *Omoo*. Chapter three delves into the significant role the American whaling industry played in exploring the Pacific, relating America's imperialistic enterprise to conquer Asia, especially Japan, to Ishmael's narration of Ahab's drive to harpoon the inscrutable whale. In addition, I attempt to historicize Fedallah and his comrades as shipwrecked Japanese sea-drifters. Chapter four analyzes Melville's critiques both of biography as a nationalistic literary genre and of capitalism through the lawyer's defective portrait of Bartleby, a devoted practitioner of what Max Weber calls "the spirit of capitalism." Chapter five, which interrogates the formation of racial identities through the masquerade of slavery in "Benito Cereno," delineates how the doubling of master and slave in a liminal space turns them both into in-betweens and thus enables a scathing critique of racism. The last chapter introduces an example of Melville's transnational

influence, his impact on Natsuki Ikezawa, a Japanese writer, and compares their views on nature as the ultimate other.

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## Introduction

### Melville on the Beach: Transnational Visions of America

*Melville's book traces an imaginary line of flight from homogeneous visions,  
be they national, cultural, historical, or literary.*

*Yunte Huang*

*We expatriate ourselves to nationalize with the universe.*

*Herman Melville, White Jacket*

Although Herman Melville is generally acknowledged to be one of the major writers of American literature, and *Moby-Dick* constitutes a seminal part of the American literary canon, he and his works did not obtain their current high estimation as readily as Nathaniel Hawthorne and his oeuvre did. After Melville closed his life as a long forgotten author of the South Sea adventure stories in 1891, what started as a cult among a small group of admirers in England and the United States culminated in the so-called Melville Revival in the 1920s, also triggered by the centenary of his birth.<sup>1</sup> We might be able to assume that a critical assessment of Melville was fully established when, in 1941, Francis O. Matthiessen named “an extraordinary concentrated moment of literary expression” of the period from 1850 to 1855

an “American Renaissance,” and counted Melville as one of the five major literary figures whose “devotion to the possibilities of democracy” were granted to represent the phase along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Nathaniel Hawthorne (vii, ix). As the five masters he designated were all white male writers, Matthiessen has become one of the main culprits of asserting the “undemocratic” American literary tradition.<sup>2</sup> In her daring attempt to “demonstrate the power and the ambition of novels written by women,” for example, Jane Tompkins targeted Melville to prove the possibilities of the “other” American Renaissance led by the feminine cultural impetus of sentimentalism (13). Considering that Melville and Susan Warner were born in the same year, and that Warner’s “best-selling novel, *The Wide, Wide World*, was published in the same twelve-month period as *Moby Dick*,” Tompkins contends that Warner can be a match for the canonical writer: “But I am not interested in Warner’s novels for the light it can shed on Melville, I am interested in it because it represents, in its purest form, an entire body of work that this century’s critical tradition has ignored” (155). To save from oblivion such popular sentimental novels as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Wide, Wide World*, whose values Matthiessen restricted to the sociological and historical (Matthiessen x-xi), Tompkins sheds an evangelical light on them and thus proclaims that “the sentimental novelists wrote to educate their readers in Christian perfection and to move

the nation as a whole closer to the city of God” (Tompkins 157). Hence, regardless of several decades of academic negligence, from, say, the publication of *Moby-Dick* in 1851 to the 1920s Melville Revival, Melville, as one of the “great” men of letters, bore the brunt of criticism in the turbulent age of the radical expansion of the American literary canon and the vicissitudes of valiant interpretive methodologies.

As Myra Jehlen declares, however, “Melville has remained canonical through the whole period of canon-busting” (3).<sup>3</sup> The drastic transformation of the American literary canon was primarily provoked by the changes in university demographics. The diversification of the student body is a key condition for explaining the student civil rights movements of the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> However, what caused these social and political actions, globalization, is not “a contemporary phenomenon,” but “is dated as beginning in at least the sixteenth century and covering a time span that includes the long histories of imperialism, colonization, decolonization, and postcolonialism” (Jay 2-3). Because Melville perceived globalization and its consequences well before the field of American studies responded to them, his works were both neglected before and hailed after. Melville and his works not only survived the deconstruction of the Americanist literary canon, but they have also fueled the critical discussion of race, gender, and class in American literature.

To explore the peculiar location of Herman Melville in American literary and cultural studies, let us start with the comparison of Melville with Perry Miller, an intellectual historian and critic of American literature.<sup>5</sup> Both of them cherished New England's cultural heritage: the family roots of Miller's parents lie there, not to mention the fact that he himself is a historian of New England Puritanism. With his maternal ancestry including a general of the American Revolution and his paternal ancestry including a hero of the Boston Tea Party, Melville lived in New York and Massachusetts throughout his life, except while traveling. Both men wandered around the world in their early youth: After dropping out of the University of Chicago, Miller went off to live in the Colorado mountains, pursued a theatrical career in New York, and journeyed as a merchant sailor to Mexico, Europe, and Africa; Melville sailed to England, the Pacific, Polynesia, Central and South America, and Hawai'i, on a merchant ship, a whaler, and a USS naval ship.<sup>6</sup>

Both Perry Miller's Africa and Herman Melville's Polynesia gave them an epiphanic moment to construct their identities as, respectively, an American historian and a writer of national literature. Their overseas experience, however, yielded completely disparate outcomes for the two men. While Miller's African experience abruptly awakened his consciousness of the origin of American culture and Americanness, and solidified his New England self, Melville's attachment to Polynesia prevented him from

retrieving his whole Western self and instead turned him into part  
“cannibal.”

“Perry Miller’s ‘jungle epiphany’ in the heart of the Belgian Congo” (301), to borrow Gene Wise’s wording, has been regarded as a genesis of American Studies, and since American Studies has always had to delineate American national identity, it is a genesis of America as an idea and set of ideals as well.<sup>7</sup> In the 1956 preface of *Errand into the Wilderness*, Miller states that in searching for “adventure” equivalent to the meaning of “the First World War” for his “older contemporaries,” he went to Africa, and a calling was manifested to him “at Matadi on the banks of Congo”: “The adventures that Africa afforded were tawdry enough, but it became the setting for a sudden epiphany . . . of the pressing necessity for expounding my America to the twentieth century” (vii). What is striking about the passage to us living in the age of postcolonialism or transnationalism is the violent elimination of Africa from the scene. The moment Miller encounters Africa, it is deleted and replaced by America. The African adventures are slighted as “tawdry,” and dismissed as the mere “setting,” while “[his] America” abruptly looms. As Amy Kaplan rightly interprets: “From the remote vantage of the Congo Miller discovered himself at home with a coherent national identity; there, like the Puritans in the wilderness, he found himself ‘left alone with America’” (“Introduction” 4). Hence, Miller found the “meaning of America”



(ix) to be monolithic and exceptional, constructed a coherent history of the United States with “the Puritan migration” as its sole origin (viii), established an academic discipline called “American Studies,” and successfully retrieved his intellectual integrity by transforming himself from a college dropout to a Harvard professor, all by repressing the African presence, or, in other words, by separating the inhabitants of the “city upon a hill” from the “savages” in the wilderness.

The harder Miller tries to erase the traces of Africa from the scene of his intellectual revelation, however, the stronger it asserts its presence. The “pressing necessity” to enunciate a coherent national identity must have arisen from the pressing reality of colonial Africa. “The unloading of drums of case oil flowing out of the inexhaustible wilderness of America” Miller superintended “in that barbaric tropic” reminds us not only of the ongoing exploitation and forced modernization of the Congo but also of the “wilderness of America” and the cultures and lives of Native Americans exhausted by Anglo-Saxon conquerors (viii). In his outright denial of “social historians,” who were not tackling “*the* fundamental theme,” Miller derides “the warp and woof of American history” exemplified by “the Wilmot Proviso and the chain store” (vii-viii). Amy Kaplan comments on the passage: “Reference to the Wilmot Proviso also introduces the major theme Miller never touches in his work but silently evokes on the banks of the Congo:

American slavery” (“Introduction” 7). The Wilmot Proviso was an unsuccessful proposal advanced by a Democratic congressman, David Wilmot, to forbid the extension of slavery to the new territories as a result of the Mexican War (1846-48). As the Wilmot Proviso stands out in its specificity among other examples of the materials of social historians, such as “stoves or bathtubs, or tax laws, banks, the conduct of presidential elections, or even inventories of artifacts” (viii), Miller’s deliberate choice of the proviso as a mockable concern suggests that the colonial Congo must have considerably affected his mind, prompting his awareness of the imperialistic westward expansion and slavery endorsed by the United States. Thus, Miller sacrifices Africa as “an imperial unconscious of national identity” for staging a coherent national image of America (Kaplan, “Introduction” 5).

Miller never expected the idea of Africa, which he pushed aside to tell a consistent history of the US, in fact to haunt his whole book. His ominously entitled chapter “The End of the World” explores the possible completion of the Puritan errand into the wilderness through the analysis of how the literature of the apocalypse rewrote the deluge and the last judgment as a way of responding to the Copernican and Newtonian theories of universe, which threatened the very foundation of Christianity. Although Miller needed a sense of an ending appropriate enough to complete the coherent narrative of the birth of the nation, he failed to give “a glorious, even though

a violent, conclusion” to the errand and to his story (217). His final chapter has two endings. He reaches the first tentative ending when he insists that “the nineteenth century was completing the seventeenth’s errand into the wilderness” by launching “the gigantic industrial expansion” with a “limitless prospect,” which “would demonstrate the folly of anxieties about, or even of a lust for, the end of this physical universe” (236). As a man of letters living in the age of the Cold War, however, he could not securely believe in the optimistic celebration of modern technology. The second coda comes when Miller cites the official *United States Bombing Survey* as the last and most impeccable example of apocalyptic literature. This ending is incompatible with his mission in two ways: the selection of material of “social” history conflicts with his disregard for such material in the book’s preface, and his perspective changes drastically from New England to Hiroshima. The way Miller demonstrates how “punctiliously” the record of nuclear bombing complies with the “apocalyptic tradition” is devoid of any emotion, almost numbed (238, 239). Miller’s last passage shows his bewilderment about the completion of the errand the nuclear destruction might have brought:

When the end of the world was a descent from Heaven, it was also a Judgment; if it becomes more and more a contrivance, it has less and less to do with good and evil. . . . Explosion, in its stark physical simplicity, although satisfying the most venerable requirements for stage effects, turns out to be . . . not what was wanted after all. Not for this was the errand run into a wilderness, and not for this will it be run. Catastrophe, by and for itself, is not enough. (239)

The sheer violence of the atomic bomb, forbidding space for moral judgment, confused and terrified Miller. His out-of-place, theatrical metaphor reminds us of the grand announcement of his project in the preface as “a rank of spotlights on the massive narrative of the movement of European culture into the vacant wilderness of America” (vii). Miller’s stunning realization that the errand is not performed on the stage but happening in reality fractures his otherwise coherent narrative of America’s genesis.

It is predictably ironic that the real Congo which Miller buried deep in the unconscious in his preface strikes back dramatically at the end of the book; the first American atomic bomb, dropped on Hiroshima, was made with uranium dug out from the Shinkolobwe mine in the province of Katanga of the Belgian Congo (Reybrouck 190).<sup>8</sup> As this fact had been kept secret until recently, Miller had no way to realize that his repressed Congo loomed over the whole book.<sup>9</sup> Nor did he expect the irreparable consequence of the errand when he wrote, in his preface: “What I believe caught my imagination, among the fuel drums, was a realization of the uniqueness of the American experience; even then I could dimly make out the *portent* for the future of the world, looking upon these tangible symbols of the republic’s *appalling* power” (ix; emphasis added). If Miller’s choice of such words as “portent” and “appalling” is a deliberate one, it seems he dimly discerned that the atomic bombs, which are the symbols of the republic’s horrifying power in the mid-

twentieth century, would be a menacing warning for the future of the world. The uniqueness of American experience would thus be realized in a disastrous and tragic way.

A century before Miller, Herman Melville accurately prognosticates that the Pacific, especially Japan, would be the next target of United States imperialism, as I argue in Chapter three. His prophesy might be extended farther: that the catastrophic climax of the atomic age would be marked in the same region. As Yunte Huang states, “Close to where Melville’s *Pequod* went down in its doomed pursuit of the White Whale, the United States conducted its first offshore testing of nuclear weapons. What Melville calls ‘that double-bolted land’ or ‘the impenetrable Japans,’ later in the twentieth century, witnessed a ‘double flowering’ of nuclear horror that destroyed two of its cities” (144).

In contrast to Miller’s persistent resistance to a heterogeneous national identity, Melville’s sailing experiences raised his intense consciousness of transnational America. Christopher Sten argues that Melville’s physical contacts with diverse cultures cultivated his postcolonial sensitivity:

It was perhaps inevitable that Herman Melville would become America’s most cosmopolitan writer of his time—the most widely traveled, with the broadest cultural experience and the most carefully considered views on the colonialism and cultural imperialism that defined his century in the South Seas, Latin America, Africa, and North America. (38)

Young Melville placed himself in what Mary Louise Pratt calls the “contact zone,” “a social space where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination,” which brought him “a new respect for another culture *as a culture*” and a stern critique of western civilization (Pratt 4, Sten 39). We can assume the transformation of his inner self from his outer form:

“Interestingly, the Melville who came back from four years of the Pacific journey had the appearance of a ‘savage’; his brother had to ask him to shave his beard and cut his hair in order to look more like a ‘Christian’ before he met his family” (Huang 84).

Melville’s sojourn on the islands of the South Seas is equivalent to Perry Miller’s epiphany in the Congo in the sense that it perpetually transforms his sense of self and of national identity. In her dense book-length discussion of Melville and Native Americans, Yukiko Oshima illustrates in a succinct expression the significance of Polynesia to constitute Melville’s cosmopolitanism and declares: “Firstly, Melville is American, and secondarily, he is Polynesian” (46).<sup>10</sup> Melville claims himself to be a hybrid. His lyceum lecture, “The South Seas,” delivered from December 1858 to March 1859, insists that he seeks to enhance the welfare of others, particularly of Polynesians, and concludes with both a fervent plea to preserve the Polynesian Eden and a harsh criticism of “civilization”:

As a philanthropist in general, and a friend to the Polynesians in particular, I hope that these Edens of the South Seas, blessed with fertile soils and peopled with happy natives, many being yet uncontaminated by the contact of civilization, will long remain unspoiled in their simplicity, beauty, and purity. And as for annexation, I beg to offer up an earnest prayer—and I entreat all present and all Christians to join me in it—that the banns of that union should be forbidden until *we* have found for ourselves a civilization morally, mentally, and physically higher than one which has culminated in almshouses, prisons, and hospitals. (420)

As in *Typee*, where Toby and Tommo are described as both “pioneer[s]” and “serpents” while intruding into the Typee valley (38-39), Melville identifies himself not only as a “friend” of Polynesians but also as a colonizer who degenerates their innocence and desires to conquer the “Edens of the South Seas” (Oshima 46-47, 418). The application of the marriage metaphor of “the banns of that union” to the Western annexation of the South Sea islands recalls the “cozy, loving pair” of Ishmael and Queequeg. As Queequeg, a prince of a Pacific island tribe, realizes the Christians are more “miserable and wicked” than “all his father’s heathens” and determines to “die a pagan” (*Moby-Dick* 52, 56), Melville is profoundly skeptical whether western civilization is morally, mentally, and physically worthy to unite with the innocent natives. In his June, 1851, letter to Hawthorne, Melville lamented that he would “go down to posterity” as a “man who lived among the cannibals” (Correspondence 193). The very experience of loving and fearing the cannibals, however, assigns him a mulatto identity of being both American and Polynesian, and allows him to keep a perspective sympathetic

to the heathens or the marginalized without disregarding his inevitable position as a colonizer throughout his literary career.

In this dissertation, I name Melville's mind-set as it wavers between the American and Polynesian as being "on the beach." The expression both literarily and figuratively demonstrates Melville's status as a writer whose encounters with primitive societies in the South Seas both threaten and liberate him from Victorian cultural codes of race, class, and gender. On the one hand, if we take the beach to signify "land," and a "civilian life," it suggests the physical fact of Melville's being "ashore," "retired" from his seamen's life and starting his literary career (*OED*). On the other hand, the beach is a liminal, in-between space which is not exactly the land nor the sea; "on the beach" is used to mean "beachcombing, unemployed" (*OED*). The term describes Melville's fluid, drifting self, who, like a beachcomber translating languages and manipulating exchanges, interprets two cultures and destabilizes the boundary between savagery and civilization, or periphery and center.

How Melville acquires the hybridity of the American and Polynesian can be tracked down in his first novel, *Typee*. Melville focuses on the theme Miller deliberately avoided and ignored: the Indianization of Westerners. When Miller dismisses Virginia as an origin of national history, his reasoning is tautological and it begs the question: "Once I was back [from Africa] in the



security of a graduate school, it seemed obvious that I had to commence with the Puritan migration. (I recognize, and herein pay my tribute to, the priority of Virginia; but what I wanted was a coherence with which I could coherently begin)” (Miller viii).<sup>11</sup> Even though Miller acknowledges that the English colony of Virginia chronologically precedes the New England colonies, he begins his history of America from New England anyway in pursuit of “security” and “coherence.” Virginia is doubly incoherent and insecure as a national origin. First of all, Jamestown posits a disgraceful alternative history of the slavery in North America. The first known Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619 are surmised to be slaves (Morgan 297).<sup>12</sup> Secondly, migration to Virginia kept failing for several decades because quite a few settlers deserted the colony to go native. Therefore, the ethical problem of the settlers owning slaves and of their faltering loyalty to the colony make the superiority of the city upon a hill insecure and the narrative of Puritans enlightening the savages incoherent.

Westerners’ going native threatens and subverts the Western colonizer’s hegemony over the native population. Especially in the history of the United states, early settlers’ Indianization challenges the legitimacy of the founding of the nation. In his discussion of European encounters with America, Peter Hulme points out the existence of “evidence of a persistent flow of Englishmen voluntarily leaving the harsh conditions of Jamestown for

the Algonquian towns in the surrounding area where, at least before 1622, they were rapidly and unproblematically assimilated” (143). The mysterious disappearance of the Roanoke colony could be explained by the “suspicion that it might simply have gone native” (Hulme 143). This tendency toward assimilation into indigenous tribes is not limited to seventeenth-century Virginia but extended to colonial America in general. In the last letter of *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur insists that “persons of credit” asserted “a thousand instances” of Europeans held captive by the Indians and “thoroughly naturalized to [the] wild course of life” (202). Some of them “chose to remain” among indigenous people because of “the most perfect freedom, the ease of living, the absence of those cares and corroding sollicitudes . . . ,” and “the peculiar goodness of the soil they cultivated” (202). Assuming “something singularly captivating” and “far superior” in the “social bond” of native people, St. John de Crèvecoeur concludes: “for thousands of Europeans are Indians, and we have no examples of even one of those Aborigines having from choice become Europeans!” (202).<sup>13</sup> Thus Europeans’ sense of cultural and racial superiority is overturned by the numerous examples of Indianized whites.

Melville never imagined the Americas as tabula rasa, as he writes about the continent: “though it [America] was then [in 1492] just as old, and perhaps older than Asia, only those sagacious philosophers, the common

sailors, had never seen it before; swearing it was all water and moonshine there” (“Hawthorne and His Mosses” 246). The passage reveals that the Europeans named the land the “New World” just because they had never seen it, and pretended not to notice the presence of the lives and cultures of indigenous peoples which were “perhaps older than Asia,” so that they could legitimately own the land. “The gesture of ‘discovery’ is,” as Hulme puts it, “at the same time a ruse of concealment” (1). Melville layers the stratum of Native Americans beneath Saddle-Meadows, the manor of American aristocrats, the Glendinnings, in *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852): “The Glendinning deeds by which their estate had so long been held, bore the cyphers of three Indian kings, the aboriginal and only conveyancers of those noble woods and plains,” although “in Pierre’s eyes, all its hills and swales seemed as sanctified through their very long uninterrupted possession by his race” (6, 8). The source of the name, Saddle-Meadows, can be traced back to the Indian War, where “the paternal great-grandfather of Pierre, mortally wounded, had sat unhorsed on his saddle in the grass, with his dying voice, still cheering his men in the fray” (5-6); the Glendinning estate is not only honored by the heroism of their ancestor, but is also haunted by the nation’s brutal violence against Native Americans. So Melville’s America is also haunted by the ghosts of Native Americans, slain and dispossessed.

Melville wrote to respond to the complications of a colonial and postcolonial world with his keen awareness of the violence western colonizers had perpetrated on the colonized. Geoffrey Sanborn wisely categorizes Melville as a postcolonial writer who articulates “the dynamics of anxiety and menace in the colonial encounter” and questions “the ontology of the colonial subject” (*Sign* xiii). *Typee*, for example, explicates the process of Tommo’s negotiating the degrees of humanity and savagery in the Typees and in Western civilization through his anxiety at the prospect of being consumed by cannibals and the menace of being tattooed and turning into a cannibal. In “Benito Cereno,” the subtle intelligence of African slaves, especially Babo, is revealed in a masquerade of slavery which reverses the usual power structure of slavery by presenting a white slave and a black master, and thus threatens the racial superiority of the Spanish colonizer and the American observer.

What is striking about Melville’s writing, however, is the rapturous delight with which he depicts being in-between, coexisting with colonial anxiety and fear. This jubilation is typically captured in the following escape scene toward the end of *Typee*. Upon the news that Toby is coming back, which turns out to be wrong, Tommo is reaching the seashore anyway:

[N]ever shall I forget the extacy I felt when I first heard the roar of the surf breaking upon the beach. Before long I saw the flashing billows themselves through the opening between the trees. Oh glorious sight and sound of ocean! with what rapture did

I hail you as familiar friends! By this time the shouts of the crowd upon the beach were distinctly audible, and in the blended confusion of sounds I almost fancied I could distinguish the voices of my own countrymen. (*Typee* 248)

This blissful moment has been misinterpreted as Tommo's excitement about tricking his way out of the prison of tattooed cannibals and returning to civilized society for several reasons; because he imagines hearing "the voices of [his] countrymen"; because Marheyo, Tommo's Typeean father, "emphatically pronounce[s]" the two English words, "Home" and "Mother" right before the scene; and because Tommo flings a boat-hook at Mow-Mow, an athletic islander, at the end of the story (248). But if closely read, the passage obviously describes the "extacy" brought to him by "the roar of the surf breaking upon the beach" and the sight of "the flashing billows," and the "rapture" with which he lauds the "glorious sight and sound of ocean" as his "familiar friends" (248). Besides, what Tommo distinguishes as "the voices of [his] countrymen" turns out to be "[his] own name shouted out" with the "broken English" of Karakoe, an Oahu islander, whose tabooed status gives him the privilege of mediating between the various tribes of the island and the westerners (248, 249). Tommo is filled with "a tumult of delight" to see this Westernized islander (249). Although Tommo ends up employing violence against the "ferocious" islander, Mow-Mow (*Typee* 252), he does not return to his country but goes roaming as a beachcomber in *Omoa*. Therefore, Tommo's ecstasy is not derived from tearing himself away from the cannibal other and

retrieving his white self, but from anticipating being at sea, that is, suspending himself outside of the dichotomy of civilization and savagery, and liberating himself from the social, political, and historical orthodoxies on the land in the boundless space of the ocean.

It was his many encounters with the ocean that gave Melville an outside perspective from which to look at his own country. In his meticulous examination of circle imageries in *Moby-Dick*, Hiroshi Takayama points out that the ocean for Melville is “oxymora incarnated, and ironies he senses in his flesh and blood” (my trans.; 222), as his characterizations of the seas suggests: “beneath all its blue blandness, some thought there lurked a devilish charm”; “these are the times of dreamy quietude, when beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean’s skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it; and would not willingly remember, that this velvet paw but conceals a remorseless fang” (*Moby-Dick* 234, 491). As Takayama argues that Melville was able to relativize rigid dualisms and to represent the “roundness of life” through ironies by experiencing the ocean as “discordia concors” (my trans.; 225-26, 231), I believe that Melville comes to realize, while on the ocean, the interdependency of white and black, civilization and savagery, colonizer and colonized, or center and periphery, and thus to conjure up a transnational vision of America.

The ocean not only teaches him the totality of life but also constitutes the ultimate other. Swallowed by the deadly calm of the sea, a writer confronts absolute silence and becomes suspicious about the representative power of language. When Pip jumps out of the boat and is left alone in the middle of the sea, he sees “God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom” and reaches “celestial thought,” but goes insane (*Moby-Dick* 414). Ishmael warns of the danger of “[losing] his identity” while standing the mast-head. Without looking for a whale, “a dreamy, meditative man” is delightfully “lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie” “by the blending of cadence of waves with thoughts,” and nearly drops into the sea “no more to rise for ever” (*Moby-Dick* 156-59). To approach the truth of life reflected in the ocean without risking insanity nor the loss of identity, Melville places himself on the beach, where he can sense the sea with both anxiety and pleasure. He identifies himself with this in-between state for the rest of his literary career.

Melville’s heterogeneous, multilingual, and transcultural approach to the nation and the world anticipates the recent transnational turn of American Studies. As Amy Kaplan explains Melville’s transnationalism, “[h]is work affords us a critical perspective on both the power and the limits of the nation in a world increasingly interconnected by the vectors of trade, empire, and revolution” (“Transnational” 43). In his revision of canonical

American literature through transatlantic negotiations, Paul Giles explains his attempt to “virtualize” America by denaturalizing the relationship between literature and national identity:

The point here is that national histories, of whatever kind, cannot be written simply from the inside. The scope and significance of their narrative involve not just the incorporation of multiple or discordant voices in a certain preestablished framework of unity, but also an acknowledgement of external points of reference that serve to relativize the whole conceptual field, pulling the circumference of national identity itself into strange, “elliptical” shape. (Giles 6)

Melville’s literary work not only deconstructs the national history by letting the “meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways” (*Moby-Dick* 117) relate diverse and contradictory counternarratives, but also interrogates “the circumference of national identity” from the perspective of in-between space.

My dissertation begins with the chapter entitled, “Captivated by the Other: *Typee* and the Barbary Captivity Narrative,” which explores how Melville makes use of the literary motifs of ‘turning Turk’ in Barbary captivity narratives to recount Tommo’s experience of nearly going native in *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*. The Mediterranean Sea and the Barbary States had been a transnational sphere where Turks, Moors, buccaneers, and Christian apostates had intermingled and struggled with each other since the sixteenth century. From the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, American ships were often assaulted by Algerian privateers, and as many as 500 Americans were captured as slaves. The Barbary captivity



narrative is a sensationalized testimony of white slaves, often focusing on the exotic life of North Africa and the straitened circumstances of the captives. The most problematic moment of the narratives occurs when the white slaves are forced to renounce their faith in the Christian God and to convert to Islam, and some of them actually do turn Turk. The contradictory mixture of attraction to and repugnance of the moment produces a critical if momentary subversion of the hierarchies of the Christian over the heathen and of civilization over savagery, and thus interrogates the legitimacy of American citizenship. Tommo's oscillation between the allure of the noble savages and the fear of being tattooed or devoured in *Typee* parallels the ambivalent feelings of converted Barbary captives, James Leander Cathcart and Joseph Pitts, both authors of this rare genre. The chapter thus proves Melville's early awareness of the instability of nationhood and of a sense of American self, as well as his interest in a popular literary genre.

While Tommo seems to retrieve his western identity by knocking an islander down, the narrator of *Omoo*, who might well be Tommo, and other minor, in-between characters in *Typee* and *Omoo* enjoy roaming on the beach, a liminal space between civilization and savagery. The next chapter, "Melville on the Beach: In-Between Characters in *Typee* and *Omoo*," continues to discuss the question of Western self in scenes of colonial encounters, with more focus on Melville as a beachcombing writer. Like the

authors of Barbary captivity narratives, Melville was obliged to satisfy the contradictory needs of his readers: to place himself close enough to indigenous people and their culture to tell an authentic story of the glamorous South Seas, but also to maintain a whole American self and thus be a reliable narrator for enlightened readership. As Vanessa Smith aptly names him a “gentleman beachcomber,” Melville’s sophisticated narrative techniques and his shrewd identification with Western society make it possible to criticize the violence and corruption of missionaries and civilized nations, and to ennoble him among the disreputable vagrants. In *Typee*, while Melville restores Tommo’s American citizenship and in consequence conceals the possible otherness of his autobiographical self, he characterizes Toby, Tommo’s double, as a perpetual rover, paints Marnoo, a Westernized islander, as an ideal hybrid of savagery and sophistication, and does not allow Jimmy, a subversive in-between, to appear in the main story but only in the sequel. On the other hand, in *Omoo*, Melville sets himself free from the controversial status of beachcomber by ridiculing it. He confuses the narrator’s identity, by changing his name from Tommo to “Typee,” and then abruptly christens him and his companion with the names Paul and Peter, which is an intended mockery of the missionaries in Tahiti. The two pairs of beachcombers in *Omoo*, Paul and Peter, and Zeke and Shorty, lack the linguistic abilities of either Polynesians or English speakers, thus making

neither of the pairs a possible threat to Western values. As Homi K. Bhabha designates “the figure of colonial otherness” as creating “the disturbing distance” between “the colonialist Self” and “the colonized Other,” the beachcombers, who exemplify the distance between civilization and savagery, stand for the colonial otherness itself and could undermine the absolute superiority of the civilized world over the primitive utopia. Thus, Melville somehow succeeded in creating an incisive critique of colonial powers without ruining his reputation as a decent Americanist writer.

Chapter three, “Strike through the Unreasoning Masks’: *Moby-Dick* and Japan,” delves into the significant role the American whaling industry played in exploring the Pacific, relating America’s imperialistic enterprise to conquer all parts of Asia and to unfold the mysteries of Japan to Ishmael’s narration of Ahab’s drive to harpoon the inscrutable white whale. *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* was published in 1851, which is just three years before Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry persuaded the Japanese government to open up in 1854. Reflecting the peculiar political tension of the time, *Moby-Dick* is filled with ominous and mysterious images of Asia and Japan, thus creating the haunting atmosphere of the story. In remarking that the *Pequod* allegedly obtains one of its masts from Japan, Melville indicates his knowledge of the unofficial diplomatic intercourse between Japan and American whaling vessels, which was already cultivated before the

diplomatic opening of Japan. Based on the hypothesis that holds that Ahab accidentally picks up the narrative's five anonymous sailors along or off the coast of Japan in a previous voyage, the chapter will suggest that Fedallah and his dusky comrades are the collective image of mysterious Asia and could have been modeled after the Japanese sea drifters. There is a possibility that Melville read and heard about or even met such shipwrecked Japanese sailors rescued by American whaling vessels, the most renowned of whom is Manjiro Nakahama, also known as John Mung. Historicizing Fedallah and his associates as castaways in the real Pacific demystifies and exorcises demonic Asians, transforming them into silent, diligent laborers struggling to survive in heterogeneous cultures. Tales of shipwrecked sailors represent some person-to-person exchanges between American whalers and anonymous sea drifters that the national history is unlikely to uncover.

Melville found another castaway in the middle of metropolitan New York. Engaging in such menial work as copying legal documents on Wall Street at starvation wages, Bartleby seems "absolutely alone in the universe," and he is compared to "a bit of wreck in the mid Atlantic" ("Bartleby" 32). The Atlantic here metaphorically signifies the global capitalist economy, one of whose centers in the world was New York. Brought up and living in New York for most of his life, "Melville was well situated to observe how an emergent transnational capitalism was drafting and mixing various peoples,

including himself, into its system” (Marr 135), and well aware of how it exploits and alienates the working-class. Chapter four, “‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’: The Politics of Biography and the Future of Capitalism,” analyzes Melville’s critiques both of biography as a nationalistic literary genre and of capitalism through the lawyer’s defective portrait of an insignificant law-copyist, a devoted practitioner of what Max Weber calls “the spirit of capitalism.” From 1790 through the mid-nineteenth century, biographies of great men contributed to the creation of the image of the ideal citizen and the American national identity. Deliberately choosing the most marginalized of ordinary men as protagonists in “Bartleby” and *Israel Potter*, Melville undermines the tradition of the national biography of great men, and thus relates a counter-narrative of an exploited laborer. Although the lawyer-narrator’s latent but constant fascination with John Jacob Astor, a remarkably successful American entrepreneur and landowner, shows his awareness of the possible monetary reward for writing a millionaire’s biography, his most unlikely selection of Bartleby as a subject suggests the intent to critique rather than celebrate Astorian materialism, and to provide an orientation towards “poetic enthusiasm” that Astor lacks (14). The chapter ends with the picture of Bartleby as a prophet to warn of the possible grievous consequences of extravagant materialism. Max Weber’s gloomy anticipation of the future of Capitalism resonates well with the demeanor of

Bartleby, who writes on, “silently, palely, mechanically” (20). When the spirit of religious asceticism is completely woven into the gigantic economic mechanisms of the nation, a laborer never questions the spiritual meaning of labor as a calling. The biography of Bartleby is an alternative history of America and a dead letter from Melville to his contemporaries and future generations who keep firm faith in the bright future of modern capitalistic society.

Benito Cereno and Babo constitute the most problematic doubling throughout Melville’s literary career. Both being deliberately around the same age, thirty, and both ending their lives right after the trial, one executed, the other enfeebled to death, they represent the implacable tableau of a dignified master and a faithful slave and the dramatic reversal of the colonizer and the colonized. Chapter five, “Mimicking Black, Fashioning White: The Politics of Racial Identities in ‘Benito Cereno,’” interrogates the formation of racial identities through the masquerade of slavery in a slave rebellion. Three of the novella’s critiques of racism will be explored. “Benito Cereno” is told in a complicated threefold narrative structure: the third person narration throughout a limited perspective of Delano, the extracts of Cereno’s deposition about the rebellion, and a sequel to the event which consists of a conversation between Delano and Cereno after the suppression of the rebellion, and its aftermath, the deaths of Babo and Cereno. Though no

part alone provides a substantial clue to interpret the story, the narrative structure of the novella itself provocatively illuminates the untold critique of slavery by unveiling an ideological formation of narrative voices. Secondly, the chapter will explain how the slaves, under Babo's supervision, contain and transgress the ideologies of racism both in the dramatization of racial relationships and in ridiculing scientific racism. Thirdly, focusing on the fatal transformation of Benito Cereno's body and soul after he is forced to act "white," I will argue that the diseased, wounded, and finally dead body of Benito Cereno represents not only the unsubstantiality of white supremacy, but also the tormented body and the dispersed, dislocated subjectivity of black slaves.

Melville's literary imagination has inspired many American novelists and poets such as Hart Crane, W.H. Auden, Ray Bradbury, Charles Johnson, Toni Morrison, and Cormac McCarthy, but the range of repercussions from his works transcend national borders. Chapter six, "From Rosmarine to Grandma's Bible: Melville, Ikezawa, and the Otherness of Nature," introduces an example of Melville's transnational influence, his impact on Natsuki Ikezawa, a contemporary Japanese writer, a translator, and an editor of Japanese and world literature collections. Having lived and traveled in Greece, France, Okinawa, Hokkaido, and Pacific islands, Ikezawa's works, like Melville's, contemplate a civilization and an environment, sympathize

with minorities such as indigenous Ainu, Pacific islanders, and war victims, and describe communications and conflicts across cultural, political, and ethnic borders. This last chapter examines the philosophy of nature and nuclear power Ikezawa developed after the Japanese earthquake of March 11, 2011, and pursues how Ikezawa's thoughts about the apathy of nature resonate with Melville's meditations upon humanity and the environment in his later works, especially *John Marr and Other Sailors with Some Sea-Pieces*. Melville responds to what Edgar A. Dryden calls "the world" as "an absolute Other" in the last verse of *John Marr*, "the Pebbles." After rejecting our egotistic desire to control or personify natural objects, the poet solemnly declares that the heartlessness of nature will be purified in a poem, "[d]istilled in wholesome dew named rosmarine," and thus heal the poet's wounded soul. In Ikezawa's short story, "Grandma's Bible," the image of the protagonist's grandmother's Bible with her photo in it, caught up by the tsunami and now sitting at the bottom of the sea, reconnects the protagonist to his once distant hometown. The Bible becomes a kind of fetish to symbolize not only his attachment to his grandmother but also his family history and the legacy of marginalized Christians in the region and "a little Ainu blood." Both writers manage to find a way to co-exist with nature as the ultimate other, that is, to compose a poetic and imaginative vision in order to keep the



treasured, though traumatic, past in remembrance, to be healed by that memory, and in the end to recover a connection with physical reality.

Melville wrote in “Hawthorne and His Mosses”: “[G]reat geniuses are parts of the times; they themselves are the times; and possess a correspondent coloring” (246). If Melville himself is the times, I argue that he is as colorful, sympathetic, multicultural, interracial, and transnational as he depicts the times in his narratives. I like to imagine this to be so.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the concise and insightful history of the Melville Revival from 1883 to 1953 and its aftermath, see Marovitz. He argues from the standpoint not only of textual, critical, biographical discourses on Melville but also of visual adaptations such as illustrations, films, and operas.

<sup>2</sup> Matthiessen himself, however, is not as mainstream as we once considered him to be; his monograph on Sarah Orne Jewett, for example, proves his attention to female writers; and his distressing suppression of his own homosexual identity has only been posthumously revealed. Besides, Matthiessen's choice of the five authors is heavily affected by the ideas of New Criticism.

<sup>3</sup> To prove Melville's continuous presence in the literary canon, Myra Jehlen counted and compared the number of critical works on Melville with those on Stowe and Douglass: "Overall, in the half century from 1940 to 1991, the [MLA] *Bibliography* lists 3,357 publications on Melville, 239 on Stowe, and 85 on Douglass" (3).

<sup>4</sup> In the "Preface" and "General Introduction" of *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), the general editor, Emory Elliott, states the impossibility of telling a single, coherent narrative of literary history. Unlike the *Literary History of the United States* (1948), which naturally and solemnly announces that "[e]ach generation should produce at least one

literary history of the United States, for each generation must define the past in its own terms” (Spiller xii), “the” past is no longer available in late twentieth century American literary arena because during those four decades, all the definitions of “literary or literature,” “history,” and “the United States or America,” have radically been changed. Elliott regards the change from monolithic American literary history to heterogeneous one as liberating for literary critics:

Once the skeptical arguments had cut the tie between the text and ‘reality,’ between the ‘meaning’ and ‘truth,’ and had exposed the rhetorical and political nature of all writing about human experience, ‘fictional’ or ‘historical,’ many critics and historians felt a great relief at no longer having to ‘prove’ their readings to be the only true and correct ones. Criticism has been freed to be more daring and speculative so that some critics have begun to rival the creative artists themselves with interpretive essays that are quite original in style and perspective. No longer required to sound authoritative and magisterial, the voice of the individual critic can be more distinctive and personal. (General Introduction xviii)

<sup>5</sup> Ann Douglass connects Miller to Melville twice in her memorial essay on Miller. She remembers a drunken Miller reading *Moby-Dick* to an audience. As the “intoxicated text transformed Miller’s inebriation into a strange sobriety of inspiration,” she realized “two masters had met to vivify each other” (26). When she tells the “myth” of Miller’s death, she recites that his “carcass by rights should have been as scarred as Ahab’s or the body of the white whale itself” to imply Miller’s “shattering self-violence” (27-28).

<sup>6</sup> All the biographical information on Perry Miller comes from Delbanco, “Perry Miller,” pp. 511-13.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Kaplan declares that “[t]he field of American studies was conceived on the banks of the Congo” (3). Peter Hulme introduces Miller’s discovery of “his intellectual vocation” in Africa as an example of historians’ accounts of “American Genesis” (138-39). My argument about Miller’s preface is based on Kaplan’s insightful close reading of it, except for the secret connection between the Congo and Hiroshima through uranium, which was unavailable when she published the Introduction in 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Japan was not only a victim of the atomic bombs but also a strong advocate of Imperialism. Digging up the unknown history of Congolese soldiers’ participation in the Allied campaigns, David Van Reybrouck portrays “Congolese paramedics car[ing] for Burmese civilians and British soldiers” in the jungle of Burma, where the “fierce combat between Japanese and anti-Fascist forces, including the British,” continued (188-89). As the nuclear destruction forced Japan to surrender, the Congolese were, ironically, “‘saved’ by an ore that came from under [their] own native soil” (190).

<sup>9</sup> Attending the event, “The Missing Link: Peace and Security Surrounding Uranium” in 2016, Susan Williams reports that “once at the centre of the Manhattan Project in the second world war,” with “the richest

uranium in the world,” the Shinkolobwe mine is now closed, deserted, “haunted by the ghost of Hiroshima.”

<sup>10</sup> In his comprehensive discussion of Melville’s religious thoughts, Emory Elliott points out: “Clearly, his experience of the world, and especially his month of living with the Typee people, was like a graduate education in cultural anthropology that challenged many of his youthful assumptions” (“Wandering To-and-Fro” 151).

<sup>11</sup> Miller actually “pay[s] tribute to” “the priority of Virginia” by including a chapter, “Religion and Society in the Early Literature of Virginia” in *Errand into the Wilderness*, where he attempts to transform the historical view of early Virginia as solely materialistic into a religious equivalent to the New England Puritans, and thus to incorporate Virginia in his coherent narrative of the American genesis. By making an excuse that “history is often more instructive as it considers what men conceived they were doing rather than what, in brute fact, they did,” Miller pays attention not to the successive failures of the colonies but to a Virginian “spirit of chivalric nobility” (101, 99). He analyzes John Rolfe’s letter about his marriage with Pocahontas as an example of the piety of the English settlers. Rolfe forced Pocahontas to convert to prove his decision was led not by “the unbridled desire of carnall affection” but for “the glory of God” (107). Miller notices neither the possibility of Rolfe’s actually marrying her for “carnall affection” nor the

religious violence Rolfe exerted on Pocahontas. Miller, of course, never mentions the numerous occasions of the Indianization of the first Virginians.

<sup>12</sup> Edmund S. Morgan explains the origin of slavery in Virginia solely from the economic perspective: “Slavery is a mode of compulsion that has often prevailed where land is abundant, and Virginians had been drifting toward it from the time when they first found something profitable to work at. Servitude in Virginia’s tobacco fields approached closer to slavery than anything known at the time in England” (296). As the mortality rate was very high among the immigrants, hiring English servants for five years would be “the better buy” than owning slaves by 1660 (297-98).

<sup>13</sup> St. John de Crèvecoeur might not have been able to write so generously about Native Americans after he discovered in 1783 that his house was burned in an Indian raid and his wife murdered during his absence (Manning ix-x).

## Chapter 1

### A Possibility of “Turning Turk”: *Typee* and Barbary Captivity Narratives

Since as early as the sixteenth century, migration from Europe to North Africa had given such poor people as discontented sailors, exploited peasants, and pioneering traders a precious opportunity to restart their lives. Willingly discarding their native lands, customs, and beliefs, these Europeans “turned Turk,” that is, converted to Islam, in search of a better livelihood. The North African region served as a Promised Land before people began to pay more attention to the Americas. At the same time, many traders, sailors, and travelers from Europe were captured by Muslim privateers and sold as slaves in the Maghreb. Hence, the Mediterranean Sea and the Barbary States, that is, Algiers, Morocco, Tripoli, and Tunis, constitute a great multiethnic and transcultural space where Moors, Turks, and Christian renegades lived and flourished together though not without commercial, religious, and political conflicts.<sup>1</sup>

The United States was forced to be involved in this multicultural diplomatic sphere when it declared its independence from Britain, and thus American vessels were no longer taken under the protection of the powerful British navy and of the treaties between the British government and the North African States. From the capture of the Boston merchant ship *Betsy*

and the enslavement of its crew in Morocco in 1784 to America's military victory against Algiers in 1815, nearly seven hundred American citizens were held captive and endured a slave life.<sup>2</sup> The stories of Barbary piracy and white slaves spread in their homeland through captives' correspondence with their family and friends and the narratives they published after emancipation. The Barbary captivity narratives deeply influenced the formation of national identity of the early republic and of its diplomatic place in international relations at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Above all, the impact of white slaves revealed the fundamental contradiction between American democracy and institutional slavery.

Herman Melville's *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) makes use of the framework of captivity narratives to present the colonial encounter between Western civilization and the Marquesan natives. A white captive is a recurrent theme in Melville's works, and he takes advantage of the literary subjects generated and nurtured in Barbary captivity narratives and Puritan/Indian captivity narratives, such as the question of American self and legitimate citizenship contrasting with the Other, the dichotomy of savagery and civilization, racial stereotypes based on ferocious customs like cannibalism and tattooing, and the intermixture of races, cultures and religions.



One of the most controversial questions in *Typee* is why Tommo finally chooses to escape from the Edenic valley of Typees and returns to a civilization whose baleful influence upon the Marquesan cultures he harshly criticizes. In other words, he firmly refuses to “convert,” though his sympathy once lies with the savages. Some critics ascribe this narrative inconsistency to the difference between the voice of the young adventurer and that of the mature narrator. Others simply explain that the convention of travel narratives obliges the protagonist to come home to tell the story.<sup>3</sup> Tommo’s rash and biased judgment of the presence of cannibalism, his overwhelming fear of tattooing, and the vividness of his violence against the native in the last scene tend to cancel out his resentment over the enforced Westernization of the native population and his affection toward his Typeean family in the earlier part of the narrative.

It may sound paradoxical, but I would like to argue that the main theme of *Typee* is a possibility of “going native.” The literary convention of homecoming, if too abrupt and contradictory, is the only way to represent a so-called white Indian. Based on extensive archival research of Barbary captivity narratives, Paul Baepler reasonably concludes that there are very few or almost no accounts of converted captives, probably because they are to be blamed for their voluntary choice of “inferior” or “savage” culture over Christian civilization, and also because a white barbarian makes too radical

and sensitive a topic to command a large readership (Introduction 42-43). Technically, we cannot reach the transcultural experience of Christian renegades as far as they keep silent.<sup>4</sup> By combining the perspective of a disaffected sailor who readily dismisses the civilized society with that of a white captive who strongly refuses to be assimilated into the Other, *Typee* succeeds in depicting the possibility of “turning Turk” and securing a politically neutral space from which to criticize Western societies and Christian missionaries.

This chapter aims to show how Melville adopts the literary motifs of “turning Turk” in Barbary captivity narratives, including James Leander Cathcart’s *The Captives, Eleven Years a Prisoner in Algiers* (1899), and Joseph Pitts’ *A True and Faithful Account of the Religion and Manners of the Mohammedans* (1704), two of the rare examples of the writings of converted captives, to produce a critical moment of subverting the hierarchies of Christian and heathen and of civilization and savagery in *Typee*.

As a sailor and an avid reader, Melville must have been familiar with the geography of the Maghreb and the Mediterranean, and the tales of privateering and captivity in the region. The library of “the frigate United States, on which Melville served between August 1843 and October 1844,” carried “various narrations of imprisonment, shipwreck, perils and captivity,” including *Two Years before the Mast* and *Robinson Crusoe* (Sealts 27). In

*Omoo*, “six veteran rovers,” paid off from a whaler, tipsily sing a tune, “Sailing down, sailing down, / On the coast of *Barbaree*” (*Omoo* 292). *Mardi* refers to Mediterranean whales when some sailors wonder if the “catastrophe [of Jonah] took place in the Mediterranean Sea” (*Mardi* 289). In *Moby-Dick*, John [Johannes] Leo, “the old Barbary traveller,” testifies to “the antiquity of the whale” by describing the “Afric temple” of whale bones (*Moby-Dick* 458). *Pierre* figuratively employs the phrase “to turn Turk” to describe something impossible: “He would turn Turk before he would disown an allegiance hereditary to all gentlemen, from the hour their Grand Master, Adam, first knelt to Eve” (*Pierre* 24).

In *Typee*, after Tommo and Toby have deserted the ship, the *Dolly*, and are wandering around the interior of the island, Tommo comes across “an indistinctly traced footpath” (*Typee* 44). He compares his fear of an accidental encounter with the savage tribes to Robinson Crusoe’s, and said: “Robinson Crusoe could not have been more startled at the footprint in the sand than we were at this unwelcome discovery” (44). This reference to Robinson Crusoe, “the archetypal conqueror and colonizer” (Colley 1), reminding us of his colonial relationship with his “servant” Friday, foreshadows Tommo’s behaviors as a pseudo-colonizer in the *Typee* valley. We should also notice that Crusoe is “representative of British imperial experience in a very different sense,” that is, Barbary captivity (Colley 1). Before his shipwreck off

the coast of Trinidad, Crusoe is captured at sea by “a Turkish rover of Sallee” and ends up serving as “a miserable slave” in Morocco (Defoe 40,41). Thus Melville’s allusion to Crusoe here correctly anticipates Tommo’s double roles as a captive and a conqueror in the Typeean community, as Crusoe is, even after six years of his occupation of the island, uncertain if he should name his situation his “reign” or his “captivity” (Defoe 147).

We can also infer Melville’s knowledge of Barbary captivity narratives from his mention of the sensational description of cannibalism in the popular literature.

According to the popular fictions, the crews of vessels, shipwrecked *on some barbarous coast*, are eaten alive like so many dainty joints by the uncivil inhabitants; and unfortunate voyagers are lured into smiling and treacherous bays; knocked in the head with outlandish war-clubs; and served up without any preliminary dressing. (*Typee* 205, emphasis added)

“Some barbarous coast” possibly means “the Barbary coast,” because the *OED* explains the origin of the word “Barbary” as “land of barbarians, barbarism,” and “Barbarous nationality, state, or speech.” Robinson Crusoe is also afraid of cannibalism when he approaches “the truly Barbarian coast” “where we could ne’er once go on shore but we should be devoured by savage beasts, or more merciless savages of humane kind” (Defoe 45).

When Melville tries to undermine the hegemony of Western civilization over the heathenish islanders, he does not forget to include Native Americans and Arabs among “the noble savages”:

Civilization does not engross all the virtues of humanity: she has not even her full share of them. They flourish in greater abundance and attain greater strength among many barbarous people. The hospitality of the wild Arab, the courage of the North American Indian, and the faithful friendships of some of the Polynesian nations, far surpass any thing of a similar kind among the polished communities of Europe. (*Typee* 203)

The passage suggests that Occidental contacts with the Orient and European encounters with Native Americans create instructive precedents for Tommo's observation of the Marquesas.

Regarding the hero's homoerotic attraction to "the Dark Stranger(s)" as "a subversive force to undermine that patriarchal authority," Robert K. Martin identifies the influence of captivity narratives on the narrative structure of *Typee* (22). The normative ending of captivity narratives, the rescue of the captives, often betrays ambivalence because by the time the white prisoners escape, they are partly or sometimes totally incorporated into the native society and thus on the verge of losing their white identities.<sup>5</sup> As *Typee* opens with the "bachelor sailors" spellbound by the temptation of Polynesian women, the stories of captivity unreservedly describe the allure of captivation paired with the fear of captivity: "The 'Dolly' was fairly *captured*: and never I will say was vessel carried before by such a dashing and irresistible party of boarders! The ship taken, we could not do otherwise than yield ourselves *prisoners*, and for the whole period that she remained in the bay, the 'Dolly,' as well as her crew, were completely in the hands of the

mermaids" (*Typee* 15). By changing his name from "Tom" to "Tommo," the protagonist, if temporarily, disposes of his Western identity and is adapted into the Typee family of "benevolent" father Marheyo, "industrious" mother Tinor, "devoted" servant Kory-Kory, and "engaging" wife Fayaway. The white captives who willingly "go native" should be threatening to American society because "surely a society that feels this danger so intensely must doubt the validity of its own sense of self" (Martin 23). The conventional escape at the end of the story apparently retrieves the legitimacy of western culture and yet leaves some equivocation.

Although Tommo is afraid of being eaten by the Islanders throughout the narrative, and cannibalism surely makes one of the main reasons for his desire to escape, his primary motivation for disengaging himself from Typeean community is based on King Mehevi and other chiefs' persistent demand for him to be tattooed. Samuel Otter persuasively argues that tattooing is more devastating than cannibalism in the sense that it profoundly injures Tommo's Western identity: "Tommo might be eaten on the island of Nukuheva, and such an event would be unfortunate, but far more troubling to Melville is the prospect that Tommo will be incorporated in native systems in a more enduring sense: not through metabolism but through inscription" (10). Tommo's "utter abhorrence" of tattooing results from his apprehensions that he "should be disfigured in such a manner as

never more to have the face to return to [his] countrymen” (*Typee* 219). Above all, Tommo regards the operation of tattooing as religious conversion: “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*” (*Typee* 220, emphasis added). The tattoo, especially the one on his face, impresses the eternal mark of a heathen on his white skin, proves his “turning Typee,” and makes it impossible for him to go back to the civilized, Christian world.

In an earlier chapter (Chapter 18), Tommo considers the tattooing on the back of Marnoo as “the best specimen of the Fine Arts,” and highly estimates that the contrast of “the brightest blue” of the tattoo with “the light olive color of the skin” produces “an unique and even elegant effect” (*Typee* 136). After Tommo himself is urged to be tattooed, however, the tattooing changes its connotations from a fine and admirable art to the emblem of the other. He begins to describe the Typee as “a set of evil beings” “with their naked tattooed limbs” (*Typee* 227), and emphasizes the “hideously tattooed face” of Mow-Mow, as if it becomes a justifiable reason for Tommo to dash the boat-hook at him when Tommo escapes (*Typee* 236). Tommo is compelled to practice violence on the native in order to avoid the fatal violation of his American citizenship.

Tommo's rejection of "conversion," that is, being tattooed to become a heathen, follows the model of the literary motif of "turning Turk" in Barbary captivity narratives. Nearly every story of Barbary captivity contains the captive's report of how he or she is urged to convert to Islam for liberty and a better livelihood, and how he or she bravely resists the temptation and adheres to his or her faith in Christian God. To make a sharp contrast with the heroic Christian survivors, the renegades are drawn as the most detestable wretches in the stories. Cotton Mather, for example, strictly prohibits Christians at home from commiserating with the apostates abroad in his sermon:

One would have thought, that if any thing should have made them turn *Infidels*, it would have been their *Adversity*, and the Hope of getting thereby some Relaxation of their *Adversity*. No; It was remark'd, That the *Renegade's* for the most part, were those who suffered the least share of *Adversity*. The Fellows who enjoy'd more *Prosperity*, & lived in Gentlemens Houses with much of Idleness, and Luxury, and Liberty, THESE for the most part were they that fell into *the Snare of the Wicked*; when those who were toiling about *Castles* or *Brickilns*, continued stedfast in the Faith of our Lord JESUS CHRIST. (65)

In this sermon, Mather blames the French slave who "turned Moor" to escape the death penalty and glorifies the English man who did not yield to the threat and died in the Christian faith. Converting to Islam in pursuit of earthly comfort is such an unforgivable sin that it is better to die a martyr for the faith.



Even the narratives written by the renegades themselves curse and swear at Christian apostates as if trying to purify the “contamination” of Western identity by intimate contact with the Islamic other. James Leander Cathcart was among the six crews of an American schooner captured by an Algerian pirate ship in 1785, held captive in Algiers for eleven years, and eventually promoted to chief Christian secretary to the Algerian Dey, which was the highest possible rank for a Christian slave to attain. In his narrative of captivity, Cathcart never admits his having turned Turk, but insists that the Muslims entrapped him into pronouncing “the symbol of their faith” and forcibly proselytized him. Right after the episode of his conversion, Cathcart manages to cancel it out by quoting the Dey’s high opinion of him:

“That young man has a hard head,” said the Dey; “he has no more intention to turn Moslem than I have now to turn Christian. . . . [H]e said . . . he would deserve contempt if he should become an apostate from the religion of his forefathers merely to promote his worldly interests. ‘I should dispise [*sic*] a Moslem’ said he, with a tear glistening in his eye, ‘what have you seen in my conduct to induce you to form so contemptible an opinion of me? Do you suppose that I can not bear slavery with all its concomitants and degradations sooner than renounce faith which I was taught to hold sacred by my mother, whom I hope yet to live to see and to thank more for her instructions than her nourishment.’” (Cathcart 144)

This sentimental story of the white slave who desperately adheres to his Christian faith away from home not only manifests the conventional rejection of apostates in captivity narratives but also accidentally reveals the humanity and empathy for him of the Algerian Dey. Besides, Cathcart

praises not only a Christian who never turns Muslim but also a Muslim who never turns Christian. Cathcart censures religious converts not because of Cotton-Mather-like Christian absolutism but because of the cultural relativism with which he respects anyone who cherishes his or her ancestral religion.

Compared to Cathcart, who generally took advantage of his situation for his financial success, Joseph Pitts was a full-blown British renegade with a deep understanding of Islamic culture. Pitts' story offers an ethnographic account of the religion and customs there, especially of the pilgrimage to Mecca, presenting an illustrative example of "encyclopedia-like sections, adding to the United States' knowledge base about the Orient" (Brezina 205). As he is aware of his sin of conversion, he calls his book "a bad testimony of my repentance for my apostasy" in the preface, and postpones the description of how he turned Turk until the second to last chapter, which shows a contradictory mixture of corrections of misunderstandings about Muslims and a vindication of his own Christian honor:

I spake something before of the cruelties exercised upon me by the Turks but now shall give a more particular account of them, which were so many and so great that I being but young, too, could no longer endure them and therefore turned Turk to avoid them.

**GOD BE MERCIFUL TO ME A SINNER!**

It is usually reported among us here in England that when any Christians are taken by the Algerines, they are put to the extremest tortures that so they may be thereby brought over to the Mohammedan faith, and, I doubt not, many who have been

slaves in the Turks' country and come home again have asserted so much out of a vanity to be thought to relate something very affecting to those that are strangers to that country. But I do assure the reader it is a very false report, for they never, or at least very seldom, use any such severities on such an account, though it was my hard fortune to be so unmercifully dealt with. They do not use to force any Christian to renounce his religion. (Pitts 306)

While Pitts expresses strong objections to the reports of violence and cruelty of Turks against their white slaves, he testifies that he himself was abused so severely that he could not resist conversion. In the same chapter, he also quotes a letter from his father, in which his father tells that "he had rather hear of [his son's] death than of [his son's] being a Mohammedan" (314). Pitts' ambivalence about the existence of violence among Turks revealed here proves how detestable the crime of conversion to Islam could be considered for Western readers. That is why he is obliged to insist that "my principal end in its publication is giving glory to God, by whose gracious providence I am released from slavery and returned into my own native country where there are no means of salvation wanting and where the blessed doctrine of Jesus is established and the Holy Trinity adored" (223). We should notice, however, that even in his denial of conversion, Pitts cannot help defending the humanity and mercy of Muslims.

While pro-Christian statements happen to reveal the hidden sympathy of white captives towards non-Christians, it is ironic that anti-Christian practice could be useful to counter anti-Christian acts. It is a curious fact that

a tattoo is used as a means of preventing conversion from Christian to Muslim in the Levant. According to Nabil Matar, Christian parents in Muslim lands imprinted “a visible part of the face, arm, or hand” of their new-born babies with the unerasable cross using the sap of herbs (Matar “Turning Turk” 38-39). The Christians literally made their religion part of their body in order to resist conversion in their souls, taking advantage of the typically Levantine practice of tattooing.<sup>6</sup> Thus the cultural ambiguities and contradictions in the discourses of “turning Turk” manifest the transcultural hybridity cultivated in the face-to-face communications between Westerners and the Other which nullifies the dichotomy of Christian and heathen, civilization and savagery, on the textual level.

Mary Louise Pratt categorizes “first-person stories of shipwrecks, castaways, mutinies, abandonments, and (the special inland version) captivities” as “survival literature” (86):

Throughout the history of early Eurocolonialism and the slave trade, survival literature furnished a “safe” context for staging alternate, relativizing, and taboo configurations of intercultural contact: Europeans enslaved by non-Europeans, Europeans assimilating to non-European societies, and Europeans confounding new transracial social orders. The context of survival literature was “safe” for transgressive plots, since the very existence of a text presupposed the imperially correct outcome: the survivor survived, and sought reintegration into the home society. The tale was always told from the viewpoint of the European who returned. (Pratt 87)

If the narrators' homecoming constitutes a prior justification for such a taboo topic as turning Turk, Tommo's rejection of turning Typee at the end of the story can be a necessary outcome of his transgressive plot. "[A] sojourn among cannibals" in the "Happy Valley" surely destabilizes the absolute superiority of civilization over barbarity in Tommo's mind: "The fiend-like skill we display in the invention of all manner of death-dealing engines, the vindictiveness with which we carry on our wars, and the misery and desolation that follow in their train, are enough of themselves to distinguish the white civilized man as the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth" (*Typee* 123-25). As James Cathcart's rejection of turning Turk and Joseph Pitts' remorse for his conversion secure a safe place for their anti-Christian accounts and sympathy for Turks, Tommo's refusal to be tattooed and his strike upon Mow-Mow allow him to temporarily dismiss the civilized society and assimilate into the non-Christian Other.

*Typee* conceals another moment of cultural subversion in its sequel, "The Story of Toby." The sequel depicts a white beachcomber called Jimmy, who actually turned Marquesan. Jimmy is "an old grizzled sailor" living "an easy devil-may-care life" as a "royal favorite" (*Typee* 263). As he wears "the verse of a song tattooed upon his chest, and a variety of spirited cuts by native artists in other parts of his body" and is regarded as "taboo," he clearly symbolizes a possible future image of Tommo if Tommo agreed to be tattooed

and turned Typee (*Typee* 263). While Jimmy fully enjoys the privileges of taboo men, such as visiting every Marquesan tribe without fear of harm and having “wives at all bays,” he turns out to be “a mere mercenary” to deceive Toby into leaving Tommo after receiving a wage for the rescue of Tommo (*Typee* 268, 270). Although the apparent objective of adding “The Story of Toby” to the main discourse is to prove the authenticity of Tommo/Melville’s narrative of captivity by the presence of a witness, Toby, readers cannot help focusing on another main character of the sequel, Jimmy, as Tommo’s double.<sup>7</sup> Melville cannot end Tommo’s story with his total rejection of the Other. The unwritten but implied story of Jimmy, from his desertion of his ship to his full assimilation into Marquesan community, lets us imagine how Tommo would be if he chose to get tattooed and thus converted to be a savage. Tommo’s possibility of “turning Typee,” secretly inscribed in the image of Jimmy, definitely shows a powerful figure of trickster with cultural hybridity, who can easily transcend the boundary of civilization and savagery.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the history of cultural, political, and economic relations between Europe and North Africa, see Davis, Matar's "England" and "Turning Turk," and *The Barbary War at the Clements*.

<sup>2</sup> As for how Barbary captivity experiences/narratives contribute to the construction of American identity/nation, see Baepler and Brezina.

<sup>3</sup> Janet Giltrow takes Tommo's escape for granted as "[h]omecoming is the proper dénouement in travel writing," while William B. Dillingham explains Tommo's ambivalent attitudes towards Polynesian culture by "the two points in time," the one "recounting Tommo's adventures and his feelings at that time" and the other "commenting on the past from the vantage point of the present" (Giltrow 26, Dillingham 13).

<sup>4</sup> Although the printed testimony of turning a heathen was very rare; those who were converted basically did not come back to the western society for the rest of their lives; and even if they did return to civilization, indianization could be too subversive a topic to command a large readership. However, stories of assimilation into indigenous tribes seem to have been well circulated among people. In his letter to Peter Collinson, for example, Benjamin Franklin lamented how easily "indianized" American captives could be:

When an Indian Child has been brought up among us, taught our language and habituated to our Customs, yet if he goes to see his

relations and makes one Indian Ramble with them, there is no perswading him ever to return. [But] when white persons of either sex have been taken prisoners young by the Indians, and lived a while among them, tho' ransomed by their Friends, and treated with all imaginable tenderness to prevail with them to stay among the English, yet in a Short time they become disgusted with our manner of life, and the care and pains that are necessary to support it, and take the first good Opportunity of escaping again into the Woods, from whence there is no reclaiming them. (qtd. in Axtell 57)

<sup>5</sup> Although Martin here considers only Puritan/Indian captivity narratives, not Barbary captivity narratives, the fear of losing cultural identity is a common theme of both genres.

<sup>6</sup> There appears a character named Clark with a tattoo of the cross on his arm in James Riley's *An Authentic Narrative of the Loss of the American Brig Commerce*, 1817. Brezina regards the tattoo as the permanent emblem of the captive's faith in Christian God: "Clark's cross tattoo remains even as layer after layer of his skin burns, peels away, and is replaced; so, too, Christianity remains a crucial point of identity for the captives" (Brezina 209).

<sup>7</sup> As many reviews of *Typee* raised a doubt about the authenticity of the narrative, and a local paper identified Richard Tobias Greene of Buffalo as the true Toby, Melville went to see him and decided to write "The Story of Toby" to lend credibility to his original story (Howard, "Historical" 286-87).

<sup>8</sup> This chapter is a revised version of "Captivated by the Other: *Typee* and the Barbary Captivity Narrative," *Facing Melville, Facing Italy*:



*Democracy, Politics, Translation*, edited by John Bryant et al., Sapienza  
Universita Editrice, 2014, pp. 197-208.

Chapter 2: Melville on the Beach:  
In-Between Characters in *Typee* and *Omoo*

*Never shall I forget the extacy I felt when I first heard the roar of the surf  
breaking upon the beach. Herman Melville, Omoo*

*It is not the colonialist Self or the colonized Other, but the disturbing  
distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness—the  
white man's artifice inscribed on the black man's body.*

*Homi K. Bhabha*

Herman Melville started his writing career as an author of beachcomber narratives. His first two autobiographical novels, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) and *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847), were primarily composed of his beachcombing experience in Polynesia. His father's bankruptcy and early death obliged him to look for a job on board a ship. After leaving Fairhaven on the *Acushnet* on January 3, 1841, he deserted the American whaling vessel in Nukuheva on July 9, 1842. *Typee* deals with his experience of being held captive in the tropical valley of the Typees, who were allegedly cannibals. Getting out of the Marquesas Islands aboard an Australian whaler, the *Lucy Ann*, Melville again succeeded

in deserting at Papeete. *Omoo* covers the two weeks spent wandering in Tahiti of Melville and the steward, John Troy, whose assumed name is Doctor Long Ghost in the story.<sup>1</sup> The exciting adventures in the South Pacific provided him juicy material for the novels.

Although it might not be voluntary but natural and inevitable for Melville to select a travel narrative out of many other literary genres, this choice plays a critical role in preparing for Melvillean idiosyncrasies, such as the jumbling of diverse styles of writing and the subversion of conventional social values.<sup>2</sup> According to Robert K. Martin, travel literature is “implicitly subversive” and thus permits its author “to introduce an open sensuality that would otherwise be unthinkable in respectable literature” and to present “a critique of dominant mores, whether Western colonialism or Protestant evangelism, by implied contrast” (18).<sup>3</sup> As Robertson-Lorant argues, for example, an encounter with Oceanic cultures, where androgyny forms an ideal existence, stimulates Melville’s “essential bisexuality” (109). By infiltrating “puns, jokes, and allegories” that would “elude most genteel readers,” Melville “embraced transgressive fiction to reclaim sexuality for serious literature” (Robertson-Lorant 110-11). Once stepping into the unlawful territory of savages, travelers are released from legal and moral restraints, and bring some objectivity to the Western sense of values for which they usually beg the question.

This chapter deals with the in-between characters, including Melville himself, in *Typee* and *Omoo*. As a symbol of power politics in the colonial encounter and discourse, the white beachcombers and the Westernized natives reveal the process of producing the other and thus undermine the absolute superiority of the civilized world over the primitive utopia. I will examine the subversive nature of the hybrid figures and how Melville exposes and camouflages the threatening critique of civilization they manifest.

### **Melville on the Beach**

Vanessa Smith considers Melville as a predecessor of the “gentleman beachcomber” (159). As “beachcomber” signifies “a settler on the islands of the Pacific, living by pearl-fishery, etc., and often by *less reputable* means” (*OED*, emphasis added), the word has acquired a more or less dishonorable connotation and is incompatible with such a modifier as “gentleman.” The oxymoronic denomination, however, accurately represents Melville’s peculiar position among his fellow writers as “the only beachcomber whose narratives have achieved canonical status” (Smith 20). What makes Melville nobility among the vagrants is his highly literate story-telling and shrewd identification with Western society, despite his strident criticism of missionaries and civilization.

The beachcombers enjoy the privileged position among the Pacific islanders, making use of their knowledge about Western language and technology, as Lem Hardy, an Englishman, is “a sort of honorary Grand Master” of the society of tattooists “from his influence as a white” (*Omo* 31-32). Once returning to their home country, however, they are expelled as an alien element because of the fear that they might discard civilization and go native. “Returned from cultures prepared to accept them as representatives of ‘civilization’ to a home community that defined itself against the types of otherness they embody, these beachcombers peddled their self-representations as unofficial publications, or ‘mendicant’ texts” (Smith 46). All they can do to win a meager subsistence is dispense measured doses of knowledge about savage places to their countrymen.

The former beachcombers who returned to their society and managed to live on writing about their experience in the South Seas were compelled to be in an equivocal position. The commercial value of their narratives lies in the factual description of exotic islands of savages based on their peculiar experience. Their stories should be authentic, but at the same time, if they emphasize their celebration of exotic cultures and assimilation into the uncivilized society, they are to be rejected as “the other.” Like captives of Native tribes or Barbary pirates, the returned beachcombers are obliged to lay stress on their familiarity with the “savages” to quench the readers’ thirst

for truthful and sensational stories of unexplored parts of the world, but if they become too sympathetic to cultures and situations of the natives, their books cannot command a large readership.

Melville had to reconcile the reader's taste for veracity and a conflicting desire for a "civilized" perspective of the author. *Typee*, which was categorized as ethnography in some bookstores, was expected to be totally factual. Besides, the evangelical tradition held Christian truth in high regard in nineteenth-century America and thus informed people of a possible danger and harm in reading fiction (Herbert 183). The Christian magazines such as the *Evangelist* and the *Christian Parlor Magazine* harshly attacked the corruptive fictitiousness of *Typee*. To refute accusations that he had transformed the facts with his imagination, Melville and John Murray, the publisher, brought out a revised version of *Typee* with a sequel, "The Story of Toby," who could be a witness to Melville's adventure in the South Seas.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, *The Friend*, reviewing the revised version of *Typee* in 1847, proclaimed an abhorrence of Melville's "habits of gross and shameless familiarity . . . with a tribe of filthy savages of the Marquesas."<sup>5</sup> *The Polynesian* asserted in 1848 that Melville was "utterly unqualified to act as an intelligent observer" because of "his choice of low society—his frequent draughts of 'Pisco' or other liquors—his gentle associations with Tahitian damsels."<sup>6</sup> Melville was required to give his contemporary readers the

veracious description of Marquesan experience from a cultured, colonial point of view.

Melville must have been torn between the two opposing identities, savage mind and civilized self. In other words, he was *on the beach*. On the one hand, Melville as a protagonist of his stories was still beachcombing, deserting the ship and civilization, mining the shore for whatever he could glean. On the other hand, he tried to fit right back into where he was born as a writer, retired from the USS *United States* and taking up the civilian life. This double-bound state of mind causes the inconsistency in his narrative voice, which has often been argued among the critics of *Typee*. As Wai-Chee Dimock puts it, “the narrative sequence of *Typee* follows no linear progression from doubt to enlightenment, from conflict to resolution, but simultaneously carries forward two halves of a sustained opposition” (28). The dynamics of civilization and savagery, which the in-between characters embody, do not allow the story to have a teleological ending.

### **The Menace of Mimicry: Subversive In-Betweens in *Typee* and *Omoo***

At the site of colonial encounter, the in-between characters, both the white beachcombers who have gone native and the islanders who have gone Western, provoke a crisis of colonialism by revealing the process of identification in their act of mimicking the other. The concept of colonial

mimicry can be applied to elucidate how the hybrid characters deconstruct the Western way of domesticating the other. “[C]olonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (Bhabha 86). While mimicry is a strategy of colonial authority to “appropriate” the recognizable, relatively safe, Other, it can also be a “menace” to the colonizer because it signifies “the inappropriate” by generating a “difference” or a “slippage,” which makes the colonial subjects a “partial” presence and thus reveals and dislocates the colonizer’s “normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers” (86). The ambivalence of colonial mimicry, “almost the same, but not quite / white,” incessantly threatens the legitimacy of dominant culture and discloses “the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body” (92).

In *Typee*, Melville is well aware of the subversive potential in the intermediary characters, and carefully moderates the degree of their resistance to the discipline of civilization. While Tommo, the protagonist who deserts the ship and is fascinated with the “humane and virtuous” characteristics of the Typees (205), fails to become a powerful in-between by striking a bad Indian and escaping from the cannibals in the end, the



marginalized characters present some examples of the threat of colonial mimicry.

Tommo's companion, Toby, is introduced as a typical beachcomber. He is "one of that class of rovers you sometimes meet at sea, who never reveal their origin, never allude to home, and go rambling over the world as if pursued by some mysterious fate they cannot possibly elude" (*Typee* 32). As Tommo's double, he is almost the same as Tommo, but "not quite / white." Robert K. Martin suggests a reading of Toby as an islander with his "naturally dark complexion" as a clue (*Typee* 32). "Toby is presented as the first of the Dark Strangers, even though he is present on the ship, and it is he who is able to function as a guide for the passage from the world of the ship to that of the island" (Martin 25). Toby "had evidently moved in a different sphere of life," and he is often seen "gazing wistfully upon the shore, when the remainder of the crew would be rioting below" (*Typee* 32). He has the potential to be a Westernized islander who inveigles a white man into becoming a cannibal.

Marnoo is a Westernized islander who mediates between the Marquesan tribes and the French Armies. Melville ingeniously conceals the "slippage, excess, and difference" in Marnoo's mimicry by exaggerating the excellence of his appearance. "The matchless symmetry of his form" makes such a perfect mixture of European beauty and Polynesian charm that

Tommo names Marnoo “Polynesian Apollo” (135).<sup>7</sup> While Marnoo advises the Typees to preserve “the terror of their name” as cannibals to prevent the encroachments of the French, he guides Tommo out of the captivity in the valley to an Australian vessel (138). In this sense, Marnoo is totally deprived of the menacing otherness the in-betweens should be imbued with.

In a sequel to *Typee*, “The Story of Toby,” Melville finally lets a powerful and cunning beachcomber come onstage. An “old grizzled sailor” called Jimmy is a “royal favorite” and lives “an easy devil-may-care life” in Nukuheva (263). He abuses his privilege as “a taboo man” to enjoy his life on the tropical island with his wives. Although he is just a minor character who does not emerge in the original story, it is actually Jimmy who motivates all the events in *Typee* by deceiving Toby into leaving the Marquesas without Tommo so that he can misappropriate the money Toby received from the captain of the whaler. It is then that the sudden disappearance of Toby causes Tommo to be suspicious of the Typees’ practicing of cannibalism. Tommo surmises that Jimmy “might be a mere mercenary, who would be sure to prove faithless if not well paid” (270). It is appropriate to call Jimmy a “heartless villain” because he is faithful to neither the natives nor his old countrymen (265). Melville characterizes Jimmy as a caricature of Western commercialism.

*Omo* depicts a powerful hybrid figure, an Englishman named Lem Hardy, who, after deserting a trading brig about ten years ago, threatens “the hostile kings” with “a musket and a bag of ammunition” to be allied with him, and becomes “the military leader of the tribe, and war-god of the entire island” (27).<sup>8</sup> Tommo would have become such a problematical Indianized Westerner as Hardy if he had not refused to be tattooed on his face. The description of the first encounter with Hardy epitomizes the fear and disgust the native-like beachcombers raise in the mind of civilized men:

With them [the natives] also came a stranger, a renegado from Christendom and humanity—a white man, in the South Sea girdle, and tattooed in the face. A broad blue band stretched across his face from ear to ear, and on his forehead was the taper figure of a blue shark, nothing but fins from head to tail.

Some of us gazed upon this man with *a feeling akin to horror*, no ways abated when informed that he had *voluntarily* submitted to this embellishment of his countenance. What an impress! Far worse than Cain’s—*his* was perhaps a wrinkle, or a freckle, which some of our modern cosmetics might have effaced; but the blue shark was a mark *indelible*, which all the waters of Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, could never wash out. (*Omo* 27, emphasis added)

What causes “a feeling akin to horror” is the white face with tattoos, which represents an “indelible” marking of otherness and thus deprives the Westerner of humanity. The fact that he “voluntarily” chooses to become the other, that is, willingly goes native, baffles the narrator more because his choice erodes the axiomatic supremacy of the Western society over the primitive one.

Homi K. Bhabha defines otherness and writes, “It is not the colonialist Self or the colonized Other, but the disturbing distance *in-between* that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness—the *white man’s artifice inscribed on the black man’s body*” (45, emphasis added). The tattooed white skin signifies “the *black man’s artifice inscribed on the white man’s body*,” and the “artifice” is all the more disturbing because it is mimicry of white men’s tactics to make the colonized “a recognizable Other” (86). If the otherness resides in neither the colonizer nor the colonized but “the disturbing distance *in-between*,” we can assert that the beachcombers, who exemplify the distance between civilization and savagery, stand for colonial otherness itself. The figure of mimicry “problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority, so that the ‘national’ is no longer naturalizable” (87). The stateless in-betweens can undermine the notion of the “national” and nullify the distinction between the colonist and the colonized.

**From Peeping Tommo to Paul of All/No Trades: Gentleman Beachcombers in *Omoo***

Despite the strenuous effort Melville had to make to characterize Tommo as a person who felt like transgressing the boundary between savagery and civilization but not quite, he seems to have become more intrigued with the in-betweens when he wrote his second work. It is not too

much to say that the principal theme of *Omoo* is the beachcombing figures, considering that the title itself means a beachcomber. Melville defined the word Omoo in the preface as “a rover, or rather, a person wandering from one island to another, like some of the natives, known among their countrymen as “Taboo kannakers”” (xiv). He deliberately chose a local language to label a vagrant in the South Pacific and avoided referring to the word “beachcomber,” which was more suitable for his title but which aroused the infamous image of deserters (Anderson 284-85).<sup>9</sup>

As the subtitle of *Typee* suggests, Tommo just *peeps* into the life of Polynesians for a while and does not abandon his homeland in the end. Compared to Tommo, who violently oscillates between an attachment to the Edenic community of Typee and a repugnance to their possible practice of cannibalism and tattooing, the narrator of *Omoo* is a more detached observer, or rather, does not even take what he sees seriously. From the very beginning of the story, the narrator becomes so “delirious” from a glass of spirituous liquor as to motivate the whole plot by alcohol (6). More than half of the crew are drunkards, and the novel is full of descriptions of excessive drinking. The order on the ship was kept by “these bluff, drunken energies” of the first mate, John Jermin (14). Only the “knock-down authority” of alcohol can control those rough sailors on board (15).<sup>10</sup> Though temporarily, the narrator becomes an authentic beachcomber in the sense that he simply enjoys

drinking, feasting, and roving. Peeping Tommo turns into a typical vagabond, Jack of all/no trades.

In *Omoo*, Melville sets himself free from the controversial status of beachcomber by ridiculing it. First of all, the narrator never allows us to know his real name. Though he is supposed to be the same Tommo, who escapes from the Typee valley, nobody calls him Tommo any more. It is ironic that Melville lets the crew of the *Julia* call the narrator “Typee, my king of the cannibals,” the very name by which Tommo was so frightened to be designated (8). The narrator even applies “Typee” as his signature when a Round Robin for a mutiny is executed (77).

The narrator and his friend Doctor Long Ghost are suddenly christened Paul and Peter in Chapter 51 when they manage to be hired by two white men as field laborers in order to get out of Papeete and seek another Eden in Imeeo. The deliberate choice of apostolic names makes a mockery of the missionaries. John Samson is right when he contends that “Melville not only parallels their act to those of missionaries, he obviously enjoys his protagonists’ unmissionarylike, reckless immorality” (498). Arheetoo, a Polynesian convert, regards Paul as a “mickonaree,” which is a corrupted form of “missionary” but means “a man able to read, and cunning in the use of the pen” (164). Even for the natives who have already been made members of the church, there is no specific difference between the missionaries and the

beachcombers. They are just literate Caucasians. The false names of the narrator and Long Ghost and their connotations not only show the crafty nature of beachcombers but also make a shrewd criticism of the mission work in the South Seas which could be accomplished by any literate westerner.

The alliterative names, Tommo and Toby, and Paul and Peter, indicate that both *Typee* and *Omoo* take advantage of the doubling of the narrators, which enables the narrators to portray their beachcombing in the third person as well as in the first person. It is not Melville's autobiographical selves, Tommo and Paul, but the duplicates of the protagonists, Toby and Peter, who take the initiative in desertion, fraud, and promiscuity. In this way, Melville was able to recount the beachcombers' debauchery without being directly accused of it himself.<sup>11</sup>

Melville introduces a hierarchy to the society of beachcombers. Doctor Long Ghost and the narrator, or Peter and Paul, are placed in a higher rank, so-called gentleman beachcombers, while Zeke and Shorty, the farm owners and the employers of Peter and Paul, are categorized as wretched rovers. Whether they are literate in Western languages or not is the dividing line between them. Zeke and Shorty are "quite illiterate" and find it "entertaining and instructive" to be in company with "a couple of civil, good-natured fellows" (204, 230). They are so infatuated with Long Ghost, a "prodigy," that they even dream of "building a small craft of some forty tons, for the purpose

of trading among the neighboring islands” by taking advantage of his “science of navigation” (230-31).

Doctor Long Ghost, however, retains his advantaged status only in the community of the four white rovers and is never given the privileged position of beachcomber among the islanders. The final objective of Long Ghost and Paul is to be granted an audience with the queen. “In the train of many Polynesian princes, roving whites are frequently found: gentlemen pensioners of state, basking in the tropical sunshine of the court, and leading the pleasantest lives in the world” (247). Long Ghost tries to obtain the luxury life, only to fail. The queen is “surprised” and “offended” at the sudden presence of Long Ghost and Paul, and issues orders “to admit no strangers within the palace precincts” (311).

Doctor Long Ghost also burlesques what the colonizers are supposed to do. He bluffs the narrator into believing that he is versatile enough to act as a social reformer in Polynesia. “Ha! ha! I’ll put up a banana-leaf as physician from London—deliver lectures on Polynesian antiquities—teach English in five lessons, of one hour each—establish power-looms for the manufacture of tappa—lay out a public park in the middle of the village, and found a festival in honor of Captain Cook” (245). But none of his plans are carried out in the end. He neither heals a patient on the ship as a doctor, nor shows his knowledge about the “science of navigation.” All he does on the tropical island



is tempt Polynesian maidens and take Pisco and laudanum. He exemplifies a parody of both the missionaries and colonial authority.

The beachcombers can be powerful mediators between civilization and savagery only when they are literate in both Occidental and native cultures and languages. Melville heedfully assigns one to the gentleman beachcombers and the other to the uneducated vagabonds to keep the possible subversiveness of the white in-betweens out of sight. As the social standing of Long Ghost and the narrator in Tahiti is unstable, Long Ghost has to ask Zeke, who is “well-known” and “much respected all over the island,” to write a kind of passport to protect them on their way to see the queen (249). Zeke is not “accustomed to composition.” “His literary throes” are “so violent” that the “precious paper” as a result is “a great curiosity” (250). The comic episode proves the inevitable impotency of both Long Ghost and Zeke as in-betweens. The fact that Long Ghost is unable to woo a young native girl owing to his “ignorance of the love vocabulary of the island” shows that his communicative ability in Tahitian is as poor as that of Zeke in English (293-94).

Though the Pacific beachcombers are supposed to not only “facilitate” but also “manipulate” the cultural exchange between the Western colonists and the islanders with their linguistic skills and an access to “metropolitan techniques and objects of manufacture” (Smith 18-19), Melville just mentions

their manipulative capacity as an “expectation” of Long Ghost and never lets him join the powerful hybrids (*Omoo* 247). The image of gentleman beachcomber projected in Long Ghost is a comic reversal of the subversive characteristics of in-betweens. With the assistance of the trickster, Melville succeeds in the implicit critique of colonialism by positing the subversive in-betweens not as his subjectivity but as his unattainable ideal.<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All the details of Melville's itinerary are in volume one of Jay Leyda's *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville, 1819-1891* (New York: Gordian Press, 1969). I also referred to "Historical Note" by Leon Howard and Gordon Roper.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Giles is bold enough to declare that "all of Melville's texts comprise, in some fashion, travel narratives" in his discussion of how "a continuing encounter with British empire comes to frame . . . the range of Melville's artistic ambitions" (56).

<sup>3</sup> Martin considers the possibility of reading nineteenth-century travel books as genteel pornography (18-19).

<sup>4</sup> As for the controversy over truthfulness of the story, see Herbert 181-87, Robertson-Lorant 142-44, and Howard, "Historical Note" 286-88. According to Robert K. Martin, "the claim of authenticity" was the only factor which would permit Melville "to demonstrate the hypocrisies of the Christian missions and the arrogance of the colonizing impulse" (19).

<sup>5</sup> *Friend* (June 1, 1847). The article is quoted in Daniel Aaron's "Melville and the Missionary," which examines the reviews of *Typee* and *Omoo* reported in the seamen's newspapers, the *Polynesian* and the *Friend*.

<sup>6</sup> *Polynesian* (March 18, 1848). The review is quoted in Aaron.

<sup>7</sup> As Mitchell Breitwieser insists, “Tommo’s admiration for Marnoo provides a criterion for differentiating him from the Typees,” and “the animal ignorance Tommo attributes to them stems from his growing desire to see them as completely distinct from himself” (416).

<sup>8</sup> The English beachcomber reminds us of Captain David Porter, whose military strength made the Marquesans call him the “demon of destruction,” and his interpreter, Wilson, who was a tattooed deserter. Like Lem Hardy, Wilson’s tattooed body provoked a deep aversion in Porter’s mind. For further discussion and comparison of Indianized Westerners in Porter’s *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean* and *Typee*, see Saiki.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson also mentions that “the youthful Julian Hawthorne” called Melville “Mr. Omoo” (285). While Melville was identified with Omoo as a person, *Omoo* as a book has been read as his autobiography in spite of his excessive borrowing from the source books. That is why “biographical scholars have found more to reveal about *Omoo* than critics have” (Roper 342).

<sup>10</sup> *Omoo* has been paid relatively little critical attention due to its light, incoherent, and digressive narration and lack of “highbrow” thesis. Those defects, however, turn out to be advantages if it is regarded as popular literature. As Walt Whitman puts it, *Omoo* is “the most readable sort of reading” and “thorough entertainment” (212).

<sup>11</sup> Melville was not, however, able to evade the author's responsibilities for what he wrote. "The heaviest attacks on *Omoo*, as on *Typee*, came from two other quarters: from those who denounced Melville's criticism of missionary endeavors, and from those who were revolted by his 'raciness' or 'indecencies'" (Roper 336).

<sup>12</sup> This chapter is a revised version of "Melville on the Beach: In-Between Characters in *Typee* and *Omoo*," *Sky-Hawk*, vol. 20, 2004, pp. 3-16.

### Chapter 3 “Strike through the Unreasoning Masks”:

#### *Moby-Dick* and Japan

Despite the abiding interest in the multicultural environment of nineteenth-century American whaling and the racial diversity on the *Pequod*, very few critics have turned their attention to the images of Japan described in *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*.<sup>1</sup> Two possible reasons can be identified for the lack of scholarly interest in the novel’s insight into this once closed and thus enigmatic Asian country. One is that there was very little information on Japan available to Melville and his contemporaries. *Moby-Dick* was published in 1851, and Americans were not able to obtain even basic data about Japan until 1854, when Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry persuaded the nation to open up. The other reason is that the academic fascination with the Far East has been considered to begin at the end of the nineteenth century, when the “alienated young New Englanders” of the Gilded Age searched in Buddhism for spiritual stability (Benfey xii-xiv). For both American and European people in the mid-nineteenth century, the Orient mainly stood for the Near East: “The European concept of the East as primarily denoting the Near East, western Asia, the classic lands of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and India was at the turn of the century, for geopolitical reasons, superseded by a spiritual orientation toward the Far East, China

and Japan” (Finkelstein 15). Given this history, it would have been unlikely for Melville to have acquired any significant knowledge of Japan before publishing *Moby-Dick*.

American whalers, however, were at the forefront of global communications. As Melville wrote, “For many years past the whale-ship has been the pioneer in ferreting out the remotest and least known parts of the earth. She has explored seas and archipelagoes which had no chart, where no Cook or Vancouver had ever sailed” (*Moby-Dick* 110). Japan was surely the “least known” archipelago at the time. Melville accurately predicted that the opening of Japan to the world was just around the corner: “If that double-bolted land, Japan, is ever to become hospitable, it is the whale-ship alone to whom the credit will be due; for *already she is on the threshold*” (*Moby-Dick* 110, emphasis mine). It could be not only from academic sources but also from his experience as a seaman that Melville had this premonition of the increasing attraction of the secluded nation in the Far East for Westerners.

This chapter argues the interrelation between America’s audacious enterprise to explore all parts of Asia and to unfold the mysteries of Japan and Ishmael’s narrative of Ahab’s drive to strike through the unreasoning mask, the inscrutable white whale. The peculiar political and diplomatic tension of the time just before Japan was opened to the West definitely casts a deep shadow both on nineteenth-century New England whale fisheries and

on Ahab's struggle against Moby Dick. First of all, the Pacific Ocean should be understood as the new American frontier. Melville was fully aware that the next and last target of American imperialism would be Japan. He took advantage of the ominous images of Japan in the nineteenth century to create the eerie atmosphere of the story. Secondly, in saying that the *Pequod* allegedly obtains one of its masts from Japan, Melville indicates that the unofficial diplomatic intercourse between Japan and American whaling vessels had already been cultivated before the opening of Japan. Finally, the chapter will suggest that Fedallah and his "dusky" comrades are the collective image of mysterious Asia and could have been modeled after the Japanese sea drifters. There is a possibility that Melville read and heard about those shipwrecked Japanese sailors rescued by American whaling vessels. Melville could actually have witnessed some of the Japanese seamen in Honolulu.

### **Melville as a "Pacific Man"**

It was in the middle of the golden age of American whaling when Herman Melville joined the whaling vessel the *Acushnet* as a sailor and later wrote the "prose Epic on Whaling."<sup>2</sup> New England whalers are the ultimate symbol of the commercial and imperialist power of American industry, pioneering unexplored regions all over the world. "Soon after the opening up



of the Offshore Ground in 1819, Nantucket whaleships had stopped at the Hawaiian island of Oahu for the first time. That same year, Frederick Coffin, captain of the *Syren*, laid claim to discovering the rich Japan Ground. All of the Pacific, not just its eastern and western edges, had become the domain of the Nantucket whalers” (Philbrick 208). During the prosperous period of whaling from 1825 to 1860, “the value of sperm oil doubled and then tripled, and the price of whalebone used for collars and corset stays rose fourfold” (Robertson-Lorant 93). Nantucket whalers represented America as a conqueror of the Pacific and as an advocate of capitalism.

After the westward movement of the United States was halted by the United States’ victory in the Mexican War and its acquisition of California in 1848, the Pacific and the countries beyond it were naturally considered the new frontier. *The United States Democratic Review* carried the article “Japan” in 1852. This emphasizes the necessity of gathering world wealth in America by taking advantage of the Pacific as a “highway” for transportation of Asian products:

When . . . the Pacific Ocean . . . shall be a great highway, over which the teeming nations of the East may pour their long-concealed treasures; when caravans and canals and railroads from the immense *terra incognita* of Northern Asia shall seek their termini on the shores of the Japanese seas, and a depot for their countless products upon a portion of the Archipelago, redeemed and civilized by genial traffic; when, in a word, the continent of America shall be at once the entrepot, the market, and the exchange of the world’s wealth, where should our merchants be, but in the van of all, the ruling spirits of all, the regulators and

conservators of all, for the greatest good of the greatest number of all the dwellers on earth? ("Japan" 331-32)

According to Walter Prescott Webb, we can apply the concept of a moving frontier to any place "where a civilized people are advancing into a wilderness, an unsettled area, or one sparsely populated by primitive people" (4). Thus, to make Japan the next target of American expansionism, the United States strategically regarded the closed nation as a barbarous place to be "redeemed and civilized."<sup>3</sup>

We should not suppose, however, that the American people were ignorant of the possibility that the Japanese people and social system could be more sophisticated than they expected. Even though the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny labeled Japan "barbarous," Portuguese explorers found civilization there equal to that of Europe (J. G. Roberts 19-20). As the author of "Japan" informed American readers in 1847, they comprehended that the Japanese government was, "perhaps, more enlightened than those of China," and its inhabitants were "a highly civilized people" ("Japan," *Living Age* 467).

Charles Olson is right in calling Melville a "Pacific man." Melville recognized that "the Pacific is, for Americans, the Plains repeated, a twentieth century Great West" (Olson 114) and that "America completes her West only on the coast of Asia" (Olson 117). In the chapter of *Moby-Dick* titled "The Pacific," Melville writes: "The same waves wash the moles of the new-built Californian towns, but yesterday planted by the recentest race of

men, and lave the faded but still gorgeous skirts of Asiatic lands, older than Abraham; while all between float milky-ways of coral isles, and low-lying, endless, unknown Archipelagoes, and impenetrable Japans” (482-83). Here Melville is quite conscious of the significant role of the Pacific as the “carrier” of the mystery of unfamiliar worlds to the West (Olson 114); the trajectory the whales draw on the great ocean might even have reminded him of it.

Ahab’s obsessive attempt to penetrate the mystery of the great whale coincides with America’s imperialist desire to explore Asia, especially impenetrable Japan. This started with Captain David Porter’s petition for the exploration of the Pacific and Japan in his letter to President James Madison in 1815. In an article of 1820 that introduces the contents of the German translation of *The Adventures of Captain Golownin* to American readers, the anonymous author describes Japan in the early nineteenth century as a closed, peculiar, and thus exceptionally curious country:

There is probably no part of the world, which is so little known, and at the same time so worthy of exciting a rational curiosity, as the empire of Japan. Its immense population, its great wealth and industry, its progress in the useful arts, and the peculiarity of its civil and religious government, and the manners of its people give it a hold on our curiosity over almost every other part of the East. The care, with which this singular people cut themselves off from all intercourse with the rest of mankind, not only gives them a more marked and original character, but limits our knowledge of them to the slight and imperfect notices of a few travellers, whom chance has thrown among them, and who have enjoyed but small opportunities for obtaining accurate information. Several attempts have been made by European nations to open an intercourse with them, but without success. It is a law of the empire, that no

Japanese shall, on any pretence, quit his country, and no foreigners are permitted to land in Japan, with the solitary exception that two small Dutch ships from Batavia, and twelve Chinese ships from Ningpo, are permitted annually to enter the single port of Nangasaky [sic]. Persons thrown by shipwreck upon their coasts are kept in strict confinement, until they can be sent home, by one of the foreign ships from the abovementioned port. (“Adventures of Capt. Golownin” 33-34)

As the frontier moved farther and farther west and the United States had almost finished articulating every corner of the world, Japan represented what Western people had not known or conquered yet. This was not because of its physical distance but because of the diplomatic distance the Japanese government kept from foreign countries, thus making itself the object of a fierce imperialist desire on the part of the United States.

Furthermore, American sailors had to confront the real danger in the ocean around Japan, and the country impressed them as frightening as well as mysterious. The Japan Sea was notorious for “the direst of all storms, the Typhoon” (*Moby-Dick* 503). The mighty storm often damaged whaling vessels so severely that they nearly sank. Even if the sailors wished to repair their ships, the nearest coast was “locked Japan” (515). There they would be imprisoned or forced to leave without any provisions or materials to fix their ships. The images of weird and dangerous Japan create the ideal background for the appearance of the monstrous White Whale. Additionally, Mocha Dick, an actual monstrous white sperm whale, after whom *Moby Dick* is modeled, was sighted off the coast of Japan (Leyda 1: 154). Though Melville probably

never sailed in the Japan Sea, “those uncivilized seas” are the most suitable setting to be haunted by “the unaccompanied, secluded White Whale” (*Moby-Dick* 179).<sup>4</sup>

The mysteries and the ominousness of Japan in the nineteenth century are specifically inscribed in Ishmael’s world from the beginning. When he drops by the Whaleman’s Chapel before going aboard in the “stubborn storm” (34), which is reminiscent of the “typhoon on Japan” (90), he finds “frigid inscriptions” on the marble tablets, one of which says:

THE LATE  
CAPTAIN EZEKIEL HARDY,  
Who in the bows of his boat was killed by a Sperm Whale on the  
coast of Japan, *August 3d*, 1833. (36)

Captain Hardy’s destiny foreshadows the tragedy of the *Pequod*, which would be attacked by Moby Dick off Japan’s coast, and makes Ishmael think, “Yes, Ishmael, the same fate may be thine” (37).

Japan forms the beginning and end of the novel. Both Ahab and the *Pequod* are dismasted in the water off Japan, and Ahab confronts the White Whale again only to be defeated in the same ocean close to Japan. It is as if Ahab pursues his monomaniacal quest until his death because of the fear and the menace of unknown Japan. Starbuck sees Ahab examining two charts in his cabin, one “a general chart of the oriental archipelagoes,” the other “the long eastern coasts of the Japanese islands—Nippon, Matsmai, and Sikoke” (473).<sup>5</sup> When Starbuck reports that “the oil in the hold is leaking,” Ahab

becomes upset and says, “Up Burtons and break out? Now that we are nearing Japan; heave-to here for a week to tinker a parcel of old hoops?” (474). While Starbuck reasonably tries to remind Ahab of the commercial profits they are supposed to chase, Ahab’s mind is preoccupied with revenge on Moby Dick as he approaches Japan: “Gliding towards the Japanese cruising-ground, the old man’s purpose intensified itself” (483).

The hidden connection between Ahab and Japan lies in what happened to him after he lost his leg. In selecting the Japanese cruising ground for Ahab’s fierce fight against Moby Dick and creating Ahab’s five enigmatic crewmen including Fedallah, Melville presages the unlawful exchanges between Japanese fishermen and American whale ships just before the Japanese government opened its doors to foreign countries. Melville pays special attention to the crucial role of the whaling industry in the future diplomatic relationship between Japan and the United States. My assumption is that after the first deadly encounter with the white whale, Ahab manages to go ashore in Japan to obtain lumber to replace the masts of the *Pequod* and accidentally picks up the five sailors somewhere along or off the coast of Japan. Ahab’s intensifying monomania coincides with his intrusion into the unfamiliar and unruly districts of Japan,

### The “Commiserating *Gift of Wood*” from Japan

Ishmael tells us that the masts of the *Pequod* were “cut somewhere on the coast of Japan, where her original ones were lost overboard in a gale” (69). The voyage in which the *Pequod* lost her masts seems to be the previous one, Ahab’s first confrontation with Moby Dick. Bildad asks Peleg, “When this same *Pequod* here had her three masts overboard in that typhoon on Japan, that same voyage when thou went mate with Captain Ahab, did’st thou not think of Death and the Judgment then?” (90). Later, from Tashtego’s suggestion, we can infer that Ahab and the *Pequod* obtained their “masts” before they went back to America, and the place is most likely Japan: “Aye, he [Ahab] was dismasted off Japan,’ said the old Gay-Head Indian once; ‘but like his dismasted craft, he shipped another mast without coming home for it. He has a quiver of ’em” (124).

But if Ahab and the *Pequod* sailed on the Pacific in the first half of the nineteenth century, how could its crew land on “double-bolted” Japan and dare cut the woods for its masts? The foreign intruders, if found out, could have been executed under Japanese law at that time. According to Katherine Plummer, however, “the penalty of death was rarely carried out on anyone returning to the country,” and foreign vessels were treated politely (27). Captain Mercator Cooper was “the first whaling captain to be given permission to bring Japanese castaways he had rescued back to their

homeland and to receive a relatively hospitable reception” (174). It was April of 1845 when the *Manhattan*, a whaling vessel commanded by Captain Cooper, happened to encounter eleven Japanese fishermen who had lived on Torishima, the small rocky island to the southeast of Japan, after they were shipwrecked. Just a day or two after he rescued them, the captain met another group of Japanese sailors who were drifting on wreckage. Captain Cooper decided to take the twenty-two drifters to Edo, the Japan’s capital:

The captain had two great laudable objects in view. The first was to restore the shipwrecked strangers to their homes. The other was to make a strong and favorable impression on the government, in respect to the civilization of the United States, and its friendly disposition to the emperor and people of Japan. (Winslow 335)

We can see in this passage that, even as a civilian, Captain Cooper recognized the political implications of his actions. He regarded himself as a representative of “the civilization of the United States,” an unofficial ambassador. Paul Lyons contends that “[Melville’s hypercanonized Pacific writings] embody and comment on the dynamics of American Pacificism” (40). Lyons explains the dynamism of American Pacificism as follows: “The U. S. body politic breathes out acts of imperial violence and inhales professions of an idealism about a non-aggressive, care-based, non-colonial, fraternity-seeking relation to Islanders” (39). Some American whalers concealed imperial violence under the guise of a humanitarian intervention, considering the Japanese sea-drifters as hostages to exchange for some diplomatic and



commercial relations with Japan. Yet there was an exceptionally fraternal relationship realized between Captain William H. Whitfield and a saved drifter, Nakahama Manjiro, whose cultural hybridity both empowered and problematized his role as a mediator between the two countries, as I argue later in this chapter.

Thus, American whalers actually take up a civilizing mission. J. Ross Browne, celebrating the “enterprising and missionary character” of the whale fishery, refers to two important roles of the industry: “affording means of livelihood to a very great number of persons” and being “productive of great results in those distant regions which had else not been visited by the white race, nor become the object of the pious care of Gospel preachers” (453). In 1846, Senator William Gilpin even “referred to the whaling fleet as the maritime arm of America’s ‘pioneer army’” (Reising and Kvidera 300). A real army was raised to establish direct trade with Japan seven years later. The “Monthly Record of Current Events” in *Harper’s New Monthly*, May 1852, reported: “Commodore Perry, the commander of this squadron, is to be instructed to make commercial arrangements with Japan, and for the better treatment of shipwrecked American sailors, who have been heretofore barbarously treated by the Japanese in several instances; and possibly may be reclamations for injuries and losses heretofore sustained by American citizens. Japan has now no treaty with any Christian government except

Holland” (“Monthly Record” 835). It is clear from this passage that the whaling industry was in the vanguard of visiting “barbarous” nations like Japan and in fact motivated the United States toward diplomatic negotiations with Japan.

While the *Manhattan* lay at anchor in Edo Bay for four days, Captain Cooper succeeded in persuading the Japanese government to receive all the Japanese drifters, although no American seamen were allowed to land, and the vessel was under strict surveillance. When the captain asked the governor what he should do if he rescued Japanese drifters again, the governor replied: “Carry them to some Dutch port, but never come to Japan again” (Winslow 337).

According to Plummer, before the American whaler left Japan, the Japanese government gave Captain Cooper the following supplies without official reward:

20 bags of polished rice, 20 bags of hulled rye, 2 bags of wheat flour, 13 bags of sweet potatoes, 120 bundles of radishes, 20 bundles of carrots, 50 chickens, a basketful of flatfish, 2 octopuses, a set of Kii lacquer bowls, 10 Hizen painted dishes, 5 pounds of tea, 200 bundles of pine firewood, several thousand koku of water, 4 *large cedar poles to replace storm-battered masts*. (183, emphasis mine)

The lenient conduct suggested by the ample gifts of food and equipment indicates the government’s gratitude for Captain Cooper’s rescuing and

returning Japanese seamen to their homeland, though Japanese officials firmly rejected Cooper's diplomatic motivation.

Quoting the list of the commodities above, Sister M. Blish points out that "the last line seems to be the source of the *Pequod's* masts" (15). We cannot be sure if Melville knew of the *Manhattan* case or not, but information on how the Japanese government dealt with foreign ships visiting Japan seems to have circulated among American whalers. A short article about Japan published in 1847 mentions the instances of offering wood to foreign vessels in a pejorative tone:

Hostile preparations—refusal of official communications of permission to land, of all civilities and hospitalities, beyond, perhaps, an occasional commiserating *gift* of wood and water—are followed by stern injunctions to depart, and polite, or threatening, requests never to return. ("Japan," *Living Age* 467)

What is intriguing in the sentence is the mixture of the emotions in consideration of America's national interest and the impartial attitude about the actualities of the unofficial intercourse. From the diplomatic and commercial standpoint of the United States, the Japanese government's policy of rejecting any official international relationships without prior permission is referred to as "hostile," and the offering of supplies, though infrequent, is said to be "commiserating." The article also conveys, however, that "the refusal of official communications" was not unequivocal enough to prevent the occasional "*gift* of wood and water," and that the "injunctions to

depart” were not always “threatening” but could be “polite” from time to time (467).

It is highly probable that Melville was somehow acquainted with these exceptional communications between the Japanese government and foreign ships and made use of the episodes of the “occasional commiserating *gift of wood*” when he wove together the first narrative threads of Ahab’s quest for the White Whale. Melville’s choice of Japan as the place to obtain the masts must have been deliberate, because the inscrutable energy of Ahab’s vengeance for Moby Dick matches the tireless drive of American imperialism. Just as the gift of wood did not satisfy the United States but fueled the country’s wrath and impelled expansionism, the ivory leg does not appease Ahab’s anger but fills his body with vigor for revenge and leads him to destruction. Just as the interpretation of the policy of isolation of the unfamiliar Asian country as “hostility” compelled Commodore Perry to strike through the diplomatic wall with a display of military power, so too the idea of the White Whale as motivated by “inscrutable malice” forces Ahab to strike through the unreasoning mask of Moby Dick.

### **Fedallah; or, a Japanese Sea Drifter**

The multicolored deck of the *Pequod* is a microcosm of the multiracial world. At Ahab’s despotic command the three Caucasian mates—Starbuck, a

Nantucketer; Stubb, a native of Cape Cod; and Flask from Martha's Vineyard—provoke a battle in partnership with their harpooners—Queequeg, a Pacific Islander; Tashtego, a Gay-Head Indian; and Daggoo, an African—against the overwhelming whiteness of the ubiquitous and immortal whale, which at the same time represents and nullifies the preeminence of the white men. Without mentioning the loving transracial friendship between Ishmael and Queequeg, the democratic narration of *Moby-Dick* incessantly puts ethnic hierarchy into question: In the comical depiction of dinner, for example, the harpooners, “those inferior fellows,” fully gratify their appetite while the mates have to endure “the hardly tolerable constraint” at the captain's table (*Moby-Dick* 152). Melville does not fail to pay homage to the “red-men” of Nantucket who waged war against the “Himmalehan, salt-sea Mastodon” and “over[ran] and conquered the watery world like so many Alexanders” before he applauds American whalers, the successor to the native Nantucketers, for their being the “pioneer in ferreting out the remotest and least known parts of the earth” (64, 110). Thus, the nonwhite races are described as vividly as the white characters, and stereotypical descriptions of the races are avoided.

There is, however, a curious exception: Ahab's secret crew. Melville not only hesitates to describe Fedallah and his companions precisely, but also engraves “degraded racial characteristics” in them (Schultz, “Visualizing” 32).

Elizabeth Schultz condemns Melville's way of representing the mysterious Asian crew in *Moby-Dick*, which can be called "racist": "Rendered mute, hidden, and demonized, anonymous, unindividual, and inscrutable," Fedallah and his dusky companions are deliberately distanced from other nonwhite crew who are given more "positive and complex" descriptions (Schultz, "Subordinate" 199). Although they are seemingly represented as Asian, their birthplaces and ethnic identities remain mysteriously obscure to the end. By naming them "devils," "subordinate phantoms," or "yellow boys," Melville portrays them as inferior as well as unearthly creatures, and they function as an apparatus more to intensify the uncanny nature of Ahab than to describe individual characters. Unlike the other characters of color, they are not given their own voice.

I will attempt to envisage those enigmatic Asian boatmen, "five dusky phantoms," in the cultural and political context of the mid-nineteenth century (*Moby-Dick* 216). Although readers take the five Asians to be from the Near East, I would like to contemplate the possibility of their being Japanese. By the time Melville changed his career from sailor to writer, Western European countries and the United States had almost completed their world exploration. The Pacific became the location of a struggle for both commercial and imperialistic power, and Japan was the least known archipelago in the Pacific because of its policy of seclusion from the outside world. It can be

reasonably presumed that the images of the only unidentified race among all the nonwhite personae in *Moby-Dick* reflect the American people's wonder and curiosity about this mysterious country of the Far East. I contend that Fedallah and his comrades, by face and voice, could have been the kind of Japanese sea drifters who, having been shipwrecked, were often rescued by American whaling vessels. Melville could have read about such Japanese fishermen, the most famous of whom was Nakahama Manjiro, or possibly seen them in Honolulu, an international society of mixed races and one of the most important anchorages for American whalers.

Let us start with the wavering identity of the five dusky phantoms who creep onboard the *Pequod* as Ahab's secret crewmen. The difficulty of visualizing Fedallah might be one reason for the disappearance and integration of him into Ahab in the 1956 film version of *Moby-Dick*. John Huston fastens Ahab instead of Fedallah to the whale in the end of the film.<sup>6</sup> In another movie released in 1998, the director Franc Roddam interprets the harpooner as Chinese with a pigtail, perhaps to acknowledge the fact that Melville invests him with "a rumpled Chinese jacket of black cotton" (217). Fedallah, however, can also be identified as Muslim because he is wearing "a glistening white plaited turban" (217). His being called a "Parsee," or Indian Zoroastrian, further complicates his identification. After his first vague appearance in Chapter 42, an indication that a few people are hiding in the

after hold, he comes into sight as one of what Flask calls “yellow boys” in Chapter 48. As soon as Fedallah is designated as the Parsee in Chapter 73, he takes on more devilish characteristics and becomes a prophet of Ahab’s cursed destiny.

Fedallah’s companions are surmised to be Filipino:

Less swart in aspects, the companions of this figure were of that vivid, tiger-yellow complexion peculiar to some of the aboriginal natives of the Manillas; —a race notorious for a certain diabolism of subtilty, and by some honest white mariners supposed to be the paid spies and secret confidential agents on the water of the devil, their lord, whose counting-room they suppose to be elsewhere. (*Moby-Dick* 217).

None of the five secret seamen reveals his racial identity by himself, and the collection of rumors and conjectures, instead of ascertaining who they are, just utilizes the obscure images of Asian countries to emphasize the foreign nature of Fedallah and his comrades. Except for Fedallah, who is assigned an important role as Ahab’s “pilot,” they remain anonymous until the end of the story.

The obscurity of Fedallah and his comrades reflects the limited awareness of Asia in Melville’s time. George R. Stewart attributes the alteration of Fedallah’s character to Melville’s change of mind while writing: “Quite possibly Melville had the original idea that Fedallah was simply another of the ‘Manilla-men’ (who might well be Mohammedans), and only later had the idea of making him a Parsee, in order to bring in the idea of the



fire-worshiper” (427). Another view is that Melville regards the inconsistency as consistency. According to Dorothee Finkelstein, “None of the interpretations of the character—Polynesian, Islamic, Zoroastrian or Yezidi—excludes the other. On the contrary, their fusion reveals the accumulative technique of Melville’s characterization” (236). Hence, Fedallah could be an amalgam of different characters. Fedallah, with his conflicting natures, is not the result of Melville’s failure in characterization. Rather, his ambivalence is produced by historical context. Fedallah is a symbol rather than a person.

William A. Evans points out the bodiless nature of Fedallah: he is “a sexless, inhuman symbol, identified with the devil because he casts no shadow, and is ‘an early harbinger of what is to come’” (77). As the mid-nineteenth-century embodiment of the inscrutable Orient, Fedallah can easily be associated with “the devil,” “diabolism,” and evil because he and his five dusky phantoms were the typical “others” of that time. Thus, it can be said that Fedallah—who is a bodiless symbol, and who could be Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Parsee, or Muslim—embodies the mysterious Oriental in the mid-nineteenth century, or, to borrow John Bryant’s artful expression, a “cosmopolitan concatenation of Oriental tags” (1047).

Considering the significant position of Japan on the aspirational map of world exploration of the United States, why do we hesitate to add the image of Japan to the racial and ethnic characters of Fedallah already discussed?<sup>7</sup>

To begin with, the order in which Fedallah and his boatmen finally appear follows the order Japan finally made in appearance in the field of international trade and diplomacy. While all the other crew, which consists of Anglo-American and other Caucasians, African Americans, Native Americans, and Polynesians, go on stage and speak their own lines, the mysterious bowmen are described as something “looking like men”; they are as “dim” as “shadows,” or they are heard only as “the low laugh from the hold,” or the “noise” of “two or three sleepers turning over” (98-99, 164, 196). Only a man as insightful as Ishmael or one who has “sharp ears” like Archy can pick up the indications of the undisclosed tribe. That a China sailor turns up in Ch. 40, before Fedallah and his comrades absorb public attention, parallels the fact that the United States was turning its interest from China to Japan. As noted in an *Atlantic Monthly* article of 1860, “while, on closer examination, the imagined attractions of China disappear, those of Japan become only more definite and substantial” (“Japan” 722). The inscrutable Asians, including Fedallah, cast the images of “impenetrable Japans” which were still dim shadows for the Western nations (483).

Moreover, Ishmael takes advantage of a metaphor of unchanging and aboriginal Asian countries to signify “a muffled mystery” of Fedallah (231). Above all, some descriptions closely connect Fedallah to Japan:

He was such a creature as civilized, domestic people in the temperate zone only see in their dreams, and that but dimly; but

the like of whom now and then glide among the unchanging Asiatic communities, especially the *Oriental isles to the east of the continent*—those insulated, immemorial, unalterable countries. (*Moby-Dick* 231, emphasis mine)

Certainly, “The Oriental isles to the east of the continent” refer to Japan. Words like “insulated,” “immemorial,” and “unalterable” conjure up the images of locked Japan that the West had built up by the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> The portrait of Fedallah as an uncivilized creature reminds us of the rhetoric of civilization performing its mission of enlightening barbarians, and for the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, the archipelagoes of Japan were the last barbaric region to be civilized, as the following observation suggests:

It is beginning to be pretty well understood that these coasts [of Japan] are a sort of key to Eastern Asia, and that a commanding influence established upon them by a civilized nation, will give it the sway of the Pacific, and of all benefits which may hereafter flow from a great maritime outlet of Asiatic trade. (“Japan,” *United States Democratic Review* 331)

As John R. Eperjesi points out, “American Pacific Orientalism begins with those spaces coded as economically valuable in the national imaginary before they were subjected to military domination, juridico-political administration, and state-sanctioned racist violence” (28). Beneath the desire to dominate Pacific trading, however, there lies the American consciousness of the condescending civilizing mission in the barbarous islands. Our reading of the

personality of Fedallah is suffused with America's mounting fascination with Japan.

Fedallah and Ahab are described as worshippers of the Japanese sun, which connects Fedallah all the more to Japan:

Now, sometimes, in that Japanese sea, the days in summer are as freshets of effulgences. That unblinkingly vivid Japanese sun seems the blazing focus of the glassy ocean's immeasurable burning-glass. The sky looks lacquered; clouds there are none; the horizon floats; and this nakedness of unrelieved radiance is as the insufferable splendors of God's throne. Well that Ahab's quadrant was furnished with colored glasses, through which to take sight of that solar fire. So, swinging his seated form to the roll of the ship, and with his astrological-looking instrument placed to his eye, he remained in that posture for some moments to catch the precise instant when the sun should gain its precise meridian. Meantime while his whole attention was absorbed, the Parsee was kneeling beneath him on the ship's deck, and with face thrown up like Ahab's, was eyeing the same sun with him; only the lids of his eyes half hooded their orbs, and his wild face was subdued to an earthly passionlessness. (*Moby-Dick* 500-501)

It is just the "wonted daily observation of the sun to determine his latitude" that Ahab undertakes (500). But it also implies the eerie atmosphere of paganism, in which the splendors of God's throne are too naked and "insufferable." Kneeling down, and with eyes half closed, the figure of Fedallah is presented as at prayer.<sup>9</sup> We might be able to connect his behavior with Zoroastrian fire worship, as in the following chapter, when Ahab addresses the "corpusants" (506), white flames on the masts: "Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear a scar; I now

know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance,” thus announcing that the origin of his fire worship is Persian, or most likely Zoroastrian (507). The image of sun worshipping, however, should be distinguished from the rebellion against the white fire of the corpusants, because it is not Ahab but Fedallah who prays to the sun, and also because the atmosphere of unusual tranquility, contrasting with Ahab’s uncontrollable passion, surrounds the scene.

In this scene, the *Pequod* is in the “Japanese sea” and the “unblinkingly vivid Japanese sun” shines upon Ahab and Fedallah (500). When Melville uses the word “lacquered” (500) to illustrate the cloudless bright sky, he is undoubtedly conscious of the Japanese connotations of the term, as the *OED* defines “lacquer” as a noun: “Applied to various kinds of resinous varnish, capable of taking a hard polish, used in Japan, China, Burma, and India for coating articles of wood or other materials; chiefly the ‘Japanese lacquer,’ obtained from the *Rhus vernicifera*.”<sup>10</sup> After the accumulated emphasis on the “Japanese” setting is laid, Fedallah, the collective symbol of mystical Asia, comes into view to pray to a Japanese sun. As Reising and Kvidera argue, “the tableau elicits, perhaps intentionally, the common designation of Japan as the land of the rising sun or, in a literal reading of the Japanese characters, the land of the sun’s origin” (288). Indeed, Melville may have been familiar with the meaning of the word “Japan,” as an article written only a

year after the publication of *Moby-Dick* made the definition more widely available: “The name *Japan* . . . is derived from the Chinese orthography of Nippon, *Jihpun*, signifying ‘Origin of the Sun.’ Marco Polo gives it *Zipangu*, a corruption of the Chinese *Jih-pun-kwo*, or ‘Kingdom of the Origin of the Sun’” (“Japan,” *United States* 325). Worship of the sun is celebrated in Shinto, the indigenous Japanese religion in which the Emperor is regarded as a descendant of the sun goddess. An accurate description of Japanese religious observance could be found in the mid-nineteenth century:

This title [of Japan] is sufficiently explained by the Japanese cosmology, which assigns the patronship of the empire to *Ten-sio-dai-zin*, goddess of the sun, whose worship constitutes the state religion, though two others are prevalent—Boodism [sic] or idolatry, and a philosophic sectarianism founded on the moral doctrines of Confucius, without any mythology or religious rites. (“Japan,” *Democratic Review* 325)<sup>11</sup>

In another scene where Ishmael looks at Stubb observing Fedallah interpreting the doubloon, Stubb says, “What does he [Fedallah] say, with that look of his? Ah, only makes a sign to the sign and bows himself; there is a sun on the coin—fire worshipper, depend upon it” (*Moby-Dick* 434). Quite possibly then, Fedallah’s sun worshipper could be characterized by the Japanese Shintoistic custom of bowing before the rising sun.

Turning to the reality of Pacific whaling in the nineteenth century, we may see that Fedallah and his comrades may well have been modeled on shipwrecked Japanese sea drifters who were picked up by American whalers.

To demonstrate the peculiar mysteriousness of Ahab's secret crew, Melville calls attention to the characteristics of whaling vessels, which turn all the wonders in the world into nothing by recruiting outlandish people from strange countries:

Now, with the subordinate phantoms, what wonder remained soon waned away; for in a whaler wonders soon wane. Besides, now and then such unaccountable odds and ends of strange nations come up from the unknown nooks and ash-holes of the earth to man these floating outlaws of whalers; and the ships themselves often pick up such *queer castaway creatures* found tossing about the open sea on planks, bits of wreck, oars, whale-boats, canoes, *blown-off Japanese junks*, and what not. (*Moby-Dick* 230-31, emphasis mine)

Although "junk" is usually "a name for the common type of native sailing vessel in the Chinese seas" (*OED*), according to C. F. Winslow, "junks" sometimes mean shipwrecked Japanese vessels (335). Japanese junks were considered a symbol of the rigid diplomatic policy of Japan, as the cynical opinion of an 1851 article points out:

We can observe how weak they [the junks] look about the sterns, with rudders insecure. The law compels them to be so; for that is an acute device by which they are prevented from travelling too far; they dare not trust themselves too boldly to the mercy of the sea, and as it is, many wrecked men accuse the prudence of their lawgivers. But life is cheap; the population of Japan is probably near thirty million, —and who should care for a few dozen mariners? ("Our Phantom Ship" 535)

Melville must have known that American whalers often picked up Japanese fishermen in the sea around Japan, as he referred to "queer castaway creatures" floating in the ocean on "blown-off Japanese junk." And if Fedallah

and his “tiger-yellow” mates are castaway sailors found by the dismasted *Pequod* and Ahab, they could be Japanese.

How was Melville able to pick up his knowledge of the shipwrecked Japanese fishermen? No Japanese are recorded among Melville’s shipmates on the *Acushnet*: “His twenty-six shipmates included four Portuguese, three black Americans, one Scotsman, one Englishman, and various white Americans of different nationalities” (Robertson-Lorant, 95). However, it is possible that he did meet Japanese sailors while he was staying in Hawai’i. After he left the Nantucket whaling vessel the *Charles and Henry*, on 2 May, 1843 at Lahaina, Melville moved to Honolulu and spent three-and-a-half months there before he boarded the frigate *United States* on 19 August 1843.

By 1843, Hawai’i had become a major anchorage where New England whaling ships could replenish their water supply and provisions and make repairs. As Honolulu and Lahaina were the closest American ports to the Japan Sea Grounds, and both the king and the governor of Hawai’i were generous toward foreigners, Japanese sea drifters picked up by American whalers often landed on the Sandwich Islands. For instance, Denzo, Jusuke, Toraemon and Goemon, who were rescued by the American whaling vessel *John Howland* commanded by Captain William H. Whitfield in 1841, were taken to Honolulu and allowed to live with the family of Kaukahawa, a retainer of Queen Kakaluohi (Kaneko 28).



The most renowned Japanese sea drifter in the nineteenth century, Manjiro Nakahama, (known as John Mung), was the first Japanese to be educated in the United States.<sup>12</sup> He was “shipwrecked and rescued by the *John Howard*, a New Bedford whaling ship, from an uncharted island in the Pacific in 1841 when, incidentally, Herman Melville, author of *Moby-Dick*, was sailing in another New Bedford whaling ship, the *Acushnet*, in the same water” (Kaneko v). There are curious coincidences between the lives of Manjiro and Melville. Manjiro took to the sea with the four fishermen mentioned above on January 5, 1841, was shipwrecked seven days later, and rescued by Captain Whitfield on June 28, while Melville sailed on the *Acushnet* from New Bedford on January 3 of the same year. When Melville started his career as a writer in 1846, Manjiro began a whaling cruise in the Atlantic and the Pacific after receiving an education in Fairhaven under the care of Captain Whitfield. In addition, Melville published *Moby-Dick* in 1851, as Manjiro landed on Ryukyu Island, which was the first step of his return to Japan, his closed, native land.

Unfortunately, Manjiro and Melville never met, but Melville could have seen any of the four Japanese sailors who came to Hawai'i with Manjiro and who lived and worked in Honolulu until two of them left for Japan with Manjiro in 1850. Even if Melville did not meet any of them personally, it is quite possible that he either heard of them or read about them. A local

newspaper called the *Friend*, published in Hawai'i, was an important source of information among American whalers. As it includes local news as well as the arrival and departure of ships, the latest price of whale oil, and the nautical almanac, "when ships 'spoke' at sea it was frequently one of the first things asked for" (Warriner 81). Additionally, the *Friend* and another Hawaiian newspaper, the *Polynesian*, tried to scoop each other with exciting stories, such as those of Japanese sea drifters (Kaneko 69). The Reverend Samuel C. Damon contributed a call for donations to Manjiro and his friends to the *Polynesian* on November 14, 1850.

Expedition for Japan. The public is aware that from time to time wrecked Japanese have been brought to the Sandwich Islands. There are now three who were brought hither by Captain W. H. Whitfield in 1841. One of them, John Manjiro, accompanied Captain Whitfield to the United States, where he was educated in a good common school, besides having acquired the cooper's trade. He has returned to the islands, and here finds his former shipmates, two of whom propose to accompany him, and if possible, return to Japan. He has purchased a good whaleboat and outfit; Captain Whitmore of the American ship *Sarah Boyd*, bound from Mazatlan, Mexico, to Shanghai, China, having kindly consented to leave them somewhere off the Loochoo [sic] Islands and from thence they hope to make their way to Japan. To complete the outfit is wanted—a compass, a good fowling-piece, a few articles of clothing, shoes, and a nautical almanac for 1850. Will not some benevolent person aid forward the enterprise? The subscriber will be responsible for the safe delivery of the article referred to. (qtd. in Kaneko 73-74)

The Reverend Damon, a seaman's Chaplain whose specialty was homesick men, was a friend and mentor of Manjiro (Warinner 81). This article

indicates how well known the stories of shipwrecked Japanese were and how sympathetic the Hawaiian people were towards these unfortunates.

After successfully returning to his country, Manjiro was promoted to the lowest samurai rank, and the Japanese government were eager to acquire firsthand information about America (Kitadai 125-27). On the one hand, as a government advisor, an English teacher, and a Yankee-style whaling master, Manjiro contributed all his experience and knowledge to the modernization of Japan. On the other hand, he was not fully accepted as a faithful Japanese citizen: he was deprived of a chance to work as an interpreter for Commodore Perry because the government wondered if Manjiro was a spy. He was threatened with assassination many times by xenophobic nationalists to assassinate. Thus, Manjiro became one of the rare castaways who achieved a position from which to speak, but the Japanese government was not ready to take full advantage of such a culturally hybrid figure as Manjiro for the country's process of modernization.

Even if Melville had missed the opportunities of seeing or hearing about the Japanese drifters in Honolulu or on board ship, he could have read about them in New York. In June of 1851, four months before the publication of *Moby-Dick*, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* reported that seventeen Japanese sailors had arrived on the West Coast:

A vessel has arrived at San Francisco having on board seventeen Japanese, who were picked up at sea from a wreck. It is supposed

that they will be conveyed to their native country in a government vessel. They are thought to be the first Japanese who have ever set foot upon the American continent. ("Monthly Record of Current Events" 130)

Although they were not, in fact, "the first Japanese" to reach the United States, the article shows that the rumors about shipwrecked Japanese did make their way to the East Coast.<sup>13</sup> Melville could have made use of those Japanese castaways as models when he delineated Fedallah and his associates.

One of the seventeen sea drifters in the article above, Hikoza Hamada, known as Joseph Heco and the first Japanese to be naturalized as an American citizen, performed an important role in the U.S.-Japanese negotiations after Japan opened its door to the world.<sup>14</sup> He returned home, accompanying Townsend Harris as an interpreter in 1859. In his autobiography, he introduces a humorous episode of miscommunication. On his way to California on the *Auckland* after his rescue, one of the American officers, pointing to the Fiji Islands on the map, told him that the Fijians were notorious for their stupid and inhuman behavior, the worst of which was cannibalism. Misinterpreting that Americans, not Fijians, practiced cannibalism, Hikoza was frightened of being eaten by the officer and the other crew (Hamada 317). While the Western countries looked upon the people of the Pacific islands, including Japan, as uncivilized, the supposed savages could also judge that Westerners were barbarous, as Queequeg finds

Christians “miserable and wicked” and chooses to “die a pagan” (*Moby-Dick* 56). Hikoze’s misunderstanding is a good example of the demonization of the other due to the fear of the unfamiliar and the difficulty of language communication.

The most significant characteristic of the five secret crew members of Ahab’s is that they are deprived of their voices. Fedallah never soliloquizes and his boatmen never speak. Fedallah shows his eloquence only when he prophesies the deaths of Ahab and himself. This ominous scene, however, is not composed of the real conversation between Ahab and Fedallah, but is described as if it were the results of Ahab’s imagination. Ahab is monologizing: As a duplicate of Ahab, Fedallah says what Ahab wants him to say. “Started from his slumbers, Ahab, face to face, saw the Parsee. . . . Both were silent again, as one man” (*Moby-Dick* 498-99). While the reticence of the subordinate phantoms magnifies their weirdness and invests them with a devilish nature, their speechlessness itself proves that they are not given the right to speak and thus are stripped of their identities.

When a Spanish sailor shows contempt for Daggoo, saying, “Aye, harpooneer, thy race is the undeniable dark side of mankind—devilish dark at that,” African Daggoo promptly gets even with the Spaniard, cursing, “White skin, white liver!” (*Moby-Dick* 177). Throughout the story, however, the insult of the Spanish seaman is directed at another harpooner, the Asian

Fedallah, who is forced to represent “the undeniable dark side of mankind” and called a devil, and who can never curse back. Ishmael apparently succeeds in denying the “pre-eminence” of whiteness when it “applies to the human race itself, giving the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe” (189). But the Asian crew remains the suppressed “dusky tribe.”

Recovering the historical background of the yellow devils results in an exorcising of the *Pequod*. If we superimpose the images of Japanese sea drifters on the five dusky phantoms, they are not devils at all but obedient hard workers. In fact, Fedallah and his fellows are the only subordinates who are perfectly submissive to Ahab, who is obliged to take precautions against rebellion all the time. Above all, Fedallah offers himself as a sacrifice, by being caught in Ahab’s line and tied together with the white whale.

The shipwrecks of Japanese junks are hidden behind the disaster of the *Pequod*. Although Melville was astute enough to perceive that the “double-bolted” Japan was “on the threshold,” it was too early to draw a clear picture of the country and its people (*Moby-Dick* 110). Harry Slochower is right when he regards Fedallah as an underdeveloped character:

More is made of Fedallah than the story itself justifies. Melville’s intention was to make Fedallah’s speechless impersonality the Eastern counterpart to Ahab’s Western rhetorical and wilful individualism. But this is not executed. Fedallah remains a “shadow” as a literary character as well. (245)

If *Moby-Dick* had been written after the opening of Japan, Melville might have given Fedallah his own voice and distinct identity.<sup>15</sup>

Hence, the shadow of uncanny Japan looms over Ahab's catastrophic quest for Moby Dick. On one hand, Ahab's lust for revenge represents a caricature of America's feverish desire to dominate the unknown world, the last bastion of which was Japan. It is not accidental that Fedallah and his dusky crew come on stage later than the other sailors—Anglo-Americans, Caucasians, African Americans, Native Americans, and Polynesians—and they appropriately remain obscure until the end of the novel, since the subordinate phantoms represent inscrutable Asia, particularly Japan. Just as Fedallah, the amalgamated image of strange Asiatic countries, forcefully urges on Ahab's quest for the white whale, the enigmatic Asian countries, including Japan, impelled America's westward movement.

On the other hand, if we focus on the insane solitude of Ahab and regard his deadly attempt to penetrate the mystery of the White Whale as a desire for ontological fixity, unknown Asiatic lands would be a key to his predicament. Ahab confesses his anxiety about the true nature of terror: "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask!" (*Moby-Dick* 164).

Ishmael, vaguely expecting that the unchanging Asiatic communities could furnish an explanation for people “in these modern days,” imagines the time “when the memory of the first man was a distinct recollection, and all men his descendants, unknowing whence he came, eyed each other as real phantoms, and asked of the sun and the moon why they were created and to what end” (231). Though Fedallah, who “preserves much of the ghostly aboriginalness of earth’s primal generations” (231), could be an answer to Ahab’s ontological question, Fedallah steers Ahab and himself to destruction through his dire prophecies in the end.

Ahab’s failure to discover the reasoning thing behind the unreasoning mask, that is, his failure to conquer inscrutable Asiatic countries, foretells America’s vain attempt to find “aboriginal” Asia. Antiquity was the irresistible attraction of Asia for Western people and the term often used to describe China and Japan. Primordial Asian communities, however, could be discovered only within the Western discourse of Orientalism, as Edward W Said has suggested in his analysis of how the Western portrayal of the Orient is exclusively occidental:

All of Orientalism stands forth and away from the Orient: that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, “there,” in discourse about it. And these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient. (21-22)



Representation of the Orient has nothing to do with the reality of the East: it is just a reflection of Westerners' desire to make the Orient visible and penetrable. As Christopher Benfey comments on the New Englander's misunderstanding of Japan in the Meiji era (1868-1912), "The irony was that just as Bostonians were falling in love with Old Japan, Japan was reinventing herself as a modern state, evolving in the space of twenty-five years from a feudal backwater to an international power" (xiv). Unchanging Asiatic countries were an illusion the Western people only dreamed of: "In one sense, Old Japan vanished at the moment of its discovery" (Benfey xvi). Both the white whale and Fedallah remain mysterious. Ahab cannot find the truth of human existence even in the "Asiatic lands, older than Abraham" (*Moby-Dick* 482). His craze for the unknown origin of things results in the birth of "another orphan," Ishmael. By announcing, "after the Parsee's disappearance, I was he whom the Fates ordained to take the place of Ahab's bowsman" (573), Ishmael not only physically assumes the position of Fedallah but also takes over the role of Fedallah to guide Ahab through the unanswered ontological question, not by destroying everything but by textualizing the uncanny, which is epitomized in both Japan and *Moby Dick*.<sup>16</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Russell Reising and Peter J. Kvidera, in their comprehensive coverage of the direct and indirect allusions to Japan in *Moby-Dick*, insist that “Ishmael’s Japan reflects his culture’s attempt to enter, understand, and dominate the Asian island nation” (286). Sister M. Blish shrewdly surmises that it is possible that Melville knew about the rescue of the Japanese sea drifters by American whalers.

<sup>2</sup> That Tony Tanner appreciates William Butler’s calling *Moby-Dick* “a prose Epic on Whaling” is shown by his statement that “if ever there was a moment when the New World might have been expected to generate its own epic and myth—in effect to find its own Homer—it was surely around 1850” (vii, viii).

<sup>3</sup> Katsuaki Morita contrasts the Western view that Japan was one of the uncivilized countries in the South Seas with the sole Japanese focus on the highly Westernized aspect of the nation after the Meiji era. He argues that the perception of Japan as a Pacific Island, in spite of its discriminatory connotations, makes it possible to replace Japan in the sphere of Pacific cultures and thus to produce a new historical view of the country (92).

<sup>4</sup> Melville deserted the *Acushnet* on 9 July 1842 at Nukuhiva and was discharged from another Nantucket whaler, the *Charles and Henry*, on 2 May

1843. Both the *Acushnet* and the *Charles and Henry* later sailed for Japan (Leyda 168; Robertson-Lorant, 115).

<sup>5</sup> “Nippon” is “Nihon,” which is a Japanese word meaning “Japan.” “Matsmai” is most likely to be “Matsumae,” the famous northern fishing port, the government of which often dealt with Russian intruders, and “Sikoke” is “Shikoku,” one of the biggest islands in the Japanese archipelagoes. Most of the Japanese sea drifters picked up by the American whaling vessels in the early nineteenth century were either from the northern fishing ports like Matsumae or from Shikoku. As I argue in detail later in this chapter, Melville seems to be well acquainted with Japanese sea drifters, as this passage shows.

<sup>6</sup> Takayuki Tatsumi takes the blending of Ahab and Zoroastrian Fedallah in this film as an emphasis on anti-Christian Ahab (Tatsumi and Takayama 83-84).

<sup>7</sup> In the first screen adaptation of *Moby-Dick*, *The Sea Beast* (1929), the role of Fedallah was played by a Japanese actor, Sojin Kamiyama. The characters assigned to him in the 1920s Hollywood movies were usually those of Asian supporting parts, ranging from the Prince of Mongolia to a Chinese diplomat. Like Fedallah in the original, Sojin himself was a symbol of something Oriental and thus “represented the multinational matrix of the orientalist unconscious in the Jazz Age film industry” (Tatsumi 99). Sojin

avoided playing the role of a Japanese because, silently, he rebelled against the stereotypic depiction of his own culture in Hollywood movies.

<sup>8</sup> Melville's presentation of Japan as "double-bolted" and "impenetrable" implies that he somehow shares the imperialistic perspective of American government to blame the Japanese policy of "national isolation" for hindering the western countries from opportunities of free trade. I do not believe, however, as Paul Lyons insists, that Melville's works and Melville criticism play an active role in the Americanists' frame of reference "to write without even a minimal awareness of Oceania as a space of struggle, creativity, and innovative response to Western incursion" (Lyons 44). Here, I want to be on the side of Geoffrey Sanborn, who criticizes Lyons' view of Melville studies. Melville's rhetoric must be, to borrow Sanborn's expressions, more subtle, self-conscious, and complex than that of vulgar American Pacificism (Review 85). Melville's inclusion of the mysterious Asian crew in *Moby-Dick* shows that he recognizes the Pacific as "a space of struggle, creativity, and innovative response to Western incursion" (Lyons 44).

<sup>9</sup> Flask says, "I never yet saw him [Ahab] kneel" (229). After Ahab has his leg chewed off by Moby Dick, he is forced to stand up continuously because he cannot kneel down. The fact that Ahab cannot kneel (i.e., cannot pray) contributes to his blasphemous revenge on the white whale. In this rather serene scene, Fedallah seems to offer a prayer on Ahab's behalf.

<sup>10</sup> In the Japanese translation of *Moby-Dick*, Hideyo Sengoku gives “Japanese” in kana alongside the Japanese equivalent for “lacquered,” which suggests a Japanese connotation to the word “lacquered.”

<sup>11</sup> In the same year that the article appeared, a book exclusively on Japan was published in America that also offers some information about Shinto, especially concerning the sun goddess: “Of all these gods of Sinto [sic] mythology, none seem to be objects of great worships except for the Sun Goddess; and she is too great to be addressed in prayer, except through the mediation of the inferior Kami or of her lineal descendant, the Mikado” (Watts 175).

<sup>12</sup> For an intriguing interpretation of Manjiro as a Japanese Ishmael, see Arimichi Makino, “Nihonjin isyumaeru: 1850 nen wo oudansuru manjiro [A Japanese Ishmael: Manjiro, Who Sails across the Year 1850].”

<sup>13</sup> The first Japanese to reach America is said to be Captain Jukichi, who was rescued by the British commercial brig, the *Forester*, commanded by Captain William J. Pigot, after drifting eighteen months. Jukichi landed near Santa Barbara, California, in January, 1816 (Plummer 77-101).

<sup>14</sup> As for Hikoza's life history, see Plummer 186-205, and Hikoza Hamada 310-44.

<sup>15</sup> Melville might have written the account of Commodore Perry's expedition to Japan. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who at the time was serving as

the American consul in Liverpool, wrote about the Commodore's call on him in his Journal of December 28, 1854:

Commodore Perry called to see me, this morning—a brisk, gentlemanly, off-hand (but not rough) unaffected, and sensible man, looking not so elderly as he ought, on account of a very well-made wig. He is now on his return from his cruise in the East Indian seas, and goes home by the Baltic, with a prospect of being very well received on account of his treaty with Japan. I seldom meet with a man who puts himself more immediately on conversible terms than the Commodore. He soon introduced his particular business with me—it being to inquire whether I could recommend some suitable person to prepare his notes and materials for the publication of an account of his voyage. He was good enough to say that he had fixed upon me, in his own mind, for the office, but that my public duties would of course prevent me from engaging in it. I spoke of Herman Melville, and one or two others; but he seems to have some acquaintance with the literature of the day, and did not grasp very cordially at any name that I could think of; nor, indeed, could I recommend anyone with full confidence. It would be a very desirable labor for a young literary man, or, for that matter, an old one; for the world can scarcely have in reserve a less hacknied theme than Japan. (Hawthorne 147-48)

Hawthorne indicates that the Commodore did not consider Melville a suitable chronicler of his colonial achievements because of his “acquaintance with the literature of the day.” The Commodore might have known that Melville was suspicious about the ethics of American Imperialism. The journal entry also suggests Melville was the only author whom Hawthorne could recommend “with full confidence.” His mentioning “a very well-made wig” presents his humor and witty observation.

<sup>16</sup> This chapter is a revised and expanded version of “Strike through the Unreasoning Masks’: Moby-Dick and Japan,” *Whole Oceans Away: Melville and the Pacific*, edited by Jill Barnum, et al., Kent State UP, 2013, pp. 183-98; and “A Shadow of the Far East: Fedallah; or, a Japanese Sea Drifter,” *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies*, vol. 8, Issue 3, 2006, pp. 33-42.

## Chapter 4 “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

### The Politics of Biography and the Future of Capitalism

*Could I begin life again, knowing what I now know, and had money to invest,*

*I would buy every foot of land on the Island of Manhattan.*

*John Jacob Astor.*

*I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been*

*cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically.*

*Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener.”*

Few researchers have paid critical attention to the narrator’s intention to write a “biography” in Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853).<sup>1</sup> It is reasonable to disregard the lawyer-narrator’s announcement of recording a biography at the beginning of the story, because what he considers to be biographical deviates noticeably from the cultural conventions of the genre:

I have known very many of them [law-copyists or scriveners], professionally and privately, and if I pleased, could relate divers histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep. But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener the strangest I ever saw or heard of. (“Bartleby” 13)



First, what is peculiar about this attempt to narrate the life of a scrivener is the lawyer's deliberate choice of the most unlikely subject for a biography. As "no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man," the lawyer is obliged to depend on "[w]hat [his] own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby" and "one vague report" (13). Besides, Bartleby politely refuses to tell "who he was, or whence he came, or whether he had any relatives in the world" (28). How could it be "an irreparable loss to literature" not to record the life of such an obscure being? Second, although the lawyer could have adopted other, more entertaining literary genres "at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep," he decided to compose a biography. Third, as the lawyer imparts a substantial amount of autobiographical information "[e]re introducing the scrivener," the story tends to tell more about the biographer than about his subject (13). These unusual features make us hesitate to consider the narrative as a biography.

Let us compare what the narrator asserts to be a biography with one of the contemporary theories of biography to show the contrast between them. An article published in 1845 states, "Biography has obtained within the last half century a degree of attention and importance it never before enjoyed" ("Biography" 331). At that time, readers voraciously devoured the stories of "men eminent in art, distinguished for achievements, or notorious for misfortunes or wickedness" and "the memorials of departed greatness" (331). The

article categorizes biography as “a branch of history”: While “[h]istory teaches under what government, and by what policy, a people may become prosperous and happy,” biography shows “the course of conduct by which a man may become wise and good.” As for the content, “entertainment is united with instruction” in biography (332). While biography in the first half of the nineteenth century was considered a form of historical writing about eminent or notorious men of the time, which was both entertaining and didactic, the biography of Bartleby is written as a literary piece about one of the most insignificant persons of the time, someone who cannot be a model of a prosperous and wise man.

Considering the fact that “Bartleby” does not share any of the characteristics of biographies of that time, what was the narrator’s purpose in defining the story as a biography? Melville published two biographies in the 1850s: “Bartleby” in 1853 and *Israel Potter* in 1855. Melville’s choice of biography as a genre must have been induced by the historical literary trend called “Biographical Mania” that began in the 1830s.<sup>2</sup> As shown in the *Library of American Biography* series edited by Jared Sparks, antebellum American biography is basically a collective biography of great New England men who represent American history and nationalism. Contemporary critical evaluation held that a biography should demonstrate “the power to shape individuals’ lives and character and to help define America’s national

character” (Casper 2). Melville deliberately selected such figures as a law-copyist and an anonymous private, respectively, obscured and suppressed in national history, to criticize this fashion and to illuminate an alternative vision of America.

This chapter analyzes Melville’s critiques both of biography and of capitalism through the lawyer’s defective portrait of an insignificant law-copyist, a devoted practitioner of what Max Weber calls “the spirit of capitalism.” First, I will survey the history of antebellum American biography and explore how Melville objects to the tradition of the national biography of great men through artistic representations of ordinary men in *Israel Potter* and “*Bartleby*.” Second, by excavating a biography of American millionaire John Jacob Astor, hidden in the story, it will be shown that Melville intentionally chose to describe the life of an exploited law-copyist rather than that of an entrepreneur in order to critique American capitalism. Third, we will see Melville’s warning of the eventual corruption of American capitalism by comparing *Bartleby*’s solitude at the center of the commercial city to Max Weber’s vision of the bleak future of capitalism.

### **Jared Sparks and the Development of Antebellum American Biography**

The American biography was born and nurtured under the backdrop of strong public sentiment regarding revolution and independence. Establishing

a tradition of American biographical literature was “part of the multifaceted effort to create a national identity and culture” (Casper 19). Dana Kinsman Merrill cites three factors that affected the development of the American biography from 1790 through the mid-nineteenth century. The first factor is “the spirit of hero-worship” generated “in the struggle for independence.” The second force is “a desire for a culture that would be expressive of the United States.” The third influence is the tradition of biographical writings imported from Europe (Merrill 109-110). Recording the lives of great Americans was an efficient way to demonstrate the superiority of the United States to the Old World and to inspire patriotism. Biographies of Revolution-era leaders propose images of ideal citizens who contributed to the prosperity of the new nation. Thus, “nationalism” and “didacticism” are the two indispensable elements of the biographies of this era (Casper 4). Biographies of these leaders not only offered role models to be followed but also defined American national history and character.

The *Library of American Biography*, edited by Jared Sparks, was the first biographical project to record the life stories of major American historical figures. It consists of ten volumes published from 1834-38 and fifteen additional volumes issued from 1844-48, commemorating sixty eminent men and women.<sup>3</sup> Sparks explains his definitions of “biography” and the aims of this biographical series in the prefatory note:

The two principal objects to be attained, in biographical compositions, are accuracy as to facts and finish in the literary execution. The former demands research, the latter labor and skill. Biography is only another form of history; truth is the first requisite, simplicity of style the next. It admits of no embellishments, that would give it the air of fiction; and yet its office is but half done, unless it mingles entertainment with instruction. The plan of this work embraces the lives of all persons, who have been distinguished in America, from the date of its first discovery to the present time. Such a scheme, if faithfully carried through, on the scale here assumed, would embrace a perfect history of the country, of its social and political progress, its arts, sciences, literature, and improvements of every kind; since these receive their impulse and direction from a comparatively few eminent individuals, whose achievements of thought and action it is the province of the biographer to commemorate. (Sparks iv)

Sparks' first priority in biography is historical accuracy. As a Harvard historian, he understandably gave fastidious attention to facts and documentation. He strongly admonishes fictitious biographies produced by such writers as Mason Locke Weems. When asked why he did not adopt any of the anecdotes from Parson Weems' *Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington* when he published a collection of George Washington's papers, Sparks replied that he had "very little confidence in the genuineness or accuracy" of Weems' narratives because the anecdotes were "generally derived from tradition or hearsay" and much decorated with the author's "fancy" (Adams 517).<sup>4</sup> Reflecting his progressive view of national history, Sparks' *American Biography* attempts to record the advancement of the

country and its improvements in arts and science through the achievements of distinguished individuals.

In *Israel Potter*, which was published two years after “Bartleby” appeared in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* in 1853, Melville critiques the Sparksian-style biography of great men by positing an anonymous private as the protagonist and shoving into subordinate roles Revolutionary heroes such as Benjamin Franklin, Ethan Allen, and John Paul Jones.<sup>5</sup> Daniel Reagan, who regards Jared Sparks as a practitioner of the biographical theories of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, argues that “Melville used *Israel Potter* as a vehicle to criticize this view [that biography ‘should represent the lives of great men’] for its tendency to ignore the common man as a viable subject and productive force of history” (258). The preface to *Israel Potter*, beginning with the announcement of creating a biography “in its purer form,” proudly states that the name of Israel Potter “should not have appeared in the volumes of Sparks” (viii).

Israel Potter seems purposely to have waited to make his popular advent under the present exalted patronage, seeing that your Highness [the Bunker Hill Monument] . . . may, in the loftiest sense, be deemed the Great Biographer: the national commemorator of such of the anonymous privates of June 17, 1775, who may never have received other requital than the solid reward of your granite. (*Israel Potter* viii)

Referring to the Bunker Hill Monument, which is “solid” but reticent, as “the Great Biographer” of “anonymous privates,” Melville implicitly expresses his

resentment of the total exclusion of common people from American biographical writings.

*Israel Potter* also poses an objection to Sparks' definition of biography as history. Sparks restricts the object of "literary execution" to achieving "simplicity of style" and does not allow any "embellishments" to tinge biography with "the air of fiction" (Sparks iv). The narrator of *Israel Potter*, however, is "sorely tempted" to replace "the hard fortunes" of the hero with some "*artistic recompense of poetical justice*," although he eventually decides to show the "general fidelity to the main drift of the original narrative" (*Israel Potter* viii, emphasis added). In fact, for the American biography, the 1850s was in a period of increasing maturity and transition from strictly historical biographies to more artistic ones. "From the 1850s on, American critics sought to do what James Parton described: make biography a branch of the fine arts, not a handmaiden to history or handbook of virtues" (Casper 202). An article published in 1852 celebrates the emergence in American biography of the "literary character" in the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne, while lamenting the prior lack of skillful American biographers and especially attacking Sparks, who made biography "the lie to history" ("Hawthorne's Life of Pierce" 276).<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that the article still considers biography to be a form of history, its definition of biography is quite different from the Sparksian national biography. "To see a man as he lives, moves, and has his

being—if you have that in a biography, you have everything . . . . It is only by the clearest perception, and the most assiduous study, that even a ‘literary man,’ that is one who can write, can approximate to the idea of history” (277). The focus of biography in this era shifted from the delineation of national history to the description of unique individuality for which the keen “perception” of a “literary man” was indispensable. Melville must have been conscious of this trend in biographical writings and of the “advent” of Nathaniel Hawthorne, a literary genius, in the field of biography.

#### **A “Fogy” Lawyer’s Biography of John Jacob Astor**

In “Bartleby,” Melville incorporates the evolution of American biography as a literary genre in more complex and shrewd ways than in *Israel Potter*. First, there are historical grounds for Melville’s choice of a lawyer as the biographer. As the aforementioned journal article on Hawthorne’s biography of Franklin Pierce satirically suggests, many biographies before 1852 were authored by lawyers.

[U]ntil N. Hawthorne, politician, came out in the line biographical, the lives of our heroes have been in the hands of lawyers. Old Fogy persons, proud of being the legatees of great men, imagined they could write! . . . And thus it comes, that we see our great men in such a glass as lawyers keep in their back offices, for the express purpose of distorting the human countenance—nose immense, eye nothing, and any quantity of cheek . . . .” (“Hawthorne’s Life of Pierce” 277)<sup>7</sup>



It can be surmised that Melville reflects such “fogy” unskillful lawyer-biographers of great men in his portrait of the narrator of “Bartleby.”

This foggy lawyer-biographer’s choice of such an avant-garde subject as Bartleby suggests his inordinate literary ambitions to expand the horizon of the genre. Insisting that the absence of a biography of the scrivener means “an irreparable loss to literature” (“Bartleby” 13), he participates in the generic transition in American biographies from history to literature. Thus, he daringly discards great figures as a biographical topic and chooses to portray the unique characteristics of a common man.

The lawyer’s attitude as a literary pioneer is, however, wildly inconsistent with his self-acknowledged conservative personality. He is “one of those unambitious lawyers” who advocate that “the easiest way of life is the best” (“Bartleby” 14). Why does the “eminently *safe* man” who carries on “a snug business among rich men’s bonds and mortgages and title-deeds” dare to run the risk of adopting Bartleby as a subject against generic conventions without gaining any particular benefits (14)?

In fact, the story does include material more suitable for a foggy lawyer-biographer of great men: John Jacob Astor, a remarkably successful American entrepreneur in the fur industry. The lawyer is proud of being one of Astor’s business partners, and manifests a passionate attachment to Astor at the beginning of the narrative:

The late John Jacob Astor, a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method. I do not speak it in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion. I will freely add, that I was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor's good opinion. (14)

If the late John Jacob Astor had formed a high opinion of the lawyer, the narrator could have been the same kind of chronologist of Astor's enterprise as Washington Irving was. Astor compensated Irving generously when Irving published *Astoria: Anecdotes of an Enterprise beyond the Rocky Mountains* in 1836.<sup>8</sup> The 1852 article denounces *Astoria* as a mercenary adulation: "Washington Irving's *Astoria* accustomed the mind biographical to remorseless flattery for hire, and when men less in capacity and in conscience beheld such eccentric fables from the pen of Irving, they were not slow in a wider and scarcely less corrupt field, to follow his example" ("Hawthorne's *Life of Pierce*" 278). While Irving both enjoyed an ample financial reward and besmirched his honor as a leading man of letters at that time, Astor took advantage of Irving's literary fame to purchase his reputation as a self-made entrepreneur: "[M]uch as Astor loved money and the power that money gives, he yet preferred the immortality conferred on him by the pen of Washington Irving. Surely he would rather have chosen to be remembered as a dreamer of empire than as 'the Landlord of New York'" (Porter 1: 243). The lawyer-biographer, who loves to repeat Astor's name (and he *does* repeat the name

three times), which “rings like unto bullion,” would surely be aware of the possible monetary reward for writing a millionaire’s biography.

As if reflective of the fogy lawyer-narrator’s latent craving for money, the biography of Bartleby is covertly framed by a biography of John Jacob Astor. While Bartleby repeatedly refuses to carry out the lawyer’s commands, the story delineates not only Bartleby’s strange behavior but also his employer’s “common usage and common sense” (“Bartleby” 22). Bartleby’s statement, “I would prefer not to” does not directly refer to the alternative, that is, what he prefers to do, but instead provokes the lawyer to reveal what he himself prefers to do and thus what he takes for granted. All of the lawyer’s reactions are produced by his moneymaking principles, as if he serves as a mouthpiece for John Jacob Astor, one of the greatest capitalists of the time. The lawyer can “get along” with Bartleby as far as the copyist is “useful” to him (23). Charity and friendship are observed in terms of business. “Yes. Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange wilfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience” (23-24). Astor, who owned and rented out a number of estates in New York, could have admonished his tenants if he had discovered them illegally occupying his property, just as the lawyer does when he finds Bartleby lingering in his office without fulfilling any duty: “Do

you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?" (35). As Bartleby passively resists negotiating the employer-worker relationship, the lawyer's firm faith in capitalism begins to waver: "It is not seldom the case that when a man is browbeaten in some unprecedented and violently unreasonable way, he begins to stagger in his own plainest faith. He begins, as it were, vaguely to surmise that, wonderful as it may be, all the justice and all the reason is on the other side" (22). Thus, Bartleby's anti-commercialistic attitudes uncover as well as threaten the narrator's adoration of Astor's capitalistic virtues.

The lawyer literally finds his last refuge from the emotional and circumstantial disorders Bartleby induces in him by travelling through the environs of Astorian capitalism. After Bartleby refuses to evacuate the office building, to look for an occupation, and to accept the lawyer's charity, the lawyer figures that he has exhausted every possible means to protect Bartleby and to satisfy his own conscience. Striving to be "entirely care-free and quiescent" and frightened of pursuit by the landlord and tenants, the lawyer decides to leave Wall Street for a while: "[F]or a few days I drove about the upper part of the town and through the suburbs, in my rockaway; crossed over to Jersey City and Hoboken, and paid fugitive visits to Manhattanville and Astoria" (42). The places he visits are related to John Jacob Astor: "Hoboken, across the Hudson River in New Jersey, was the site

of the Astor mansion, while Astoria, across the East River in Queens, bears the name of its overlord” (Foley 93). It is as if the lawyer manages to reaffirm his faith in Astorian economic rationalism, which has been challenged by Bartleby’s passive refusal of any materialistic causes, by making a “pilgrimage” to the places that remind him of Astor’s “money-making career” (Eitner 15, 14).

It could have been the perfect timing for praising Astor’s accomplishments and publishing his reminiscences had Melville decided to write a biography of Astor instead of *Bartleby* in 1853. The story of “*Bartleby*” seems to take place in the 1840s, which can be surmised from the fact that the narration occurs between 1848, when Astor, referred to as the “late” John Jacob Astor in the story, died, and 1853, when the narrative was published.<sup>9</sup>

Melville and his contemporaries, however, caught the stench of the degenerative aspect of capitalism in the life and death of John Jacob Astor, whose reputation had declined from that of a diligent and prosperous merchant to that of a notorious old miser towards the end of his life. When James Parton contributed a brief biography of Astor to *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in 1865, he struggled to redress Astor’s disgrace by collecting some unknown episodes of young Astor’s toil and moil: “If, in later life, he overvalued money, it should not be forgotten that few men have had a

harder experience of the want of money at the age when character is forming” (309). However, as the narrative progresses to Astor’s latter years, Parton is reluctantly obliged to acknowledge “the meanness” of “this remarkable man”:

Truth compels us to admit, as we have before intimated, that he was not generous, except to his own kindred. . . . Very seldom during his lifetime did he willingly do a generous act outside of the little circle of his relations and descendants. To get all that he could, and to keep nearly all that he got—those were the laws of his being. He had a vast genius for making money, and that was all that he had. (315)

While John Jacob Astor represents a successful American dreamer and “a firm believer in the destiny of the United States” (319), he also exemplifies the arrogance and intolerance of the worshipers of Mammon and reveals a negative aspect of American capitalism.

*The New York Herald* published Astor’s will on April 5, 1848, and dismissed him as “a self-invented money-making machine” (Porter 2: 1121). The testament not only afforded “a ridiculous example of the worst of legal jargon” but also was “appended by many codicils,” which displayed the vestiges of his efforts to “leave less money to his poor relations and various charities” (Johnson 30). Melville composed a will of old Bardianna as a parody of Astor’s will in Chapter 177 of *Mardi and the Voyage Thither*, published four years earlier than “Bartleby.”<sup>10</sup> “Imprimis,” in sharp contrast to Astor, who left considerable parts of his assets to his oldest son, Bardianna, a bachelor, eliminates his relations from any inheritance: “All my

kith and kin being well to do in Mardi, I wholly leave them out of this my will” (*Mardi* 583). Mocking Astor’s meanness in sparing so little of his vast fortune for the sake of charity, Bardianna donates his teeth for the poor of his home isle: “I give to the poor of Vamba the total contents of my red-labeled bags of bicuspid and canines (which I account three-fourths of my whole estate) . . .” (*Mardi* 584). The death of the New York millionaire afforded Melville an opportunity to reexamine both the system and morals of capitalistic society.

Hence, Melville’s selection of Bartleby over Astor as a biographical subject suggests two objectives: to critique rather than celebrate Astorian materialism, and to provide an orientation towards “poetic enthusiasm” that Astor lacks. If “poetry” is “[t]he expression or embodiment of beautiful or elevated thought, imagination, or feeling, in language adapted to stir the imagination and emotions” (OED), Melville could not have discovered anything beautiful nor imaginative in the insatiable avarice of John Jacob Astor, whose maxim was “Buy and Hold.” “If he [Astor] had his life to live over again, he often said, and knowing what he now knew, he would have bought up every foot of land on Manhattan Island” (Justin Kaplan 11). Bartleby, on the contrary, occupies the very bottom of the social hierarchy. The subsistence wages of the law-copyist never allow him to own or rent any property in New York. It is his poverty that forces him to live in the lawyer’s

office and to end his life in the Tombs as “a vagrant.” Purchasing nothing but “a handful of ginger-nuts” and refusing to receive his pay or accept charity, Bartleby is totally free of any greed (“Bartleby” 23). The narrator is often impressed by the scrivener’s moral correctness. “I had a singular confidence in his honesty. I felt my most precious papers perfectly safe in his hands” (26). “Now I had an unbounded confidence in this man’s common honesty. He had frequently restored to me sixpences and shillings carelessly dropped upon the floor, for I am apt to be very reckless in such shirt-button affairs” (33). Although the duty of the copyist itself is far from “poetical,” as the lawyer “cannot credit that the mettlesome poet Byron would have contentedly sat down with Bartleby to examine a law document” (20), Bartleby’s life of honest poverty somehow arouses the lawyer’s emotions and imagination to invent some beautiful literary expressions in the narrative.

### **Bartleby and the Future of Capitalism**

Having enormous foresight into how lucrative investments in New York real estate could be in the 1820s, Astor was never suspicious of the rising economic prosperity of the city. “It was through his almost unique vision of the future of New York City that he found the one place where the capital secured to him by his commerce could be finally invested so that, with a minimum of personal exertion, it would make him the richest man in



America, and one of the five or six richest men in the world” (Porter 2: 940).

In contrast, Melville’s “unique vision of the future of New York City” foresees the decline of capitalism through the image of the most desolate human of his world. We will focus on the two peculiarly “poetic” and “imaginative” scenes in the fogy lawyer’s narrative: depictions of a Sunday on Wall Street and of the Dead Letter Office.

On a Sunday morning, when the lawyer drops in at his office on his way to Trinity Church, he is startled to come across Bartleby “tenanting” in his law-chamber and portrays the solitary existence of the scrivener in the abandoned district:

Of a Sunday, Wall-street is deserted as Petra; and every night of every day it is an emptiness. This building too, which of week-days hums with industry and life, at nightfall echoes with sheer vacancy, and all through Sunday is forlorn. And here Bartleby makes his home; sole spectator of a solitude which he has seen all populous—a sort of innocent and transformed Marius brooding among the ruins of Carthage! (“Bartleby” 27-28)

The narrator compares Sunday’s uninhabited Wall Street to the ancient city of Petra in the Levant. According to James C. Wilson, Petra, which was once “the Wall Street of Arabia,” was “a great commercial center located at the hub of a network of ancient trade routes from the Orient to the Mid-East” (10-11). After the fall of the Roman Empire, however, Petra was known as a “city of the dead” studded with tombs and temples (11). The comparison with the extensive ruins of Petra lets us imagine that Wall Street, exemplifying

the highest material prosperity in Melville's time, will surely decay in days to come. Melville superimposes the image of Petra, a metropolis of commerce that became a city of ruins, upon the future decline of New York, center of American capitalism.

In his discussion of American orators' eulogies for deceased Revolutionary War heroes as a form of biography, Michael T. Gilmore proposes "the language of classical antiquity" as one of the "[t]wo systems of allusion" the speakers adopt (131-32). As exemplified by William Smith's speech on General Richard Montgomery, orators make use of "the classical past" and set "the idealized purity of the early Republic" against "the corruption and decay of the Roman Empire" (Gilmore 134). Melville applies this rhetorical technique to illustrate Bartleby in the Wall Street world but with a quite different effect. When Bartleby is compared to the "pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero," "a sort of innocent and transformed Marius brooding among the ruins of Carthage," or "the last column of some ruined temple," these metaphors express not the contrast but the similarity between the idealized, modern, doomed Republic and the ancient corrupted one (21, 27-28, 33). Although Bartleby is often referred to as an "apparition" or a "dead man" in order to emphasize how out-of-place he is in Wall Street, it is actually the city itself that is dead and deserted.

It is as if Bartleby has been sent as a prophet to warn of the possible grievous consequences of extravagant materialism. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber demonstrates that the historical factors that generate and nurture “the spirit of capitalism” do not lie in the desire for accumulation of material things or commercial greed but in the religious concept of labor as a calling in ascetic Protestantism: “It is obvious how powerfully the exclusive search for the Kingdom of God only through the fulfillment of duty in the calling, and the strict asceticism which Church discipline naturally imposed, especially on the propertyless classes, was bound to affect the productivity of labour in the capitalistic sense of the word” (121). Before he stops copying documents, Bartleby is described as this modern ascetic laborer: “At first, Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically” (“Bartleby” 19-20). We should notice that Bartleby’s style of hard work is never “cheerfully industrious.” His indefatigable diligence does not spring from asceticism and the joy of fulfilling his calling, cultivated by the doctrine of Protestantism, but out of nowhere, something blank, automatic, and slavish.

Bartleby's mechanical assiduousness corresponds to what Weber imagines workers will be like when capitalistic rationalism reaches to the utmost limit in future.

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. . . .

To-day the spirit of religious asceticism—whether finally, who knows?—has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. The rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfillment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when, on the other hand, it need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. (123-24)

When religious asceticism is completely woven into the gigantic economic mechanism, a laborer has no choice but to become a cog in the wheels of that system and never questions the spiritual meaning of labor as a calling.

Haunted by a mere shell of asceticism, Bartleby remains alone in the desolation of Wall Street and keeps copying silently and mechanically, faithfully practicing the "spirit of capitalism" in a world in which workers have lost the meaning of the austere performance of their duties.

To round off the biography of Bartleby, the narrator refers to “one little item of rumor” about the copyist’s past. Although the “vague report” simply informs that Bartleby had worked for the Dead Letter Office before being hired by the lawyer, the phrase “Dead Letter” abruptly rouses the narrator’s emotions, and he begins to create an imaginative life story of Bartleby:

The report was this: that Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration. When I think over this rumor, hardly can I express the emotions which seize me. Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? For by the cart-load they are annually burned. Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring: —the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity: —he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.

Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity! (45)

When the narrator associates “dead letters” with “dead men,” he identifies Bartleby not only with a “pale clerk” of the Dead Letter Office but also with a dead addressee. The image of dead letters reconfirms the sense of guilt that he cannot eventually solve Bartleby’s predicament in any way. The belated letters the narrator imagines here correspond with the helping hands he has tried to extend to the law copyist: A “ring” is equivalent to the narrator’s offer of his “dwelling” for the copyist, and a “bank-note” to the “odd twenty” the

narrator had tried to give the scrivener in charity. Visualizing the pallid scrivener sorting out numerous undelivered pieces of mail that were too late to save people from “unrelieved calamities,” the lawyer blames himself afresh for his inability to prevent the miserable death of his friend.

Another reason for the narrator’s powerfully emotional reaction to the scrivener’s past lies in the narrator’s sneaking recognition of the similarity between Bartleby’s condition of life and his own.<sup>11</sup> While the narrator has regarded himself as a successful lawyer who substantially benefited from a capitalistic economy by making full use of his “prudence” and “method,” he has taken pity on Bartleby, who has been exploited as cheap labor (“Bartleby” 14). However, just as Bartleby was unreasonably laid off “by a change in the administration,” the lawyer lost his job by a sudden abolition of the Court of Chancery: “I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages; but I must be permitted to be rash here and declare, that I consider the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master in Chancery, by the new Constitution, as a —premature act; inasmuch as I had counted upon a life-lease of the profits, whereas I only received those of a few short years” (14).<sup>12</sup> This forcible termination must play a significant role in evoking the narrator’s sympathy for Bartleby. The lawyer wished to believe in the huge difference of status between Bartleby and himself. He thought that he lived in the “paradise of bachelors” with

“fraternal, household comfort” while “pale” Bartleby worked in the “tartarus of maids” where he copied lawyer’s documents silently and mechanically just like the maids ripping “mutely and cringingly” “some old shirts” “gathered from the dormitories of the Paradise of Bachelors” (“The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” 322, 328, 330). However, the narrator is obliged to notice that both of them are incompetent individuals who are irresistibly controlled by the heartless and inhumane system of capitalism.

A dead letter is congruent with what Melville calls biography “in its purer form” in the preface of *Israel Potter* in the sense that the writer and the written discourse are severed from the receiver. The biography of Bartleby, which warns against the dark destination of American capitalism through its description of the absolute solitude of the law-copyist left behind in the wreckage of a moribund empire, is a dead letter from Melville to his contemporaries and future generations who will keep firm faith in the bright future of modern materialistic society.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Scott E. Casper briefly mentions “Bartleby, the Scrivener” in his argument that Melville’s *Israel Potter* criticizes Jared Sparks’ biographies of great men (156).

<sup>2</sup> *New-York Mirror, and Ladies’ Literary Gazette* ran an article, “Biographical Mania,” on May 15, 1830. It reports that mounting curiosity about “the privacy of domestic life” divests “public men of all the pomp and mystery of office and situation,” which should confer a considerable advantage on the public “especially in a republican government, where the ruling men of the times should be known as they really are” (359).

<sup>3</sup> The titles of the first series of the *Library of American Biography* (1834-38) are: Vol. I, Lives of John Stark, Charles Brockden Brown, Richard Montgomery, and Ethan Allen; Vol. II, Lives of Alexander Wilson and Captain John Smith; Vol. III, The Life and Treason of Benedict Arnold; Vol. IV, Lives of Anthony Wayne and Sir Henry Vane; Vol. V, Life of John Elliot, the Apostle to the Indians; Vol. VI, Lives of William Pinkney, William Ellery, and Cotton Mather; Vol. VII, Lives of Sir William Phips, Israel Putnam, Lucretia Maria Davidson, and David Rittenhouse; Vol. VIII, Lives of Jonathan Edwards and David Brainerd; Vol. IX, Lives of Baron Steuben, Sebastian Cabot, and William Eaton; Vol. X, Lives of Robert Fulton, Joseph Warren, Henry Hudson, and Father Marquette. The titles of the second series



(1844-48) are: Vol. I, Lives of Robert Cavelier de la Salle and Patrick Henry; Vol. II, Lives of James Otis and James Oglethorpe; Vol. III, Lives of John Sullivan, Jacob Leisler, Nathaniel Bacon, and John Mason; Vol. IV, Lives of Roger Williams, Timothy Dwight, and Count Pulaski; Vol. V, Lives of Count Rumford, Zebulon Montgomery Pike, and Samuel Gorton; Vol. VI, Lives of Ezra Stiles, John Fitch, and Anne Hutchinson; Vol. VII, Lives of Sebastian Rale and William Palfrey; Vol. VIII, Lives of Charles Lee and Joseph Reed; Vol. IX, Lives of Leonard Calvert, Samuel Ward, and Thomas Posey; Vol. X, Life of Nathanael Greene; Vol. XI, Life of Stephen Decatur; Vol. XII, Lives of Edward Preble and William Penn; Vol. XIII, Lives of Daniel Boone and Benjamin Lincoln; Vol. XIV, Life of John Ledyard; Vol. XV, Lives of William Richardson Davie and Samuel Kirkland.

<sup>4</sup> Although it is true that Weems' biography of Washington was notorious for its "mixture of fairy stories and outrageous panegyric" (Garraty 100), Sparks himself was also accused of "editing" Washington's letters to the extent of impairing the accuracy of the documents in order to restore the dignity and integrity of the national hero (Casper 193-95).

<sup>5</sup> *Israel Potter* was first serialized in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* from July 1854 to March 1855 and published as a book in 1855. Melville's *Israel Potter* was based on the autobiographical narrative, *Life and Remarkable Adventure of Israel R. Potter* (1824). According to Scott E. Casper, "[t]hese

ephemeral tales of true-life adventures” were not counted as “biographies” but as “narratives.” “Akin to picaresque fiction as well as to biography, narrative inhabited a separate genre because of its first-person narration, its emphasis on adventures rather than lives, and its publication in cheap, easily disposable form” (Casper 156). Thus, Melville saved the story of Israel Potter for posterity by changing the first-person narration to the third-person, an autobiographical narrative to a biography, and a disposable chap-book into a permanent book form.

<sup>6</sup> For more detailed discussion of Sparks’ troubles and Hawthorne’s *Life of Franklin Pierce*, see Casper 193-201. As Casper warns, we should notice that *Life of Franklin Pierce* was written as a campaign biography for a Democrat. “Democratic and Whig newspapers agreed that the biography was ‘as pleasant reading as the best of the author’s romances’ but interpreted this remark differently. Democrats meant that Hawthorne had transcended the ordinarily workmanlike qualities of the genre, while Whigs meant that he had outdone himself in creating an entirely fictional character” (197).

<sup>7</sup> We might speculate that Melville read this article because he had borrowed some volumes of *The United States Democratic Review* from Evert Duyckinck in the summer of 1850 and possibly continued to read the following volumes. His attentiveness to the works of Hawthorne has also been documented (Sealts 61, 223).

<sup>8</sup> Though Irving denied the rumor that Astor gave him \$5,000 for the completion of *Astoria*, Astor paid \$3,000 for the preliminary work by Irving's nephew, Pierre M. Irving, and Irving was "quartered at Astor's country estate" at Hell Gate while working on *Astoria*. Additionally, Astor allowed Irving to buy land at Green Bay, which was surely profitable, not in cash but on mortgage, and made up for his loss when land prices dropped. Irving also received \$10,592.66 "from his commission as executor" (Porter 2: 864, 867, 1053-55).

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the complications in dating the events in "Bartleby," see Foley 88-89.

<sup>10</sup> Leon Howard points out that Melville "digressed long enough to allow later readers to date the composition of this section of his manuscript [Chapter 177 of *Mardi*] when he 'recited at length' a parody of the last will and testament of John Jacob Astor which had appeared in the New York *Herald* for April 5 and so amused Evert Duyckinck that he commented upon it in a letter to George [his brother]" (*Herman Melville* 120).

<sup>11</sup> Richard R. John also notices "a parallel between Bartleby's dismissal from the Dead Letter Office and the lawyer's loss of a valuable post as justice of the chancery court in the state of New York," although John blames the lawyer for not interpreting Bartleby's strange behavior as a result of the

unreasonable termination of his former employment, thus demonstrating the lawyer's obtuseness and "unreliability as a teller of Bartleby's tale" (634-35).

<sup>12</sup> The courts of chancery remind us again of John Jacob Astor, who must have frequently used the courts for foreclosures. The system was considered to be "aristocratic and patriarchal" since "the office of chancellor was seen as another royal manifestation" in pre-Revolutionary America (Eitner 14, Gitelman 358). Depending on the kind of case, the costs for the service of the courts of chancery ranged from \$30-\$90 or more. The foreclosures cost more than \$150, a large part of which was spent for the number of copies necessary in the legal processes (Moulton 428- 57). The lawyer-narrator is impelled to hire an additional copyist, Bartleby, because business (the number of copies) had increased "by receiving the master's office" ("Bartleby" 19).

<sup>13</sup> This chapter is a revised version of "Bartleby, the Scrivener": The Politics of Biography and the Future of Capitalism," *Melville and the Wall of Modern Age*, edited by Arimichi Makino, Nan'un-Do, 2010, pp. 77-96.

Chapter 5 Mimicking Black, Fashioning White: The Politics of Racial  
Identities in “Benito Cereno”

*“You are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?”*

*“The negro.” Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno”*

*The Negro is not. Any more than the white man. Frantz Fanon*

One of the most striking moments in “Benito Cereno” occurs at the novella’s conclusion after an American Captain, Amasa Delano, finally realizes that it is not Spaniards but Africans who control a Spanish slave ship, and quashes a slave rebellion. Feeling safe on board an American trader and recovering his health and self-possession for a time, Benito Cereno, the captain of the slaver, engages in “many cordial conversations” with Delano during the “long, mild voyage to Lima” (“Benito Cereno” 114). The “fraternal unreserve” between them, however, falls back to “former withdrawments” when Delano asks Cereno, “What has cast such a shadow upon you?” (114, 116). Cereno’s response, “The negro” (116), and his ensuing silence, suggest an unbridgeable difference of view on race between them. What is contrasted in this exchange is “Don Benito’s moral collapse” and “Delano’s moral obtuseness” (Stuckey 169). For Delano, who shares the contemporary

stereotypical ideas about the inferior race without any slightest doubts, the negro is nothing but “the most pleasing body servant in the world,” with “a certain cheerfulness,” who is “too stupid” to organize any conspiracy (83, 75). Delano’s eloquence in representing the negro depends on the conventional racist vocabulary of the time. Benito Cereno, however, never really clarifies what the negro is even after the rebellion is subdued. Just as the legal deposition silences Babo, the shadow of “the negro” smothers Benito Cereno. Don Benito’s reticence about race demonstrates that the blackness of the “negro” implies the horrible absence of the signified and at the same time is filled with numerous ambivalent meanings, as the whiteness of the whale suggests “the visible absence of color” as well as “the concrete of all colors” (*Moby-Dick* 195).

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon simultaneously defines and deconstructs the distinction between the Negro and the white by oddly and intentionally splitting a sentence: “The Negro is not. Any more than the white man” (231). Both the absolute otherness of the Negro in “the world of the *You*” and the unavoidable interdependency of black and white are condensed in the unconventional period in the middle of the sentence (232). What Fanon tries to eliminate here is the hierarchy between black and white, which always already forces the existence of the Negro to be marginal and inferior:

It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world. / Superiority? Inferiority? / Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?" (231)

Because of his ineluctable doubt regarding the hierarchical tension between black and white, Fanon's black self cannot be stable and is thus required to be recaptured and reexamined. Whenever he asks who he is, he is obliged to question the mechanism of racial identities. Forced to act out white supremacy while he is enslaved by the African mutineers, Benito Cereno, like Fanon, cannot help challenging the legitimacy of the racial hierarchy. Cereno is forced "to touch the other, to feel the other," but cannot find any words "to explain the other" to himself. He becomes an in-between, both white and black at the same time, but not empowered by hybridity but exhausted by playing both.

It may seem strange to juxtapose Herman Melville, a white American writer in the nineteenth century, with Frantz Fanon, a black psychiatrist and political activist who was born in Martinique, educated in France, and naturalized in Algeria in the twentieth century. We should notice, however, that Melville and Fanon are haunted by the same disgraceful colonial history. Melville names the slave ship "the San Dominick," reminding readers of the Haitian Revolution which led to the establishment of the first independent nation of the former slaves (Sundquist 140); the ship's figurehead is

Christopher Colon. In at least these two acts of naming, Melville traces the transatlantic history of slavery to the discovery of the “New World.” On the other hand, though Fanon refuses to be “the slave of the Slavery,” and to be “sealed away in the materialized Tower of the Past,” he is nevertheless haunted by the past: “I am a Negro, and tons of chains, storms of blows, rivers of expectation flow down my shoulders” (226, 230).

Fanon’s unusual interruption of the sentence resonates with Benito Cereno’s speechlessness after his utterance of “The negro.” The Negro is not . . . what? The Negro is not white? Or, the Negro is not what white men consider him to be? Both Fanon and Melville are interrogating the Negro’s subjectivities. Homi K. Bhabha interprets the strange halt in the middle of the sentence, “The Negro is not. Any more than the white man,” as follows: “That familiar alignment of colonial subjects—Black/White, Self/Other—is disturbed with one brief pause and the traditional grounds of racial identity are dispersed, whenever they are found to rest in the narcissistic myths of negritude or white cultural supremacy” (40). Both Fanon’s conscious insertion of the disturbing cessation and Cereno’s involuntary dumbness refuse to accept the conventional distinctions between a black identity and a white one, and thus putting us in a liminal, in-between space. Because of the cultural code on race of mid-nineteenth century, “Benito Cereno” cannot be as outspoken as when Fanon or Bhabha questions the familiar boundary of



black and white, but Cereno's choked silence about the Negro keeps asking the readers what the Negro is and who names it.

This chapter examines the politics of racial identities in "Benito Cereno." First of all, the complex threefold narrative structure will be analyzed in terms of colonial discourse to show that the form of the story tells the untold critique of slavery. While two versions of narrative of a slave mutiny are apparently told, behind those Americanized and Hispanicized tales, an Africanized counternarrative will be revealed. Secondly, focusing on the San Dominick as liminal, transnational space where all the laws and social mores are suspended, I will explain how the slaves contain and transgress the ideologies of racism in their dramatization of racial relationships. Finally, the chapter will attribute the fatal transformation of Benito Cereno's body and soul after he is forced to act "white" to the doubling of master and slave, both having turned a kind of "in-between." I will argue that the diseased, wounded, and finally dead body of Benito Cereno represents not only the unsubstantiality of white supremacy, but also the tormented body and deprived subjectivity of black slaves, and thus speaks for them.

### **“Benito Cereno” as Colonial Discourse**

The peculiar narrative structure of “Benito Cereno” is inseparably intertwined with its critique of racism. It is the form, not the story itself, that speaks clearly: the ways that the story speaks with singular eloquence, hesitates to end, and fails to unveil the truth, demonstrate how both timely and outdated it could be to deal with race and slavery in the middle of nineteenth century. Slavery had been implicitly threatening the American national ideal of freedom and democracy since 1776, and the heated discussions of abolitionists began to make the nation’s internal contradictions explicit and push it toward the Civil War. Even now, as Toni Morrison points out, “race’ is still a virtually unspeakable thing” (3). “Benito Cereno” is Melville’s bold attempt to narrate the unspeakable thing through the elaborate tactics of eloquence and reticence.

The threefold narrative structure of this novella dissects the mechanism of colonial discourse. As Gesa Mackenthun aptly points out, “What ‘Benito Cereno’ has in common with many postcolonial thinkers is the . . . position that the colonized cannot be represented in any culturally authentic way, as the power of representation rests exclusively with the colonizer” (542). By constantly reminding us who is guaranteed the right to speak, Melville reveals how the colonizers could abuse narrative authority to

maintain the racial hierarchy, and lets perceptive readers imagine what is left out of their normalized narration.

Most of the story is told from the third person narration throughout the limited perspective of Delano. It is ironic that this most eloquent section in the narrative informs us the least of what is really happening on the San Dominick, and reveals about the racial bias which blinds Delano's recognition. Delano's failure to pierce the veil of the mutiny is ascribed to his "singularly undistrustful good nature" and "benevolent heart," which cannot believe "the imputation of malign evil in man" (47). However, as Dennis Pahl rightly explains Delano's inability to unravel the mystery, "on another level one might understand this 'blindness' more in terms of the historical world with which he is most familiar . . . : the world that privileges his identity as 'American,' 'captain,' 'white,' and 'civilized'" (174). As an American, Delano does not hesitate to casually offer "fifty doubloon" to buy a seemingly faithful slave, Babo, while he laments, looking at the bleeding cheek of the servant, allegedly cut by Cereno, that "slavery breeds ugly passions in man" (70, 88). As a white captain, Delano is constantly alert that Cereno, not Babo, conceives a piratical plot because he never doubts that "whites . . . by nature, were the shrewder race" (75). As a civilized man, he feels delighted with "naked nature" and the "pure tenderness and love" of "uncivilized women" as "unsophisticated as leopardesses," though in Cereno's deposition the

negresses are revealed to be more aggressive than the negroes, in the way they assert that the Spanish sailors should be “tortured to death, instead of simply killing,” and in how they sing “melancholy song” for “inflaming” the actions of murder (73, 112). Delano’s insight reaches an impasse every time he encounters something that transcends his stereotypical view of the races. Delano sees the races as fixed categories with no space in between. If Delano represents the common sense of contemporary American readers, his obtuseness could be interpreted as a biting criticism of the readers themselves, though they would not be astute enough to find it.<sup>1</sup> Those who Melville mockingly called “the superficial skimmer of the pages” (“Hawthorne” 251) are never able to dig out the voice of Africans beneath Delano’s restricted and condescending translation of it.

After the suppression of the slave rebellion, the unidentified narrator, who is curiously distanced from the story itself, interrupts Delano’s discourse to insert the deposition of Benito Cereno, expecting that it will “shed light on the preceding narratives” and “reveal the true port of departure and true history of the San Dominick’s voyage” (103). The narrator keeps implying that the most important truth is still kept unspoken. This gesture suggests both the unspeakability of race and incompetency of metropolitan discourse.

The legal documents obviously take on unreliable appearances; they are translations from Spanish with possible misinterpretation; they are not the

full text but extracts; and the testimony of Cereno, whose mental state is far from stable after the traumatic event, cannot be verified as evidence without support from other sailors' depositions. "Some disclosures therein were, at the time, held dubious *for both learned and natural reasons*. The tribunal inclined to the opinion that the deponent, not undisturbed in his mind by recent events, raved of some things which could never have happened" (103; emphasis added). The passage suggests that Benito Cereno's testimony is delivered under the pressure of legal ideology: the tribunal believes it *learnedly and naturally* impossible for the black slaves to be intelligent enough to plot and carry out the mutiny because they are *scientifically* proved to be inferior and thus *naturally* apt to be slaves.

Before adding a fragment of narrative in the end, the narrator makes an ambiguous comment on the deposition: "If the Deposition have served as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it, then, as a vault whose door has been flung back, the San Dominick's hull lies open to-day" (114). The metaphor of a lock and key reminds us of the padlock of chained Atufal and the key hung from Don Benito's neck, which constitute, in Delano's words, "significant symbols" (63). For Delano, who is "a man of such native simplicity as to be incapable of satire or irony," the lock and key represents "the Spaniard's singularly evidenced lordship over the black" (63). As Atufal's chains turn out to be dropped in a moment without any key, the

lock and key do not symbolize but caricature the white man's control over the Black. A lock and a key define each other; the way neither has meaning or use without the other suggests interdependency of black and white. The deposition as a key should be read as "satire or irony" as well. While the deposition certainly discloses "the true port of departure," which was Valparaiso, and the general circumstances of a slave rebellion, it does not ease "the complications of the story," nor can it be considered as the "true history of the San Dominick's voyage" because the discourses of dominant ideology never reveal the truth of slavery and racism (103, 114). In fact, Cereno's unilateral testimony under the pressure of legal validity lays a disproportionate emphasis on the ferocious acts of the black rebels, the worst of which is the merciless murder and skeletonizing of their master, Alexandro Aranda, as if Cereno manages to retrieve the authority of master once usurped by the negro and to lay all the responsibility of the revolt on the evilness of slaves.<sup>2</sup> The historical fact that "torture was used in Lima until the Inquisition ended in the nineteenth century" indicates the possibility of the tribunal's cruel treatment of Cereno (Coulson 21-23). Thus, Cereno's Hispanicized legal version of the slave mutiny may well be full of distortion and censorship.

Melville implies that both the deposition of Cereno and the last passage "irregularly given" to "conclude the account" have a specific purpose (114).

Those discourses are intended to open not only the door to the “vault” of St. Bartholomew’s church, where Benito Cereno sleeps, to elucidate the mystery of his death, but also “the San Dominick’s hull,” to reveal the gruesome reality of the slave ship, that is, the violence of slavery. This specific expression of “the San Dominick’s hull” surely reminds us of the “‘cargo’ that bled, packed like so many live sardines among the immovable objects” (Spillers 70). Typically epitomized in the engraving of a British slave ship, the *Brookes*, where “every man slave is to be allowed six feet by one foot four inches for room, every woman five feet ten by one foot four” (qtd. in Spillers 72), the horrors of the Middle Passage, from the appalling conditions of the human cargo to the high mortality rates as its consequence were well distributed through abolitionists’ writings.<sup>3</sup> Slaves confined in these suffocating spaces do not have subjectivities because they are cargo and counted by quantities. Although the deposition somehow individualizes the mass of undifferentiated slaves, and there are even some traces of testimony by the Africans themselves, all the African voices are ventriloquized by the Spaniard and under the control of the very laws that deprive them of the power to speak. Babo and the other Africans, however, take advantage of this “undifferentiated” identity and let us hear an Africanized version of the story, as I argue in the next section.

## The Masquerade of Slavery in a Transnational Space

When Captain Delano was informed that “a strange sail” was sailing in the harbor of St. Maria, “a small, desert, uninhabited island toward the southern extremity of the long coast of Chili” (“Benito Cereno” 46), surrounding circumstances were thickly painted gray:

Everything was mute and calm; everything *gray*. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter’s mould. The sky seemed a *gray* surtout. Flights of troubled *gray* fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled *gray* vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. *Shadows* present, *foreshadowing* deeper *shadows* to come. (46; emphasis added)

An unskillful repetition of the same words, “gray” and “shadow,” for such an experienced story-teller as Melville not only expounds Delano’s growing uneasiness but also brings our attention to the indispensable ambience for the masquerade of slavery to be enacted on the San Dominick. “Gray” suggests an in-between color, which implies an indistinct boundary between black and white, and thus foretells the subversion of the racial hierarchy. The narrative is set in the gray, shadowy area, dominated by “lawlessness and loneliness” (47). According to Marta Puxan-Oliva, “‘Lawlessness’ and ‘loneliness’ are part of a longstanding European imaginary in which the ocean is a natural, unbounded and uninhabited space beyond the reach of social systems,” and in “Benito Cereno,” “the perception of the colonial ocean



as a free lawless space enables the slave revolt at sea” (430). In addition, the San Dominick displays “no colors” (“Benito Cereno” 46), which makes the narrative setting a non-national or transnational space.

In her innovative discussion of culturally overburdened Black female identity, Hortense J. Spillers unveils “the semantic and iconic folds buried deep in the collective past” of the Atlantic Slave Trade, and she contends that the African captives in the Middle Passage are “suspended in the ‘oceanic’” (69, 72):

[R]emoved from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet “American” either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all. Inasmuch as, on any given day, we might imagine, the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say that they were the culturally “unmade,” thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that “exposed” their destinies to an unknown course. (72)

Forcibly deprived of an African identity but not yet conferred a slave identity, the African captives in the Middle Passage belong to nowhere and become nobody. What is intriguing about Spillers’ argument is how she redefines this state of unmade subjectivity and unknown destiny as being full of “possibility”:

[T]he slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, not ‘counted’/‘accounted,’ or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure. Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into ‘account’ as *quantities*. (72).

The state of undifferentiated “quantities” can be negatively considered as the loss of individuality and agency. But once the slave ship is regarded as a suspended space where both its crew and its human-as-cargo are left “wild and unclaimed,” they are free from any cultural norms and open to be accounted in any way; subversion of any kind of social values is possible in a liminal place.<sup>4</sup>

Melville was fully aware of the complexity of slave agency. As Saidiya V. Hartman designates, the enslaved is “a subject who is socially dead and legally recognized as human only to the degree that he is criminally culpable” (24). Throughout the narrative, Melville lets the slaves possess their subjectivities in a shrewd way: at first, as disguised loyal slaves in a masquerade who secretly seize control of the ship, and later, as “defiant” criminals who refuse to speak. Babo, the ringleader, gains such perfect mastery of cultural codes of race that he rebels by performing overly legitimate roles; he plays a devoted servant as institutional slavery expects him to be, and he keeps silent, because the law prohibits slaves from testifying. Because the masquerade constantly refers to the reality of slavery, it reveals that the slavery itself is a kind of masquerade by forcing the slaves (and even the whites) to put on certain kinds of masks. It is forbidden to enquire what is behind the masks.

As Eric Lott names the story of “Benito Cereno” “Melville’s version of the minstrel show” (242), what is enacted on the San Dominick can be seen as a dramatization of the politics of racism written, directed, and acted by the slaves themselves. What is appreciated and ridiculed in it is not black culture but the myth of white supremacy, and it is not based on love and theft but on hate and revenge. Instead of oversized and ragged Negro costumes, Don Benito wears costly apparel and a silver-mounted sword. For banjo, fiddle, castanets, and tambourine, the six hatchet-polishers “clashed their hatchets together, like cymbals, with a barbarous din,” and the four oakum-pickers chant with a “continuous, low, monotonous” tone (“Benito Cereno” 50).

The primary objective of the show is to make the audience, Captain Delano, believe that nothing is happening on the vessel. The black mutineers put on the masks of docile and ignorant slaves, and Don Benito is forced to wear a mask of dictatorial white superiority. To deceive Delano, the script should follow the most stereotypical racial discourse of master and slave. What is striking about this drama is not only how tightly it embraces the ideology of racism, but also how boldly it transgresses the cultural expectation of races. According to Lott, “At every turn black face minstrelsy has seemed a form in which transgression and containment coexisted, in which improbably threatening or startlingly sympathetic racial meanings were simultaneously produced and dissolved” (234). For the minstrelsy of the

mutineers, transgression is not accidental but deliberate. It proves the outstanding cultural literacy of black slaves.

The contrast in dress of Babo and Benito strengthens Delano's impression of the beautiful spectacle of the slave's "fidelity" and the master's "confidence." While the Spaniard is wearing "a loose Chili jacket of dark velvet," "white small clothes and stockings, with silver buckles," "a high-crowned sombrero," and "a slender sword, silver-mounted," the servant is wearing "nothing but wide trousers, apparently, from their coarseness and patches, made out of some old topsail" (57). But as it turns out, "the dress so precise and costly" is not "willingly" put on by Cereno, and the "silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic commands," is not a sword, "but the ghost of one." It is Babo who conceals a real dagger in his shabby clothes. The contrastive costumes of Babo and Cereno contain as well as subvert the beautiful relationship of master and slave.

Another example of the containment and transgression would be the barber scene. Seeing Babo preparing to shave Cereno, the conventional image of slaves occurs to Delano: "Most negroes are natural valets and hairdressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castanets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction" (83). But the exquisite tableau of the servant helping the master groom fissures when we notice that Babo makes use of the Spanish color as an apron. Though Delano is ignorant

enough to interpret it as “an odd instance of the African love of bright colors and fine shows,” it is in fact a deliberate expression of Babo’s disrespect for a King and country engaged in the slave trade.

Thus, in the rebellion, which is transformed into a masquerade of black and white, the slaves *re-present* race. “By overthrowing slavery and then staging it as a play, Babo has *conventionalized* the supposedly natural relations of master and slave” (Rogin 215, emphasis mine). The Africans shrewdly conceal and reveal their revolt against slavery. And black intelligence is condensed in the head of Babo, which is described in the text as a “hive of subtlety” (116). Caroline Karcher astutely points out how Melville’s delineation of Babo perverts the African stereotypes:

Not only does the entirety of “Benito Cereno” give the lie to Delano’s complacent reliance on the Negro’s intellectual inferiority, but as some critics have recognized, Melville’s portrayal of Babo as an almost disembodied brain—“his slight frame, inadequate to that which it held” —reverses the conventional racist stereotype of the Negro as all brawn and no brain. (130)

Physically Babo is frail enough to yield to “the superior muscular strength of his captor” (116). But the intellectual abilities epitomized in Babo’s head surpass the interpretive skills of the American captain.

In the last scene, Babo’s severed head is placed in the plaza. It is meant to be exposed to “the gaze of the whites” to assert white authority by imposing indignities on the body even in death. But the narrator’s description

of the head betrays the conventional cultural reading of a dead body of slave. Dead or alive, it is Cereno, not Babo, who continues to be under surveillance. As Franny Nudelman elucidates, “when Babo stares back, defiantly, it appears that he has not only survived the act of punishment but also thwarted the observer’s desire to understand him” (54).

According to Nudelman, in nineteenth-century America, the skulls of African Americans were used to prove their intellectual inferiority and thus to establish scientific racism. Babo’s brain not only resists being an object of scientific observation, but also raises an objection against scientific racism itself. Substituting the skeleton of the slaveholder, Aranda, for the vessel’s figure-head, the image of Christopher Colon, Babo asks Cereno whose skeleton it is, and whether he should not think it a white’s judging from its whiteness (107). It is true that the cruel slaughter of the master reminds us of the stereotypical image of the savage custom, the practice of cannibalism, but here, Babo’s inquiry about the correspondence between the color of the skeleton and its race is all the more threatening because it caricatures and ridicules the stupidity of pseudo-scientific racism based on the superficial observation of skulls. In this question, Babo forces Cereno to realize how groundless the racial hierarchy could be, and even reveals the interchangeability of races: once we pull the black/white skins off, the skull does not quite tell us whether it is that of black or white.

## Master and Slave: Their Silence and Death

One of the major changes Melville made to the original story written by Amasa Delano is the characterization of the Spaniard, Benito Cereno.<sup>5</sup> In Delano's narrative, after the revolt has been crushed, Cereno turns out to be a villain. He is reluctant to compensate Delano's assistance and uses "all his endeavors to delay the time of payment" (330). He treats the American with "much dishonesty and ingratitude" (329). Cereno's obsession with monetary losses and his ungrateful manners to Delano do not indicate any renouncement of the world, but reaffiliation with the colonial economy. In her postcolonial reading of "Benito Cereno," Gesa Mackenthum interprets Captain Delano as fully involved in the slave trade by encouraging his crew to grab the slave ship and the cargo, "including the rebellious slaves and all" (Mackenthum 539), after the revelation of the revolt.<sup>6</sup> Just like Delano, the historical Cereno simply returned to the ruthless exploitation of the Atlantic slave trade after a moment of suspension during the mutiny. In Melville's story, however, after the rebellion, Cereno can never really recuperate from the shock and melancholia and finally perishes as if following the fate of Babo.

Throughout the masquerade of master and slave, Benito Cereno and Babo are being twinned, as Andrew Delbanco regards "the mirroring relation between oppressor and oppressed" as a theme of the novella (*Melville* 233).

They are around the same age and share silence and muteness. Even imperceptive Delano observes their doubling: “there was something hollow in the Spaniard’s manner, with apparently some reciprocal hollowness in the servant’s dusky comment of silence,” and he suspects “possibly master and man . . . were acting out . . . some juggling play before him” (87). Sometimes Babo’s services are somewhat “filial and fraternal acts” that make him “less a servant than a devoted companion” (52). They are often described as almost physically united; Cereno “unconsciously fell into the ready arms of his attendant” (61); or the servant was holding his master as “a sort of crutch” (97). Although Delbanco might go too far when he suggests “[w]hen the captain swoons against him, the black man half naked in skirtlike trousers cut from the topsail, the two conjoin in a kind of grotesque simulacrum of coitus” (*Melville* 234), it is only the color of their skins which distinguishes Cereno and Babo.

Both demeaned to be a slave and framed to be a dictatorial master, Cereno’s body and mind are treated as blank for forcible inscription. Benito Cereno, enslaved in his showy aristocratic attire with an empty scabbard, not only embodies white ideology but also represents the pained body of black slaves. As Jason Richards indicates, “Cereno is blackened because he has been thoroughly enslaved, so much so that he becomes a kind of a symbol for slavery” (85). While acting a master under duress, Cereno must have felt the



real pain of a slave as well as the unreasonable coercion of a master. Saidiya V. Hartman explains the mechanisms of how the enslaved black body is compelled to be a substitute for the white body:

[T]he fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion. (21)

In the masquerade of slavery, Babo makes Cereno's white body an "empty vessel" open to be a "projection" of Babo's "feelings, ideas, desires, and values." Babo realizes what Bhabha calls "the fantasy of the native": "to occupy the master's place while keeping his place in the slave's *avenging* anger" (44). As a result of losing "the master's place" and being immersed in "the slave's avenging anger," Benito Cereno cannot retrieve "the ideal ego that is white and whole" (Bhabha 76).

The shadow of the Negro cast upon Cereno does not vanish but looms over him. Some critics interpret his fatal transformation at the end of the story as certain realization of the moral responsibilities of the whites for slavery. John Haegert suggests that Benito Cereno's silence "indicates that he at least has some awareness that the institution of slavery is less a matter of law than of power—cruelly coercive and disproportionate power" (35).

According to Eric J. Sundquist, "a majority have seen in those [legal] documents an approximation of the full moral burden of the story, a burden

that Delano escapes and to which Benito Cereno succumbs in the muted finale” (179). Cereno’s recognition of the illusion of white supremacy and his exposure to the wounds and pains of the enslaved surely lead him to question the morality of slavery.

Melville, however, never gives Cereno a chance to live to atone for his sin, nor does he let Babo survive, although some of the trials of slave mutinies in history, such as the *Creole* and the *Amistad* cases, freed revolted Africans (Rogin 212). Though both Babo and Cereno, separately or together, are potentially powerful in-betweens playing in a liminal space where all the laws and social mores are suspended, they are more constrained than liberated. In acting out a tabloid play of master and slave, Babo strictly adheres to the cultural codes of race and forces Cereno to do the same.

Michael Rogin explains Melville’s relentless critique of the familial bonding of master and slave proslavery arguments often refer to and its consequence:

“The charade is as imprisoning as the organic relationship [of master and slave] it undercuts. As the tale strips away the natural bond between master and slave, it locks the two together more closely than before” (217).

Deconstruction of the myth of paternal master and faithful slave only leaves another confining, more dehumanized relationship. Melville at least allows Babo to be rebelliously silent: “Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I

will not speak words” (116). Eric J. Sundquist connects Babo’s silence with his refusal of law: “Babo will not speak within the language of a law that does not apply to him” (Sundquist182). Benito Cereno’s silence is the result of exhaustion of language, or his recognition of the indescribability of race in his language. Both Babo’s defiant death and Cereno’s exhaustion to death show the impossibility of breaking the spell of chattel slavery.

In his search for the role of a postcolonial reader, Geoffrey Sanborn positively asserts that in describing Cereno’s death, Melville does not want his white readers to be like Delano nor Cereno, but “to learn how to live in a world where meaning is the product of ungrounded decisions, and where acts of illumination are always shadowed by the darkness they displace” (175). I keep failing to discover, however, any redemption in the story. Deprived of the racist vocabulary to define the negro, Cereno’s awareness of what the negro really is does not generate in him any renewed representation of race nor empathy for the black slave. Melville’s despair at his country does not allow us to see any feasible solution to institutional slavery. As the Spanish government shuddered at the potential intelligence of the black in the slave rebellion of Santo Domingo, Melville predicts that America is on the verge of political and moral collapse. Delano, whose ethical insensitivity clearly reflects Melville’s contemporary white readers, never recognizes that Cereno’s anguish will soon be his.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In fact, most of the critics before the 1950s, that is, before the Civil Rights movement dramatically reformed both the institutional systems and consciousness about races, were as insensitive as Delano to the exquisite subtleness of the African slaves in “Benito Cereno.” As Joyce Sparer Adler accuses early criticism of completely misreading the story, it is commonly interpreted that Babo is “symbolic of Evil,” Don Benito Cereno is a “good victim of ‘black’ iniquity,” and Captain Amasa Delano is “innocence discovering Evil.” And surprisingly, slavery is “irrelevant to the story” (Adler 88). Even Carl Van Vechten, who fulfilled a preeminent role both in the Harlem Renaissance and in the Melville Revival, fails to detect Melville’s bitter protest against racism covered under Delano’s misperceptions in “Benito Cereno.” Among the “sketches” of *The Piazza Tales*, Van Vechten evaluates, “Benito Cereno” is “worth reading,” but he belittles the tale as “a sea story which should be better than it is” (86). Susan M. Ryan examines the reviews of “Benito Cereno” in the mid-1850s and finds out the story was originally received as “an eerie, mysterious and apolitical tale” (112).

<sup>2</sup> Douglas M. Coulson considers the possibility that Cereno might have been the principal architect of the slave revolt. Coulson, referring to the historical example of the *Hope* revolt in 1764, Cereno might “have killed the slaves’ owner Alexandro Aranda and the Spanish officers as part of a plot to

seize possession of the vessel and its valuable cargo” (31), and could have manipulated the deposition to acquit himself of treason.

<sup>3</sup> During four voyages the *Brookes* made between the years 1781 to 1786, it carries no fewer than 600 Africans. This horribly tight-packed human cargo prompted governmental intervention, and in 1788, an Act of Parliament was passed to regulate the number of captives allowed on a ship. The stowage plans of the *Brookes* were included in the *Description of a Slave Ship*, published by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1789 (Falola and Warnock 87-89). In “Benito Cereno,” according to Cereno’s testimony, “all the negroes slept upon deck,” and “none wore fetters,” because their owner, Alexandro Aranda told Cereno that “they were all tractable” (104). Both the leniency of Aranda and the benevolence of Delano show their profound ignorance of the violence they have practiced on Africans.

<sup>4</sup> As Maggie Montesinos Sale defines, “Ships by their very nature are liminal spaces that move between state and national boundaries” (28).

<sup>5</sup> “Benito Cereno” is based on Chapter 18 of Captain Amasa Delano’s *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels* (1817). Melville “imaginatively refashion[ed] it” (*Piazza Tales* 809) though he did not acknowledge it as his source.

<sup>6</sup> Mackenthun also points out the historical fact that many illegal slave ships sailed safely under the disguised American flag, as the United States rejected the right of England to search American ships. Thus, “the revival of the illegal transatlantic slave trade was facilitated, if not encouraged, by the ‘postcolonial’ politics of the United States government” (550).

<sup>7</sup> This is a revised and expanded version of “Mimicking Black, Fashioning White: The Spectacular of Slavery in ‘Benito Cereno,’” *Eigakuronko* [English Studies], vol. 37, 2008, pp. 3-14.

## Chapter 6 From Rosmarine to Grandma's Bible:

### Melville, Ikezawa, and the Otherness of Nature

Natsuki Ikezawa, one of the most renowned contemporary writers in Japan, avidly reads Melville both as a creative writer and a literary critic.<sup>1</sup> Ikezawa admitted, in the plenary session of the 10th International Melville Conference in Tokyo, that he has been influenced by Melville's postmodern tactics of subverting literary conventions, such as the quest motif in *Moby-Dick* ("Merubiru" 278–79). Moreover, *Moby-Dick* is discussed in a series of lectures by Ikezawa on world literature, from Stendhal to Pynchon. What makes *Moby-Dick* modern, Ikezawa argues, is the encyclopedic descriptions of whales and whaling in the center of the story. Those digressions from the plot suggest that the text as well as the world is a kind of database: the world is no longer a tree diagram with God on the top, so to speak, but instead a random jumble of items without any directory to coordinate them (*Sekai* 173–74). In his commentary on the Japanese translation of *Typee*, Ikezawa, demonstrating that Western intellectuals in the mid-nineteenth century were able to consider the world as almost perfectly known, thereby losing both terra incognita and utopia, observes that Tommo escapes from the Typee valley because he cannot find a genuine arcadia there (*Bukkisshuna* 159–60, 163).

Despite the differences in their eras and cultural backgrounds, Ikezawa shares many literary characteristics with Melville: cosmopolitanism cultivated through immense reading and worldwide travels; skepticism about the accepted forms of narratives; and a special attention to the peripheral in colonial and postcolonial contexts, such as renegades and archipelagoes. Above all, they are both astute critics of the relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds. While Melville as a sailor learned of the destructive power of the ocean through long, trying whaling voyages and shipwrecks, Ikezawa developed his philosophy on natural and manmade disasters after the Japanese earthquake of March 11, 2011. This chapter will explore how Ikezawa's thoughts about nature after the earthquake resonate with Melville's meditations upon humanity and the environment in his later works, especially *John Marr and Other Sailors with Some Sea-Pieces* (1888).

In an essay about how he felt and acted after the earthquake, Ikezawa, reaffirming that nature is indifferent to humans, groped for a way to accept such natural calamities.

I have been thinking about nature for a long time, and come to realize that the central dogma of nature is its indifference to human.

Nature has no intention. It is not because nature means it that it snows. Under certain atmospheric conditions, snow is formed in a cloud and reaches the ground. We accept a snowfall with joy or sorrow or whatever we like. Nature would never be involved in our emotions. Indifference is colder than cruelty: Absolute zero of feeling. . . .



Tens of thousands of people in the Tohoku area wished that the tsunami could have been just three feet lower than it actually was, and that it could have touched the shore 20 seconds later. Their earnest prayer did not have any effect or influence on nature, and thus the tsunami came. (*Haru*; my trans.; 15–17)

Ikezawa refers to “Parting with a View,” a poem by a Polish poet, Wislawa Szymborska, which has been reverberating in his mind after the earthquake, and from whose first line he obtains the title of his essay. The poem depicts the ambivalent feelings of the poet toward the spring that comes as it usually does, even after her husband’s death:

I don’t begrudge the spring  
for coming back again.  
I can’t blame it  
for doing its duty  
the same as every year.

I realize my sorrow  
won’t halt the greenery.  
(*Haru* 17–18; Szymborska and Trzeciak 26)

The sentiment of the victims and the poem delineate that we cannot help inquiring of nature about the reason for the disaster, even though we fully recognize the apathy of nature. As Ikezawa concludes, “we cannot stand this scientific fact, nature’s indifference” (*Haru* 19; my trans.). Although we readily grant the lack of intention in nature, people tend to impute a personality or divinity to the natural world and speak to it in order to bear with its heartlessness. William Cronon suggests that telling a story is a remedy for the psychological injuries caused by a natural catastrophe: “The

human inclination is to transform all such events [environmental disasters] into stories that carry a moral lesson. . . . And yet: we must not forget that these stories are *ours*, not nature's. The natural world does not organize itself into parables. Only people do that, because this is our peculiarly human method for making the world make sense" (50).

This "human" way of interpreting nature's will should remind us of Captain Ahab, but Ahab in fact goes so far as to believe in the evil intentions of nature. Ahab declares his belief as follows: "The inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate, and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him" (*Moby-Dick* 164). Ahab's obstinate desire to fix meanings in everything makes a sharp contrast with Ishmael's endless narration about whales, as he insists that "the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last" (264). Both of their perspectives on nature are subjective, and Lawrence Buell might be right to say, "Melville's interest in whales was subordinate to his interest in whaling, and his interest in the material reality of both was constrained by his preoccupation with their social and cosmic symbolism," and, thus "Melville's environmental imagination was too homocentric" (4, 5).

However, as Elizabeth Schultz counters Buell's reading of *Moby-Dick* by suggesting readers' possible identification with the whales and the "irresistible interdependency among diverse species of life" depicted in *Moby-*

*Dick*, Melville elaborates on the complex relationship between the natural environment and human beings in his other works as well (“Melville’s Environmental Vision” 100).

In the later works of Melville, his perspectives on nature become severer and gloomier. “Bartleby, the Scrivener” portrays the wasted Bartleby on “a soft imprisoned turf,” sprung from “grass-seed, dropped by birds” (“Bartleby” 44). The fresh, verdant grass makes a contrast with the withering life of Bartleby, and while it puts an emphasis on the cyclical nature of life beyond time and space, it never lessens the lawyer’s penitence. In “Benito Cereno,” the “bright sun,” “blue sea,” “blue sky,” and “mild trades” can be “a human-like healing” only to an obtuse observer, Captain Delano, and the image of “the negro” ends up enclosing Benito Cereno in lasting melancholy (“Benito Cereno” 116). In *Billy Budd, Sailor*, after Billy’s arraignment in the drumhead court, Captain Vere falls into “one of his absent fits” and gazes upon “the monotonous blank of the twilight sea,” which neither gives any suggestions for Vere to reach a fair and benevolent judgment nor abates the agony of losing the best of his men (*Billy Budd* 53). In these narratives, Melville does not allow the natural environment to heal sorrows nor reflect men’s emotions. The conversation between nature and humans comes to a deadlock.

Among the later works of Melville, *John Marr and Other Sailors* particularly focuses on the heartlessness of nature and how men can possibly deal with it. In the introductory prose piece, “John Marr,” which contains a short verse at the end, the title character, John Marr—a former sailor now living alone among pioneer farmers on the prairie, having lost his wife and child—cannot supply “the past” as “a common inheritance” to “the basis of sympathetic communion” (*John Marr* 196). Whenever Marr, in order to console his loneliness, relates “some marine story or picture,” his farmer neighbors reply, “Friend, we know nothing of that here,” and it aggravates his desolation more (197). He equates the lack of sympathy in his friends with the apathy of nature:

Such unresponsiveness in one’s fellow-creatures set apart from factitious life, and by their vocation—in those days little helped by machinery—standing, as it were, next of kin to Nature; this, to John Marr, seemed of a piece with the apathy of Nature herself as envisaged to him here on a prairie where none but the perished mound-builders had as yet left a durable mark. (*John Marr* 197)

Surrounded by indifferent nature and unsympathetic fellow creatures, Marr cannot do anything to console himself but turn inward: he makes the “phantoms” of his shipmates his “spiritual companions,” passionately yearns for “reunion” with the past, and sings with his “imaginative heart” (198, 199).

It is not only the prairie but also the ocean that is indifferent to humans. The main theme of the poems in *John Marr and Other Sailors* is an implacable sea, destructive of men and ships. “The Berg (a dream)”

unsentimentally observes the madness of a martial ship crashing into an iceberg:

I saw a ship of martial build  
    (Her standards set, her brave apparel on)  
Directed as by madness mere  
Against a stolid iceberg steer,  
Nor budge it, though the infatuate ship went down.  
The impact made huge ice-cubes fall  
Sullen, in tons that crashed the deck;  
But that one avalanche was all—  
No other movement save the foundering wreck.

.....  
Hard Berg (methought), so cold, so vast,  
With mortal damps self-overcast;  
Exhaling still thy dankish breath—  
Adrift dissolving, bound for death;  
Though lumpish thou, a lumbering one—  
A lumbering lubbard loitering slow,  
Impingers rue thee and go down,  
Sounding thy precipice below,  
Nor stir the slimy slug that sprawls  
Along thy dense stolidity of walls.  
(*John Marr* 240, 241)

Except for “one avalanche,” the iceberg was not influenced by nor interested in the ship crashing and sinking. Adjectives like “sullen,” “hard,” and “cold” and the poet’s use of “thou,” “thy,” and “thee” to apostrophize the iceberg, subtly imply his personalization of nature, but basically the iceberg represents the stolidity of nature. Such phrases as “I saw” and “methought” prove the narrator’s self-consciousness of his subjectivity: it is not an objective fact but a personal view that the ship is “infatuate” and the iceberg is “stolid,” “lumbering,” or “sullen.” Melville’s perspective on nature in this

poem is beyond the binarism of ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, and human beings and the ecosphere have almost no mutual influence on each other. As Hennig Cohen comments on the poem:

While emphasis is on the ship that, “Directed as by madness” destroys itself, it should be noted that the iceberg is also doomed, “dissolving, bound for death.” In this pessimistic statement, therefore, Melville does not merely assert human limitations, though they are clearly greater than those placed upon objects of Nature like the iceberg, but the limitations applicable to natural objects as well. (Melville, *Selected* 219–20).

Neither collision with the ship nor the lamentation of humans affects the doom of the iceberg. It just dissolves by itself. According to Douglas Robillard’s note, Melville was “dissatisfied with what he had allowed in publication” and “revised the last line of the poem to change ‘dead indifference’ to ‘dense stolidity’ (Melville, *Poems* 301). Melville substitutes “dead,” which means “bereft of sensation or vitality” and can modify both men and nature, with “dense,” which is defined as “having its constituent particles closely compacted together” and used to qualify natural objects. As “indifference” signifies “absence of feeling for or against” and there still remains a “neutral” feeling, it is replaced with “stolidity,” which means “incapacity for feeling” (*OED*). The change of phrasing from “dead indifference” to “dense stolidity” confirms that Melville does not allow us to apostrophize the iceberg at all. The poem tells us it is our vain conceit to believe that men can destroy or control nature.

If it is indispensable for us to address ourselves to nature and to relate a parable about the environment, how could John Marr, or other sailors, or possibly Melville himself, overcome indifferent nature and unsympathetic fellow creatures? The concluding verse of *John Marr and Other Sailors*, “Pebbles,” consists of seven brief epigrams to summarize the poet’s experience of the heartlessness of the sea. Just like a pebble worn and rounded by water and sand, the poet, buffeted by the inexorable sea, learns how poor our understanding of nature is and delivers an epigram to satirize the presumptuous human race.<sup>2</sup>

I

Though the Clerk of the Weather insist,  
And lay down the weather-law,  
Pintado and gannet they wist  
That the winds blow whither they list  
In tempest or flaw.

II

Old are the creeds, but stale the schools  
Revamped as the mode may veer.  
But Orm from the schools to the beaches strays,  
And, finding a Conch hoar with time, he delays  
And reverent lifts it to ear.  
That Voice, pitched in far monotone,  
Shall it swerve? shall it deviate ever?  
The Seas have inspired it, and Truth—  
Truth, varying from sameness never.

III

In hollows of the liquid hills  
Where the long Blue Ridges run,  
The flattery of no echo thrills,  
For echo the seas have none;

Nor aught that gives man back man's strain—  
The hope of his heart, the dream in his brain.

IV

On ocean where the embattled fleets repair,  
Man, suffering inflictor, sails on sufferance there.

V

Implacable I, the old implacable Sea:  
Implacable most when most I smile serene—  
Pleased, not appeased, by myriad wrecks in me.  
(*John Marr* 243-47)

Part I of “Pebbles” compares the intelligence of oceanic life to esteem the randomness of the natural world with the inflexibility of men to believe it possible to control nature by meteorology and a legal system. Part II mocks a man, who, while oscillating between variant schools and creeds, postpones listening to the truth revealed by the monotonous tone in a sea snail. As the unresponsiveness of the seas shows nature’s indifference toward our hopes and dreams in Part III, Part IV warns that we should humble ourselves to realize that we are only allowed to inhabit the natural world “on sufferance.” The abrupt personification of the sea in Part V ridicules the absurdity of assuming a personality for nature itself. The poet cannot help calling the calm before the storm deceptive and cruel, and attributing demonic evilness to the sea not “appeased” but “pleased” by numerous “wrecks” in it. Throughout these lines, the otherness of nature and the vain efforts of a man to approach it are emphasized: “In Melville’s world . . . nature and



consciousness, imagination and perception are completely distinct realms, the world's being an absolute Other" (Dryden 345).

The epiphanic moment of reconciliation occurs in the last two parts of "Pebbles" when the poet delineates the process of accepting the inhumanity of the surrounding environment.

#### VI

Curled in the comb of yon billow Andean,  
Is it the Dragon's heaven-challenging crest?  
Elemental mad ramping of ravening waters—  
Yet Christ on the Mount, and the dove in her nest!

#### VII

Healed of my hurt, I laud the inhuman Sea—  
Yea, bless the Angels Four that there convene;  
For healed I am even by their pitiless breath  
Distilled in wholesome dew named rosmarine.  
(*John Marr* 248–49)

The last two parts of the poem are less epigrammatic and more dramatic than the earlier parts of it. The major characteristics of Parts VI and VII, Biblical references and multiple images of such words as "billow Andean," "crest," and "rosmarine," turn the focus of the poem to the poet's imaginative and linguistic power.<sup>3</sup> Melville's choice of the Book of Revelation, from which "the Dragon" and "the Angels Four" are adopted, is an apt one because, just as the Revelation portrays "the consummation toward which the whole biblical message of redemption is focused" with "an accumulation of magnificent poetic imagery" (*New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Testament*

364), the last parts of “Pebbles” aim at the poetic redemption of alienated mankind.

Part VI superimposes the mountain imagery upon the ocean by calling the “billow” “Andean” and letting “crest” mean not only the comb of the dragon but also the top of the wave and the mountain. Although the sea is ruled by the Dragon, Satan, whose “power,” “throne,” and “authority” are given to a beast that “utter[s] blasphemies against God” (Rev. 13.2, 6), the possibility of salvation and peace remains in the existence of Christ and a dove on the mountain. It is this synthesis of good and evil, the holy and blasphemous, in nature as a whole that the poet praises in Part VII. The four angels in the Bible “[stand] at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on earth or sea or against any tree” (Rev. 7.1), and thus protect the world from any damage. The angels are, however, also “given power to damage earth and sea” (Rev. 7.2), from which Melville must have imagined their “pitiless breath.” Their breath, though unrelenting, miraculously heals the poet after it is refined into an herbal essence, “rosmarine.” “Rosmarine” here is “rosemary,” which not only symbolizes “remembrance,” but also stems from “ros marinus” in Latin, that is the “sea-dew,” which reminds us of the native habitat of rosemary, and thus let us imagine the plant’s ability to survive at the side of “the inhuman sea” (Robillard 190). To “distill” is “an act of will, implying effort” (Lee 122).

Therefore, the distillation suggests the poet's purposeful deed, the result of his creative effort to transform the brutal sea and pitiless wind to a poetic vision, represented as an aromatic dew, to keep in his remembrance. The implacableness of the nonhuman world "may be figured or represented in poetic language," and the poet "is healed by his very power to figure and refigure" (Dryden 349). In other words, Hence the poem "laud[s]" his own poetic imagination in the end.

This healing by the poetic vision brings us back to Ikezawa, as his short story titled "Grandma's Bible" (2012) depicts an impressive vision of the sea, which gives a victim of a disaster a renewed will to live. Included in an anthology of various stories written in response to the unprecedented earthquake and tsunami in 2011, "Grandma's Bible" is about a middle-aged man, Kimura, who tells his experience to a member of a relief team, Karoji, who happens to drop by where Kimura is staying. Sometime before the disaster, divorced and unemployed, Kimura was about to leave Japan to work in Arizona. He decided to discard almost all his belongings, but there were things he could hardly part with: his grandfather's glasses, his grandmother's Bible with her photo in it, and old love letters. Kimura asked his brother, still living in his hometown in the Tohoku region, to keep them, and sent the package with the specified delivery time, March eleventh, between two and four in the afternoon. Listening to Kimura's story, Karoji imagines the

package swallowed by tsunami waves. Kimura managed to reach Tohoku from Tokyo, and found his brother dead, his sister-in-law missing. Although he and his brother were not especially close, and his livelihood would have been more or less guaranteed in Arizona, Kimura decided to move to his hometown in Tohoku, haunted by the following vision, as Kimura tells Karoji:

My grandma's Bible floating in the ocean. Swaying and sinking in the currents with her photograph still pressed inside. Or else lying motionless on the ocean floor, wedged between rocks, maybe, or layered among the rubble the tsunami carried out from land, or even resting under some corpse's head. It's gone for good, but if I stay here I figure I can always remember her face in the photo. (Ikezawa, "Grandma's Bible" 106)

This vision may not alleviate Kimura's distress and pain, though it might act as a simple prayer for the victims, because the image of the rubble and corpse on the seabed would recurrently bring him back to that awful moment.

Moreover, Karoji, the listener, is not a fully sympathetic ear, and fails to understand what Kimura means. Karoji mutters in his mind, "it's not that simple for city folk to get by in the country," and sinks into a stupor at the end of the story (107). Grandma's Bible, however, symbolizes not only Kimura's attachment to her, but also his family history and the legacy of the marginalized Christians in the region. Kimura's reference to "a little Ainu blood" in her, as well, puts an emphasis on the family's indigenesness to northern Japan, and connects him all the more to his hometown. As Kimura later says, "There's a lot of uncertainties ahead, but Grandma's Bible is still

somewhere here on the ocean floor” (107). His memory of her Bible is the only proof of who he is and where he comes from.”

Thus, both Melville and Ikezawa suggest that the only way to deal with the otherness of nature is composing an imaginative vision in order to keep the treasured past in remembrance and to be healed by that memory. When John Marr and Kimura realize their isolation from society and nature, they turn inward and lose themselves in reverie—and through the poetic vision they imagine, paradoxically recover their connection with physical reality.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Works of Natsuki Ikezawa available in English are as follows: *A Burden of Flowers*, translated by Alfred Birnbaum, Kodansha International, 2001; “Grandma’s Bible,” translated by Alfred Birnbaum, *March Was Made of Yarn: Reflections on the Japanese Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Meltdown*, edited by Elmer Luke and David Karashima, Vintage, 2012, 95–108; *Mariko/Mariquita*, translated by Alfred Birnbaum, Strangers Press, 2017; *The Navidad Incident: The Downfall of Matias Guili*, translated by Alfred Birnbaum, Haikasoru, 2012; *On a Small Bridge in Iraq*, translated by Alfred Birnbaum, 2003, [http://www.impala.jp/english\\_website/indexE](http://www.impala.jp/english_website/indexE); *Still Lives*, translated by Dennis Keene, Kodansha International, 1997. A recipient of Akutagawa award, the most prestigious literary honor in Japan, and many others, Ikezawa writes not only poems and novels but also highly political essays.

<sup>2</sup> According to Cohen’s comment, Melville’s manuscripts show that he was going to name these poems “Epigrams.” Although rejected, the original title seems to be befitting because “the poems are a series of pointed statements summarizing various ideas present in *John Marr* and serving as its conclusion” (Melville, *Selected* 221). Referring to the fact that “[t]he New York Congregational weekly *The Independent* printed a long-running

miscellany column called ‘Pebbles,’” Elizabeth Renker indicates a possible historical origin of the title of Melville’s poem (137).

<sup>3</sup> Melville’s use of the Book of Revelation in the poem is discussed in Hennig Cohen’s comment in Melville’s *Selected Poems* (223) and Dryden (347–48).

<sup>4</sup> This is a revised version of “From Rosmarine to Grandma’s Bible: Melville, Ikezawa, and the Otherness of Nature,” *Sky-Hawk*, no. 31, 2016, pp. 41-53.

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