

# Herman Melville's Politics of Imperialism: Colonizing and De-Colonizing Spaces of Ethnicity

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*There is, in Herman Melville's works, a constant struggle to situate the narrative within the context of a racial and ethnic "Other." Melville's narrators—almost invariably white, Euro-American males—appear at times in tense opposition to, and at other times in social harmony with, the African, Native American, Polynesian, and Oriental presences in his texts. In essence, Melville situates these non-white characters against the dominantly-raced narrator as racial "Others." This ethnic "othering" entails a dangerous politics of racial separation, hierarchizing, and colonization, yet simultaneously allows for and even encourages a social critique of nineteenth-century white American imperialist attitudes toward non-white peoples. Indeed, this is what makes Melville such a difficult figure to decipher both literarily and historically. By marking these races as alien and "other," indeed by striving to "mark" them at all, Melville at once conducts a constructive anthropological study as well as sets the destructive foundation for a race-driven, American imperialist project aimed at alienated and "othered" races. Indeed, Melville constructs for his readership a difficult paradox; his texts on the one hand call for white intervention and colonization of ethnic and racial spaces, and on the other, they illuminate the counter-productivity of such colonization. What, then, was Melville's relationship to the ongoing imperialist project of nineteenth-century America? To reach an answer to this question we will examine Melville's political relationship to two Pacific Ocean land groups (the Marquesan Islands and the Sandwich Islands), establish a pattern to his paradoxical imperialist and anti-imperialist philosophies, and finally, construct a model of his international, inter-ethnic political philosophy:*

In 1791 an American sea captain named Joseph Ingraham paused during a commercial expedition to China to visit the Marquesan Islands. In honor of President George Washington he named them the "Washington Group," a move which literary critic Timothy Marr argues "appropriated them as symbolic American Territory" (Marr 2005, 145). This was the first of many symbolic and literal moves in which America would express and enact imperialist projects on the islands of the South Pacific. During the War of 1812, just twenty-one years after Ingraham sailed, an American commodore by the name of David Porter visited Nukahiva (the largest Marquesan island in French Polynesia), dubbed it "Madison's Island" after the fourth American president, and waged a bloody battle with the island's inhabitants in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to claim Nukahiva for United States territory.

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It is this world of imperialist expansion and native slaughter that Melville writes about and against. His first novel, *Typee* (1846), takes place on the same Marquesan island that Commodore Porter so violently attempted to annex Nukahiva. In the Typee valley of Nukahiva, the American sailor Tommo and his companion Toby spend four months amidst the Typee people, a Polynesian tribe of reputedly violent cannibals who nevertheless prove to be hospitable and kindly hosts. *Typee* is, in fact, a fictionalized account of Melville's autobiographical experiences. In 1841, Melville and his friend, Toby Greene, deserted the whaling ship, *Acushnet*, and passed six weeks on Nukahiva before, as Professor James Barbour describes it, "primitive paradise began to pall...[and] he was rescued by the *Lucy Ann*, an Australian whaler" (Barbour 1986, 5).

The word "rescue" is noteworthy here, the implication being that the "primitive" and heretofore uncolonized Typee people were savage captors, Melville and Greene their innocent victims, and the *Lucy Ann* their savior. Barbour probably meant by "rescue" nothing more explicit than the "assistance" Melville required to return to Western civilization. But the implications of Barbour's word "rescue" resonate peculiarly well with Melville's own fictionalized account of his Polynesian experience. He titles, for instance, the final chapter of *Typee*, "The Escape" (Melville 1996, 245). Despite Tommo's (Melville's fictional alter ego in his travel narrative, *Typee*) discovery that the Typee people are not violent cannibals in need of civilizing, indeed, despite his own declaration that "no sooner do [American missionaries] convert Polynesians into *nominal* Christians, than disease, vice, and premature death make their appearance" (Melville 1996, 195), Tommo still regards his exit from uncolonized Nukahiva as an "escape." It is as though Tommo recognizes intellectually the tremendous damage that American imperialism and Christian missions inflict on the Polynesian peoples, yet he fears their un-Western and thus, "uncivilized" society. In short, Tommo contrives his "escape" from the clutches of a pre-colonized society.

Does it follow, then, that Melville himself supported an imperialist America and a colonized, converted Polynesia? Clearly he notes with great concern the negative effects of America's colonization attempts in the Marquesan Islands. He was, for instance, greatly troubled by the American missionary William Alexander who, in 1835, established a mission in the Marquesan Islands only to excoriate the reputation of the Teii tribe as savage and bloodthirsty cannibals (Robertson-Lorant 1996, 107). But did Melville's concern stop there? Perhaps he, like Tommo, ultimately endorsed an American-governed, "properly" Christianized, and western-civilized Polynesia by effecting a relieving "escape" from a "savage" and "primitive" Pacific Island to the "civilized" West. It would seem that Melville's own journals could provide answers to this question. Unfortunately though, he did not begin writing his first journal until October of 1849, several years after both his Pacific Island experience and the publication of *Typee*, and the journals authored are mostly sentence-fragments that record his daily activities and movements, rather than reflective and political meditations on his past. The journals thus provide none of Melville's philosophy regarding Pacific Island missionaries and colonization.

Starting in 1857, however, Melville attempted the lecture circuit. He only gave three lectures, but in his second one, titled *The South Seas*, he discussed the ongoing imperialist attempt on the part of the United States to annex Hawaii and the Georgian Islands. “As for annexation...I entreat...that the banns of that union [between America and the Pacific Islands] 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” (Sealts 1957, 180). Melville indicts not only America’s imperialist presumptions in the Pacific Islands, but her own self-conceived identity as a “superior” and “civilized” country. As long as the American apex is “almshouses, prisons, and hospitals,” the United States has, according to Melville’s lecture, no warrant to colonize Nukahiva or any of the Pacific Islands. It would seem, then, that Melville’s politics of imperialism do not align with Tommo’s regressive flight back to Western “civilization.” No connection, imperialist or otherwise, can be forged, in Melville’s view, to the benefit of the Polynesians who yet remain “uncorrupted” by nominal Christianity.

The novella, *Benito Cereno*, poses a potential complication to this view of Melville’s politics as anti-imperialist and supportive of independent tribes and ethnic nations. In *Benito Cereno*, Melville tells the story of the *San Dominick*, a Spanish-owned slave ship on which the Senegalese slave, Babo, leads a bloody and successful insurrection. When the American captain, Amasa Delano, boards the ship, he is duped by a powerful masquerade orchestrated by Babo and his fellow slaves to convince him that no rebellion has taken place at all, indeed, that Benito Cereno, the white captain of the *San Dominick*, is still master of the ship and that the blacks are still his slaves. Babo’s rebellion and temporary rule of the *San Dominick* is an experiment in African-led government that seems to fail ethically (his “government” demoralizes, abuses, and murders the Spanish crew-members), as well as politically (he proves unable to sustain this secret “government” against even Delano’s gullible nature, and after decapitation, his head is “fixed on a pole in the Plaza” (Melville 1984, 755) for all to witness his political failure). This might be Melville’s argument that African groups, and perhaps other ethnic nations, are incapable of self-rule. Indeed, the novella could be considered an indirect call for American imperial control. Perhaps Melville’s authorial decision to make this African experiment in self-government a violent and political failure signals his lack of confidence in the political abilities of the racial “Other.”

Melville’s own experiences in the politically unstable Hawaiian Islands seem to corroborate this literary interpretation. In 1843, Melville worked as a bookkeeper for Isaac Montgomery, an English merchant based in Honolulu. In the same year Lord George Paulet claimed the Sandwich Islands (including Hawaii) for Great Britain. Native rebellion against this imposition of British rule was fierce, and Melville experienced the riots first hand in Honolulu. According to his biographer, Laurie Robertson-Lorant, “this melee convinced Melville that these ‘civilized’ islanders were incapable of self-government at this point” (1996, 116). Indeed, he went so far as to “support a British take-over” (1996, 116). It seems, at least with regard to the Sandwich Islands (so named by British Captain James

Cook in honor of John Montague, the Earl of Sandwich), that Melville supported British imperialism in lieu of a native-run, and thus “poorly governed” nation.

It is difficult to reconcile the anti-imperialist Melville of the Marquesan Islands and *Typee* with the pro-imperialist Melville of the Sandwich Islands and *Benito Cereno*. But perhaps a re-evaluation of that novella is in order. When *Benito Cereno* was published in 1856 as part of *The Piazza Tales*, the *New York Times* reviewed it as “melodramatic, not effective” (Higgins and Parker 1995, 480). The “melodrama” that the *Times* perceived in this text likely stems from the sort of literal reading offered above. If Melville’s text is taken at face value, if the *San Dominick* insurrection is truly Melville’s attempt to contrive the African race as poorly suited to self-government and in dire need of paternalistic and imperialistic protection from the United States—then truly his novella is “melodramatic.”

Consider, for instance, the moment in the narrative when Babo, as part of his masquerade to conceal the slave insurrection from Delano, performs as Benito’s loyal slave and hairdresser. He shaves him, just as Delano would expect a slave servant to do, but for a shaving smock Babo uses the flag of Spain. This is Babo’s declaration of a new, African-dominated government. No longer is the Spanish flag the revered emblem of statehood and power. The new Senegalese dictator has reduced it to a scrap of cloth that catches Benito’s falling hair—perhaps Melville’s melodramatic signal that a new, Africanist regime is in power.

But if we interpret this moment, not as Melville’s melodramatic outcry against the inability of Africans to create a peaceful, respectful, and sustainable self-government, but rather as an expose of American inability to recognize the African potential for self-government, then this moment is in fact, not melodrama, but irony. When Babo wraps the flag around Benito, Delano interprets this potentially political act as merely “an odd instance of the African love of bright colors” (Melville 1984, 717), and he continues to perceive Babo, not as an insurrectionist and government ruler, but as slave who is faithful as a “Newfoundland dog” (Melville 1984, 716). Captain Delano is invested so deeply in the racist stereotype that ascribes to Africans both a “love of bright colors” and an inability to contrive a sustainable government, that he is blind to the political symbolism of Babo’s act. Melville’s focus, then, is not the political violence and instability of the rebel Senegalese government, but rather Delano’s willful inability to recognize the existence of that government at all. Read this way, *Benito Cereno* is not a call for American imperialism, but an exhibition and critique of the deeply flawed American imperialist assumptions that blind Captain Delano so severely.

This re-interpretation of Melville’s novella certainly echoes his anti-imperialist politics of *Typee* and the Marquesan islands, but it does not explain his reaction to the Honolulu rebellion. Why, if Melville is such an anti-imperialist, would he be convinced that the Sandwich Island natives were politically degenerate and incapable of self-rule? Why would he support native government in the Marquesan Islands and British imperialism in the Sandwich Islands? Historian Charles Roberts Anderson offers a compelling explanation for this surprising contradiction:

Especially distasteful to [Melville] was the brand of civilization forced down the throat of the Noble Savage by overzealous missionaries. The Tahitians, who had been only slightly tainted, he found congenial and amusing; to the Marquesans, if one is to believe his record in *Typee*, he gave his heart. The fear that these unspoiled primitives might be polluted by the French, or anyone else, roused him to eloquence. But the Sandwich Islanders he evidently considered already polluted beyond redemption; it was of little moment, then, that the English or any nation should usurp control of their mock civilization which was already in the hands of a foreign rabble (Anderson 1939, 336).

According to Anderson's argument, Melville esteemed moral, cultural, and social purity over political independence and self-government. His anti-imperialist desire for native independence only surfaced if those natives were yet "unspoiled" by American religious missionaries.

Indeed, Melville expresses his intense antipathy toward Christian missionaries in Hawaii when he writes, "Not until I visited Honolulu was I aware of the fact that the small remnant of the natives had been civilized into draught horses, and evangelized into beasts of burden" (Melville 1996, 196). He describes a frightened, tottering, and elderly native whose job it is to pull a rickshaw containing a demanding and insult-hurling missionary's wife across Honolulu (1996, 196). Melville is clearly pained by this degradation and humiliation of Hawaiian natives, but the political philosophy he forms around it is one that considers the natives corrupted, "tainted," and "spoiled" virgins, and thus no longer worthy of political independence. The cure for natives' "Christianized corruption" is, in Melville's view, British imperialistic rule.

Given Melville's shifting and sometimes tenuous philosophy of imperialism and anti-imperialism, it can be difficult to assess his politics of colonialism and international relations. In some respects he proves progressive by critiquing American reluctance to acknowledge Polynesian and African potential for productive self-rule. In other respects, he proves regressive by marking the Sandwich Islanders as corrupted degenerates who can never reach a moral equivalence with Americans or the British, and thus they require imperial rule. What, then, is Melville's desired model of international relations? Does Melville, despite the contradictions in his philosophy, ever create and disseminate a unified politics of world affairs?

An examination of *Moby-Dick*, the tale of Ahab's obsessive hunt for the white whale, yields part of the answer, for it evinces a unified model of both kinds of politics that are central to Melville's philosophy of imperialism: religion and government. Ishmael, the white, American-born narrator of the text meets and becomes great friends with Queequeg, the dark-skinned, tattooed prince of a Polynesian island. Their fast-forming and long-lasting companionship operates in the text metaphorically as a politics of inter-ethnic relations. Religiously, their relationship bespeaks tolerance and understanding. Although wary at first of Queequeg's animistic religion, Ishmael is, with a series of Socratic questions, able to arrive logically at respect for and acceptance of his friend's ceremonies and beliefs:

I was a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church. How then could I unite with this wild idolater in worshipping this piece of wood?...But what is worship? to do the will of God that is worship. And what is the will of God? to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man do to me that is the will of God. Now, Queequeg is my fellow man. And what do I wish that this Queequeg would do to me? Why, unite with me in my particular Presbyterian form of worship. Consequently, I must then unite with him in his; ergo, I must turn idolater (Melville 1983, 849).

This moment in *Moby-Dick* speaks to Melville's primary concern that Christian missionaries will convert and thus corrupt native peoples. It is an establishing moment in Melville's narrative, one which necessarily takes place early on in the book so as to set the stage for Queequeg and Ishmael's emerging "political" relationship.

The metaphor for their "political" relationship appears in Chapter 72 when the Ahab and his crew have captured a whale and Queequeg must insert the blubber hook. To do this, Queequeg has to straddle the floating whale and stab the hook into its back a dangerous job made all the more so by multitude of snapping sharks that swarm the bleeding whale carcass. Queequeg is, however, tethered to the boat by a precautionary "monkey rope;" he is tied to one end and Ishmael, who stands securely in the boat, is at the other. As described, this would be a metaphorical model of American imperialism. Queequeg, the ethnic "Other," is tied to a moral and political lifeline held in the hands of Ishmael, the white American. At any moment Ishmael may tug on the rope or release it, sending Queequeg to his death. In this model, Ishmael is the imperialistic ruler, the monkey rope is the politics, government, and religion he installs, and Queequeg the powerless native forced to submit to the will and force of the man who holds the "imperial" rope.

But this is not actually the model that Melville proposes, for Ishmael is not merely holding on to the monkey rope, indeed, he is tied to it. "An elongated Siamese ligature united us. Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother, nor could I any way rid of the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed" (Melville 1983, 1135). If Queequeg falls into the ocean, he will drag Ishmael with him. The monkey rope, then, is not a tool of imperialistic power, but an equalizing "Siamese ligature" that assures an equivalent balance of independence and dependence to both characters or, metaphorically, nations.

Melville's model of inter-ethnic politics, thus, is *founded* on social, moral, and religious tolerance and *secured* by political and governmental equality. In other words, if Ishmael (America) can allow for non-Christian religions and abstain from sending agents of religious and moral conversion, then Queequeg (or Polynesia, Senegal, etc.) deserves and requires equal footing with America both politically and governmentally.

As a space of political, moral, and social interaction, the *Pequod* (the whaling vessel in *Moby-Dick*) is deeply symbolic of the multi-ethnic globe. Queequeg the Polynesian, Tashtego the Native American, Dago the African, Fedallah the Persian, and Ishmael the Caucasian all inhabit the politicized space of the *Pequod*. Ishmael and Queequeg each represent a nation-space, and their deeply connected friendship marks their potential for a closely connected, yet unbalanced imperialistic power relationship. But by establishing them first as religious and moral equivalents, Melville circumscribes the imperialistic construct and forms instead, a friendship of social and political equality.

A similar multi-ethnic space appears in Melville's 1856 Journal. While on a visit to Constantinople in December he writes, "Great crowds of all nations money changes coins of all nations circulate Placards in four or five languages [Turkish, French, Greek, Armenian]; advertisements of boats the same. You feel you are among the nations" (Melville 1989, 61). Melville describes this multi-national, multi-economy, multi-lingual geography as a positive, enlightening space. Indeed, he terms it a "delightful elastic atmosphere" (1989, 60). The model of international politics that Melville puts forth is not only founded on moral equivalency and secured by political equality, but it is demonstrated by multi-ethnic nationhood. The *Pequod* is not only demonstrative of a multi-ethnic globe, but of a multi-ethnic nation. The vessel is, in a sense, Melville's ultimate anti-imperialist sentiment.

*Moby-Dick*, asserts Timothy Marr (2005), is Melville's reaction against "the emergent 'science' of ethnology that gained prominence in his time, a discourse that legitimated social conventions of religious and racial exclusion" (136). Samuel G. Morton, Josiah C. Nott, and George R. Gliddon were three men who belonged to the "American School" of racial pseudo-science. Using craniometry (the study of skull capacity), physiognomy (the linking of facial features with personality traits), and phrenology (the study of brain function as it relates to bumps on the skull), the "American School" of pseudo-science was heavily engaged in attributing morality, intellect, and social worth to marks on the body. They attempted, in essence, to "read" the body in order to "know" the mind. *Moby-Dick*, according to Professor Sean Goudie, is an argument against precisely these pseudo-sciences (Lecture, 28 Feb. 2006). From the scars on Ahab, to the tattoos on Queequeg, to the natural glyphs on the whale's back, Melville's text is, in large part, about "reading" and mis-"reading" the body. Each of these markings proves un-"readable:" nobody knows how Ahab got his scar, Ishmael mistakes Queequeg's tattoos for marks of savagery, and the *Pequod* is ultimately destroyed by the very whale whose marks the crew thought they could decipher.

It is noteworthy the *Pequod*, Melville's model of international relations, perhaps even of the utopian, multi-national nation, ultimately sinks in the maelstrom of the angry whale. It is as though his conception of the inter-ethnic polity destructs into horror and oblivion. His December journal entry reaches a similar conclusion. Just a few short paragraphs after he describes the multi-national Constantinople as a "delightful elastic atmosphere," he writes, "Great curse that of Babel; not being able to talk to a fellow being Have to beware of your pockets. My guide went with his hands to his. The

horrible grimy tragic air of these streets. The rotten & wicked looking houses. So gloomy & grimy seems as if a suicide hung from every rafter within" (Melville 1989, 60). What was previously a blessing of many languages is now a curse of confusion. What was earlier admiration of a multi-national economy is now fear of pickpockets. "Delightful elasticity" becomes a grotesque "suicide hanging from every rafter."

The drowning *Pequod*, the deathly Constantinople Melville contrives an ultimately devastating fate for his models of international politics. Their multi-national, politically inter-dependant and equivalent systems succumb, not to imperialism, but to annihilation. Melville, in essence, destroys his own political models. In both cases, the negative transformations occur in the presence and as a result of mis-interpreted languages and meanings. Constantinople proves to be, for Melville, an impossible medley of multi-lingual confusion. In his journal he transitions immediately from the inability to speak and hear other people to an economic downfall for Constantinople's citizenry: "not being able to talk to a fellow human being Have to beware of your pockets." By making this transition so immediate, Melville implies a causal relationship between mis-interpretation and destruction multi-lingual confusion seems to engender economic destruction and ultimately, suicide. Similarly in *Moby-Dick*, the *Pequod* succumbs to the whale's wrath after its multi-national crew misinterprets, differently interprets, or entirely ignores both markings on each others' bodies, as well as darkly prophetic signs of their devastating fate.

Melville's politics of imperialism and anti-imperialism is a palimpsest of philosophies. If, and only if, an ethnic space remains "uncorrupted" by Christian missionaries, does it reserve the right to self-government. And as a self-governing space, it enters into a social, political, and economic contract with other ethnic spaces and nations, thus creating the multi-national nation space. But when languages, meanings, and interpretations become confused, mis-assigned, and misconstrued because of that nations' multi-ethnicity, the nation self-destructs like a suicide from the rafters, or the *Pequod* in a maelstrom. Melville's politics are multi-faceted and multi-layered, but ultimately, they demand recognition of the amazing, confusing, and dangerous act of "marking," "reading," and "knowing" the unknowable "Other."

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