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Herman Melville's *Typee* and *Omoo*: The Lost Connection with Nature
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Herman Melville's *Typee* and *Omoo*: The Lost Connection with Nature¹

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Sailing on his small schooner in 1908, Jack London arrived at the Marquesas Islands in the South Pacific. He was thrilled to be finally on the island where Herman Melville's first hero-narrator, Tommo, had lived among the wild cannibals. Travelling into the valley, London spent the day with the natives, observing their living conditions at the edge of the 20th Century. London ends his impression of the Typee Valley by revealing a change in the state of the once Edenic world that Melville depicted in *Typee* (1846):

we watched the moon rise over Typee. The air was like balm, faintly scented with the breath of flowers. It was a magic night, deathly still, without the slightest breeze to stir the foliage; and one caught one's breath and felt the pang that is almost hurt, so exquisite was the beauty of it. Faint and far could be heard the thin thunder of the surf upon the beach. There were no beds; and we drowsed and slept wherever we thought the floor softest. Near by, a woman panted and moaned in her sleep, and all about us the dying islanders coughed in the night. (London 177)

¹ This article is the third of a three part series. It is a revised version of an unpublished chapter from my work, *Melville's Missionaries and the Loss of Culture*.

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London's description captures the beautiful landscape that Melville witnessed while in the Marquesas; however, the powerful, vibrant natives Melville spent his time with are absent from London's experience. Melville's fear of invading Euro-Americans into the Typee Valley shows itself to be fully justified. The peaceful, utopian world of the Typee, which Tommo knows cannot last, eventually follows the same path of modernity that other Polynesian societies were experiencing in the 1830s. The manner through which modernity pressed upon the natives drives Melville's argument, and his focus on the work of the missionaries in both the Hawaiian and Tahitian Islands establishes his position against the indoctrination of the natives into the Euro-American standards of civilized Christian living. The cultural death that the natives undergo eventually leads to the contamination of their daily lives and the result is that they are removed from their connection with nature.

In both *Typee* and *Omoo* (1847), Melville's narrators provide long, detailed descriptions concerning the missionaries' efforts. The narrator in each text portrays the work of the missionaries as being detrimental to the lives of the natives and *Typee* and *Omoo* work together to show the disparity in the living situations that have been created for the natives. Thus, these books are more than just travel narratives; as Carol Colatrella argues, *Typee* "goes beyond the boundaries" of this type of literature in order "to present social criticism about cross-cultural interaction, formulating a critique of colonialism that responds to contemporary moral theories of rehabilitation"; whereas, *Omoo* focuses on "transgression and punishment within Tahitian society influenced by the conversion attempts of Protestant and Catholic missionaries" (87). By contrasting the radically different living conditions, *Typee* and *Omoo* help to further demonstrate why Melville negatively perceives the missionaries'

activities in the South Pacific. But the two novels also delve deeper, to a fundamental aggression against Melville's own Western culture and heritage: "a fairly standard reform stance (protest against mainstream Christianity, in the person of missionaries on the South Sea Islands) provides a cover for quite subversive commentary on the norms and values of white civilization" (Reynolds 137).² One of the primary focuses of this article will be to contrast the Typee's connection with nature against the manner by which the Tahitian's have been indoctrinated into the "white civilization", thereby removing them from the communion with nature still experienced by the Typee.

Typee and *Omoo* stand as independent works treating Melville's experience in the South Seas; yet, within the disparity between the two societies, the underlying argument against the missionaries becomes further illuminated. Comparing the primitive Typee with the Euro-American advancement in Tahiti reveals just how negatively Melville viewed the missionary efforts. It was not Melville's intention, however, to join the novels to have them appear as one narrative broken into two separate books. When writing to his publisher John Murray, Melville made it very clear that *Omoo* is an entirely separate narrative: "I think you will find it a fitting successor to 'Typee'; inasmuch as the latter book delineates Polynesian Life in its primitive state—while the new work represents it, as affected by intercourse with the whites" (qtd. in Roper 330). Melville therefore intended the two books to be separate in their discussion

² Concerning the critique of his own culture through the work of the missionaries on the Polynesian islands, we can add an additional perspective of what Robert Levine has broadly categorized as Melville and Americanness (see Levine). In my opinion, Melville's negative impression of the missionary work is both symptomatic of the tendency in American culture for domination over the Other, as well as exhibiting a superiority over anything that is not Western, or more specifically, American.

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of Polynesian culture.³ In fact, *Omoo* contains only one passing reference to the narrator's previous experience in the Marquesas Islands. Additionally, the experience of each narrator is drastically different: "[t]he hero of *Typee* had a very bad time of it. The narrator of *Omoo* is disturbed at much he sees, but he does not suffer" (Dillingham 80). If we combine the two narratives as one complete story, the brilliance of the *Typee* narrative potentially becomes obscured by the loose structure of *Omoo*. The clear disparity between the compositional forms has led to most critical commentary to be focused upon *Typee* rather than *Omoo*. Going to an extreme, Paul Witherington, in "The Art of Melville's *Typee*," denounces the unifications of the two books. He argues that "*Typee* has suffered by being placed with *Omoo*," and particular reviewers who choose to link these books have sometimes done so by placing "them in a single 'return to paradise' category [suggesting] a thematic unity which ignores—if not damages—the artistic autonomy of *Typee*" (138). Witherington's argument may be valid in relation to the artistic qualities apparent in *Typee*, as opposed to the disjointed, picaresque mode of *Omoo*. Nevertheless, both books still contain pertinent information regarding the situation of the Polynesians. This contrast of environments appears much clearer when the books are presented together; ultimately, they show how the *Typee* natives coexist with their environment without requiring external factors while the "civilized" natives are losing their grasp on the natural world within which they once existed.

³ While Melville may have intended a stronger distinction between the two, from the earliest reviews it has been common to consider them as one extended voyage. For instance, in 1849 Melville was the focus of a public profile written by N. P. Willis, who observed that "'Herman Melville, with his cigar and his Spanish eyes, talks *Typee* and *Omoo*, just as you find the flow of his delightful mind on paper'" (qtd. in Evelev 36).

By comparing and contrasting the societies that Melville's narrators visit, the dichotomy between the two Polynesian cultures can begin to be explained. In one sense, *Omoa* clarifies and solidifies the statements found in *Typee* against the missionary activities—a proverbial New Testament explanation for the Old Testament. It is important to bear in mind, though, that “although *Omoa* does not aspire to become a religious tract, its picaresque parody of missionary narratives satirizes the Christian doctrines expounded in such writing by revealing the material and political manifestations of those practices” (Suzuki 371). As such, the guiltlessness presented in the first narrative has been replaced with corruption in the second.⁴ *Omoa* exemplifies why Tommo views the primitive Typees as “essentially innocent”: they were free from the Euro-American cultivation, that “for the most part is but ‘pent-up wickedness’ which destroys man’s Eden” (Joswick 349). Tommo realizes that as Edenic as the Typee Valley may appear, he cannot remain in this blissful place because the natives’ simple culture so greatly differs from his own. It has been suggested that Tommo leaves the paradise of the valley because he knows that the missionaries and European colonizers will soon arrive and destroy everything which he has found to praise (Iverson 126). However, by the time *Omoa*’s narrator arrives in Tahiti and becomes acquainted with the current standings of the Tahitians, he inevitably must consider their condition as the

⁴ With the critical perspective that Melville takes in both *Typee* and *Omoa*, it may lead to the impression that he held a political agenda within his writing. Such a consideration is beyond the scope of this article; however, if we look at the entire oeuvre of Melville, we might wonder in what manner his time with the Typee and Tahitians altered his Protestant perspective of the world. As Denis Donoghue hypothesizes, “the more we think of Melville’s politics, of his attitude toward civilization, empire, and the modernization of native cultures, the more the thought presses upon us that he had no politics at all. What he had instead was a doomed metaphysic, a blankness, an absence [...]. His metaphysic was doomed because he could not believe in any first or last principle” (362). This position is certainly arguable, but questionable considering the breadth of Melville’s writing.

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antithesis of the *Typee*. The narrator of *Omoo* cannot refrain from noticing these differences: “so recently from a primitive valley of the Marquesas, the aspect of most of the dwellings of the poorer Tahitians, and their general habits, seems anything but tidy; nor could I avoid a comparison, immeasurably to the disadvantage of these partially civilized islanders” (*Omoo* 192). At this point, the narrator does not elaborate on the specific comparisons made, it is justifiable then to contrast certain sections in each book to help illuminate the changes wrought by missionary and colonial activity.

Following upon the success of *Typee*, *Omoo* allowed Melville to explore new aspects of Polynesian culture. Melville claims in the preface to *Omoo* that, “[t]he present narrative necessarily begins where ‘*Typee*’ concludes, but has no further connection with the latter work” (*Omoo* 8). It seems, however, that regardless of whether Melville saw *Omoo* as an independent work, the context of its cultural setting in the South Pacific can hardly be separated from that of *Typee*. And while condemnation of a Euro-American system of cultural manipulation is one of the primary thrusts of each book, “*Omoo* engages in a more subtle form of comparative cultural criticism than *Typee*, encouraging readers to compare benefits and constraints of American and *Typee* cultures” (Colatrella 99). The “advances” of the Tahitian civilization, when seen in opposition to the state of the *Typee*, allow Melville to focus “on how cultures change over time, noting how individuals move between cultures and how disciplinary innovations from one cultural system can be incorporated, not always for the better, within another” (Colatrella 99). The *Typee* and Tahitian natives represent groups living either in a traditional culture or under the effects of an imposed modernity. De Paul argues that, “[t]he obscurities Tommo had to negotiate in *Typee* do not present themselves in *Omoo*. In his journey from

the Marquesas to Tahiti, Melville moved from an ‘open’ society to a ‘stratified’ system built more solidly on political authority” (57). The differences that de Paul highlights provide Melville the opportunity to contrast the two cultures.

The Polynesian society in *Omo* represents a Westward-progressing environment compared to that of the Typee Valley, where Melville depicts how, among other inhabitants, “the missionaries exploit the natives for self-serving purposes” (Nara 171). In fact, Tahiti has become “international Tahiti—a bizarre hodgepodge of Polynesian, Yankee, and European usages and styles” (Abrams 48). Because the Tahitian culture is more stratified, the narrator in *Omo* gains a greater sense of freedom than Tommo. During his stay in the secluded valley of the Typee, Tommo is restricted from traveling extensively, and anywhere he does go, he must be attended by his consort, Kory-Kory. While among the Typee, Tommo is not once permitted to trek to the ocean or travel beyond certain limits of the valley that, in all likelihood, the Typee leaders designated to Kory-Kory. However, on Tahiti, *Omo*’s narrator, even though confined to the Hotel de Calabooza—the nickname for the island jail—he is able to escape the comical restraints and explore the village of Papeete and the outer island of Imeeo, observing the condition of the natives.⁵ This freedom is a result of Melville’s narrator being able to assimilate himself into the Western culture that has been partially adopted in Tahiti. In the Typee Valley, however, Tommo is always conscious of the all-pervading system of taboo because, unlike the natives, he cannot comprehend the dividing lines

⁵ Much speculation has been given to the validity of Melville’s actual activities and his length of time spent in Tahiti. For a thorough and detailed account of Melville in Tahiti, see “Melville’s *Omo*: Romance and Reality,” by Robert C. Suggs. Melville was indeed placed in the community jail for desertion and while there he was reported for attacking one of his fellow inmates (Suggs 47). Concerning the validity of *Typee*, see “Questioning *Typee*” (Edwards, “Questioning”).

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between what is permissible and what is forbidden. No longer governed by the systems of the taboo, Tahiti has become partially acculturated to the Euro-American systems with which the narrator is more familiar.

This familiarity only adds to Melville's argument that the advent of foreign culture in the South Pacific benefits the Euro-American, rather than the native. Comfortably wandering about the town of Papeete, *Omoo*'s narrator recounts that at times he longs "for a dress-coat and beaver, that I might step up and pay my respects" to the ladies of Western society who are now living on the island (*Omoo* 169). The narrator's freedom and familiarity with the changed culture illustrates how, as a foreigner in Tahiti, he feels more at ease than some of the natives who were born and raised on the island. Also, the narrator is now released from the pervading fear of cannibalistic traits of the *Typee* natives.⁶ On fine evenings, the Westerners take to strolling along Broom Road in "a bevy of silk bonnets and parasols," striking the narrator as "a band of pale, little white urchins—sickly exotics"; there are even "sedate, elderly gentlemen, with canes" walking about (*Omoo* 169). Some of these people are identified as missionaries and their families.⁷ However, the natives, at the appearance of the finely dressed missionaries, "here and there, slink into their huts," attempting to avoid contact (*Omoo* 169); the very appearance of the missionaries dressed in their Western garb drives the natives away from, rather than toward, the

⁶ Melville's success with the sales of his early novels drew from the fact that he had "encountered and then immortalized in literature a world characterized by risk and uncertainty that was obviously not for everyone" (Vickers and Walsh 164). Early reviews of his works were sometimes critical of how he praised the heathen activities of the natives, creating a mixture of sensual wildness and barbaric practices; the mixture of these into the texts perhaps undermined the impact of his critical attacks on the missionaries.

⁷ Lewis Mumford has noted that the missionaries in Tahiti enjoyed some of the luxuries of their Western world through the financial support raised through their churches back home; indeed, their "'zeal to propagate Christianity was not unmixed with their concern to get money which would further that fine enterprise'" (qtd. in Lorentzen 217).

would-be saviors. Although he does not state why this repulsion occurs, the narrator creates an implicit relation between the natives' desire to avoid contact with the missionaries and the image of Western civilization presented by the missionaries and other foreigners on the island.

In contrast to these images of Western flâneurs is Tommo's experience with the scantily dressed natives of Typee Valley. The Typee are uninhibited in their nakedness and are unashamed of their state when confronted by the Westerners who occasionally land upon their shores. The beautiful Fayaway is Tommo's chosen representative for the natural dress of the primitive Typee. He describes her apparel, or in some cases the lack thereof, with erotic overtones:

Fayaway—I must avow the fact—for the most part clung to the primitive and summer garb of Eden. [...] At other times, when rambling among the groves, or visiting at the houses of her acquaintances, she wore a tunic of white tappa, reaching from her waist to a little below the knees; and when exposed for any length of time to the sun, she invariably protected herself from its rays by a floating mantle of the same material, loosely gathered about the person. (*Typee* 125–26)

It does not take long for Tommo to become accustomed to the dress of the natives. He continually praises their loveliness and even goes so far as to compare the natural beauty of the native women, dressed in their gala costumes, to elaborately dressed women of the European courts: “I should like to have seen a gallery of coronation beauties, at Westminster Abbey, confronted for a moment by this band of island girls; their stiffness, formality, and affectation, contrasted with the artless vivacity and unconcealed natural graces of these savage maidens. It would be the Venus de' Medici placed

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beside a milliner's doll" (*Typee* 237). Tommo is not alone in his praise of the Marquesas' indigenous beauty. Captain David Porter also vividly described the natives' characteristics in *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean* (1815): "We find them brave, generous, honest, and benevolent, acutely ingenious, and intelligent, and their beauty and regular proportions of their bodies correspond with the perfection of their minds" (qtd. in Strauss 153). Enraptured by the natives' natural qualities, Tommo emphasizes the females' interest in arranging their hair, beautifying themselves, and adorning each other with flowers: in the Typee Valley "you might have seen a throng of young females, not filled with envyings of each other's charms, nor displaying the ridiculous affectations of gentility, [...] but free, inartificially happy, and unconstrained. There were some spots in that sunny vale where they would frequently resort to decorate themselves with garlands of flowers" (*Typee* 184). Exempt from the jealousies which Melville sees in his Western culture, the natives reside in a world centered on natural appearances; in this setting, the natives are free of any imposed notions that they are immodestly dressed.

It is not until the missionaries arrive that this primitive Edenic existence changes to something that, considered in light of Biblical beliefs, the missionaries consider akin to a depraved state of sinful existence, in this case the desire for worldly possessions. As Melville's narrators relate, attempts have been made by the missionaries to clothe the natives by introducing attire to meet the Euro-American standards of decency. Traditional clothing was designed with the tapa cloth, a material made from flattening out the bark of particular trees and then by dyeing them with various colors (see Moerenhout 341–45). These types of clothing, still used today by some Polynesians, were being replaced by Western garments. By the time the narrator arrives in Tahiti,

the missionary efforts have resulted in the natives wearing as much Western garb as possible, and often going to great lengths to acquire this clothing. Throughout *Typee* and *Omoo*, the foreign clothing worn by the natives is mentioned numerous times. Clothing is such a significant theme in the work of Melville, that Stephen Matterson has published a book-length study on the subject, entitled: *Melville: Fashioning in Modernity* (2014). Dressing the natives, Matterson observes, “is a classic synecdoche of the colonial, bringing one’s values to another land and protecting oneself from contamination with the other” (95). Clothing, therefore, helps create a barrier.

At one point, *Omoo*’s narrator briefly gains a companion named Kooloo by providing him with a regatta shirt and other apparel in return for food. However, Kooloo quickly abandons the friendship after the gifts have been exhausted. The narrator humorously concludes that, even though a self-proclaimed “‘Mickonaree,’ [...] declaring his communion with the church” (*Omoo* 160), Kooloo is nevertheless still “quite a man of the world” (*Omoo* 161). Indeed, the narrator notices how the relationships between the natives and sailors (such as himself) have turned into a sort of corrupt attempt to gain Western possessions from travelers. Finding the Tahitians’ intended friendships to be hypocritical, the narrator observes that “among a people like the Tahitians, vitiated as they are by sophisticating influences, this custom [of receiving ‘tayos’, or friends,] has in most cases degenerated into a mere mercenary relation.” He goes on to say “it nevertheless had its origin in a fine, and in some instances, heroic sentiment, formerly entertained by their fathers” (*Omoo* 158). A. N. Kaul, in *The American Vision*, notes that this particular scene highlights how the craving for possessions has led to a drastic alteration in the natives’ original disposition. Kaul emphasizes that “[t]he breakdown of

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community values in Tahiti and their supercession by the values of civilization is evident in the degradation of human relationships, most notably in the corruption of the custom of *tayo* or selfless friendship” (237–38). The natives’ desire for clothing is part of the vice of greed that comes with civilization; and, as Tommo suggests, the Fall occurs with the introduction of Western culture. In this sense, the transactions for clothing between the narrator and Kooloo reveal that the dominating factor on the islands has not been the religious conversion, but rather the advent of capitalism.⁸

In *Omoo*, the natives’ decay from their natural state is revealed in their strong propensity toward acquiring physical property, in contrast to the simple life of the Typee Valley; the islanders now “wear anything they can get; in some cases, awkwardly modifying the fashions of their fathers, so as to accord with their own altered views of what is becoming” (*Omoo* 184). The Tahitians’ taste in clothing represents a rather amusing example of the changes arising from the acculturation process. Perhaps even more so, the apparel of the Tahitian women is affected. No longer do the women spend time decorating themselves with the flowers that abound on the islands. Instead, the missionaries have instituted laws in an attempt to quell the eroticism associated with the native adornments. The narrator is troubled by this change:

ridiculous as many of them now appear, in foreign habiliments, the Tahitians presented a far different appearance in the original national costume; which was graceful in the extreme, modest to all but the prudish, and peculiarly adapted to the climate. But the short kilts of

⁸ In an economic-based approach to the works of Melville, Caleb Doan has pointed out that Melville’s incorporation of the “wide range of exchanges—from commodity exchanges to interactions motivated by the voluntary reciprocity of the gift—reveals an implicit critique of the capitalist world-economy” (208).

dyed tappa, the tasselled maroes, and other articles formerly worn, are, at the present day, prohibited by law as indecorous. For what reason necklaces and garlands of flowers, among the women, are also forbidden, I never could learn; but, it is said, that they were associated, in some way, with a forgotten heathen observance. (*Omo* 184–85)

As a testament of their strict codes, W. Patrick Strauss records in *Americans in Polynesia 1783-1842*, “[t]he life of the Tahitians as well as the other Society Islanders was vigorously regulated by a missionary-inspired code of laws that would have done honor to Moses” (39). Left without their pastimes, some women of Tahiti now participate in many of the vices that the narrator deems perfidious in a supposedly Christianized society. Unaware of the origins of these bans, he continues to attribute these clothing restrictions to the introduction of Western principles of civilized living.

The removal of the traditional garb from everyday native activity and the introduction of foreign concepts of proper attire both contribute to the narrator’s belief that the natives are undergoing a cultural death at the hands of the missionaries. In countering this argument, Watler Frear has posited that “the missionaries have been blamed much for being shocked at nudity and encouraging the use of clothes” (13–14). He goes on to describe how the missionaries “tried to teach the natives the healthful use of clothes” by introducing an alternative form of dress that “anticipated present-day freedom and simplicity as compared with Victorian prudery and unhygienic grotesqueness” (Frear 14). Regardless of the supposedly more healthful aspect of the new clothing, the native women were still being incorporated into a foreign system of civilized standards: “[t]he missionaries sought to establish

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and sustain" not only a sexual purity among the female natives, but also encouraged the natives "to cover nude bodies with decent clothing in Western style" (Grimshaw 29), which in turn further removed them from their own natural environment.

Another very important comparison between *Typee* and *Omoo* arises in the manner in which the natives participate in their religious practices. While with the *Typee*, Tommo is able to observe particular events that provide him the opportunity, although not the clarity, to witness the *Typee*'s participation in their own religion activities. However, he honestly relates that, "[f]or my own part, I am free to confess my almost entire inability to gratify any curiosity that may be felt with regard to the theology of the valley." The manner in which they worship their gods is completely incomprehensible to Tommo, and he continues by saying "I doubt whether the inhabitants themselves could [understand the religion]" (*Typee* 251). In witnessing the religious activities of the *Typee*, Melville's narrator separates himself from previous missionary and exploration writers whom he believes have misrepresented the religions of the Polynesians. Rather than attempt to come to an arrogant conclusion about their practices, the narrator

quietly sets aside the discourse inspired by the missionaries who, fed with age-old interpretations of the Bible, commonly hover between some references to natural religion and some to devilish inspirations. Renouncing attempts to fathom the theology or faith of the islanders and thereby determine their ultimate meaning, [Tommo] can only describe some of their observances, their feasts, their ritual sites (those ruined and those in use), seek to figure out who regulates taboo and offer comparisons of civil institutions [...]. (Despland 107)

Furthermore, instead of trying to share his particular thoughts on religion with the natives, Tommo decides to follow the Typee's example: since "the islanders always maintained a discreet reserve, with regard to my [Tommo's] own peculiar views on religion, I thought it would be excessively ill-bred in me to pry into theirs" (*Typee* 251). In making this decision, the "[r]eligious tolerance" Tommo exhibits can be "seen as a quality of gentlemanliness, bring[ing] into ironic juxtaposition two conflicting aspects of nineteenth-century culture: religiosity and gentility" (Firebaugh 118). The narrator refrains from prying out of politeness, therefore placing himself in opposition to the evangelical efforts of the missionaries.⁹

Nevertheless, while chronicling his observations about the Typee Valley, Tommo inadvertently relates an interesting connection between the Typee forms of worship and that which *Omoa*'s narrator witnesses in the converted natives. Moa Artua is a little wooden god that the Typee priest, Kolory, uses to answer questions for the natives. The chiefs gather together and perform a ceremony with Moa Artua, which is humorously retold by Tommo. The priest sits with the god while the chiefs convene around him and give encouraging responses to the methods of punishment that Kolory uses to get a response from the doll. When the god finally does answer after being berated by the priest, the reaction of the chiefs is very peculiar: "the priest holding Moa Artua to his ear interprets to them what he pretends the god is confidentially

⁹ While Tommo avoids trying to discern the cultural significance of his captor's cultural perplexities, he also "fosters a kind of friendship with the Typee that consists of recognizing the limits of his knowledge about the unfamiliar culture in which he find himself. Despite his in-depth tour of the Typee society, Tommo includes scenes in which he acknowledges how much about the Typee people he does not know" (Callaway 46). His Western background will forever prohibit him from entering into a complete understanding of the religious practices, including the nebulous taboo.

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communicating to him. Some items of intelligence appear to tickle all present amazingly; for one claps his hands in a rapture; another shouts with merriment; and a third leaps to his feet and capers about like a madman” (*Typee* 259). With this scene, Melville’s narrator illustrates an aspect of the religious activity the *Typee* chiefs were accustomed to performing with an “apparent superficiality of emotion” (Wallace 283).¹⁰ For this reason, in Tommo’s relation, “all action is pictured as spontaneous, no intellection. When Moa Artua is denuded in punishment, he is revealed as nothing more or less than what we are led to believe he is—a piece of wood” (Stern 64). Nevertheless, the chiefs respond as if they have an undying faith in Priest Kolory’s relation of the deaf and mute god, and they jump about like they have just been struck by a revelation.

As Tommo continues to observe the religious practices and give descriptions of the sacred sanctuaries in the valley, he becomes convinced of the religious indifference of the natives. He realizes “that the islanders in the Pacific have no fixed and definite ideas whatever on the subject of religion” (*Typee* 261). One day, while wandering through the peaceful groves with Kory-Kory, Tommo comes across an ancient carving of a *Typee* god. Curious about its nature, he attempts to get a closer look only to have the idol nearly topple over when Kory-Kory tries to prop it up. This scene is also presented in a comical tone, because, as Anderson notes, “Melville, indeed, never treats the pure paganism of the Marquesans forthrightly and in sober earnest. Sometimes his high-sounding but irreverent fooling gives place to a half-serious effort to

¹⁰ The Marquesas missionaries also noticed the questionable actions of the natives when performing the rituals surrounding the burial of the Marquesan chief, Haape. Richard Armstrong’s diary reveals his impression concerning the “frenzy of outward display” shown by the naked native women dancing before the body: “there is not the slightest appearance of grief to be seen in the countenances of the performers—The whole performance in fact partakes more of the nature of a farse [sic] than any thing else” (qtd. in Wallace 283).

embellish the superstitious practices of these primitives with the trappings of romance” (175). It has been noted that Tommo is depicted by Melville as being intentionally obtuse to the religion of the Typee (Breitwieser 8). Nevertheless, after Kory-Kory beats the statue into a state of submission, Tommo makes one of his most profound statements concerning his interpretation of the Typee’s religious faith:

In truth, I regard the Typees as a back-slidden generation. They are sunk in religious sloth, and require a spiritual revival. A long prosperity of breadfruit and cocoanuts has rendered them remiss in the performance of their higher obligations. The wood-rot malady is spreading among the idols—the fruit upon their altars is becoming offensive—the temples themselves need rethatching—the tattooed clergy are altogether too light-hearted and lazy—and their flocks are going astray. (*Typee* 263–64)

James Baird turns Tommo’s observation into a representation of the uncomplicated nature of the Typees: “A ‘back-slidden’ generation of heathens is a race of men liberated from the authority of simplex symbols” (102); furthermore, Baird claims that “[w]hat Melville saw here was an exhausted religious symbolism” (104). The Typee appear to be living without much conviction in the beliefs of their ancestors, and the symbolism that has been carried through these practices has been almost completely disregarded with the passing of time. This conclusion has led Milton Stern to comment that “Tommo, tongue in cheek, is assuming the attitude of the Christian missionary, and, of course, thus seems to blast those very aspects of Typee which have been found good” (62). Regardless of whether Tommo is being sarcastic, he has noticed that the natives lack a propensity toward extreme faithful devotion, a quality

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that is deemed necessary by the missionaries for a legitimate conversion to Christianity.

The Typee chiefs' responses to the words of the idol Artua Moa resemble the effects of the missionary preaching have on the Tahitians. Relating a particular event in the Society Islands, the narrator of *Omoo* describes an incident where the natives respond in a rather peculiar manner to the preaching they hear:

the natives, for special reasons, desired to commend themselves particularly to the favour of the missionaries. Accordingly, during divine service, many of them behaved in a manner, otherwise unaccountable, and precisely similar to their behavior as heathens. They pretended to be wrought up to madness by the preaching which they heard. They rolled their eyes; foamed at the mouth; fell down in fits; and so were carried home. Yet, strange to relate, all this was deemed the evidence of the power of the Most High; and, as such, was heralded abroad. (*Omoo* 178)

The narrator even acknowledges that this reaction is akin to those of the heathens. It appears that the natives have simply switched their own gods for the Christian one in an attempt to win favor from the missionaries. James Baird believes that “[t]heir ‘fits’ are manifestations of a passionate interest which is assumed for the sake of conformity” (191). The spiritual possession brought on by the missionary preaching resembles Tommo's description of the Typee chiefs acting like madmen and the words of Artua Moa. In neither case does the narrator believe in the sincere conviction of the participants. The scene in *Omoo* illustrates the way in which the narrator “explores how a chaotic blend of values drawn from different social systems shapes individual,

group, and national concerns in undesirable ways for individual and social moral development” (Colatrella 98). The questionable responses result from what Stephen de Paul calls “the grotesque and feigned effects of the native conversion to Christianity” (61). The natives seem to be more intent on the religious process rather than applying themselves to their beliefs. In addition, the “[g]rotesquery becomes a visible ritual in and for itself. The public pretence of conversion turns ritual back on itself, thus rendering the *mode* of behavior more significant than the *ideas* that are supposed to be communicated through its enactment” (de Paul 61). The quest for signs of true Christian faith becomes impossible when the mode supersedes the ideas; by comparing these scenes in *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville shows that the missionaries’ belief in so many sincere conversions is preposterously inflated.

The attempts of the missionaries to gather the natives into their fold is used by the narrator of *Omoo* to show how the natives are not prone to adopt a foreign religion; Melville’s depictions demonstrate that “[i]mpetus for religious change can come from within a culture, but on the islands this impetus usually comes across the beach” (Denning 170). The introduction of the new religion does not create real desire on the natives’ behalf to embrace the doctrines from foreign cultures:

The Tahitians can hardly ever be said to reflect: they are all impulse; and so, instead of expounding dogmas, the missionaries give them the large type, pleasing cuts, and short and easy lessons of the primer. Hence, anything like a permanent religious impression is seldom or never produced.

In fact, there is, perhaps, no race upon earth, less disposed, by nature, to the monitions of Christianity, than the people of the South

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Seas. And this assertion is made with full knowledge of what is called the "Great Revival at the Sandwich Islands," about the year 1836; when several thousands were, in the course of a few weeks, admitted into the bosom of the Church. But this result was brought about by no sober moral convictions; as an almost instantaneous relapse into every kind of licentiousness soon after testified. (*Omoo* 176–77)

Here is a revival similar to that which Tommo calls for in his claim against the back-sliding Typee. The results of this Christian revival, however, are not successful, as stressed by *Omoo*'s narrator. The pagans who converted to Christianity in the "Great Revival" quickly resort back to their previous activities, showing no signs of Christian conviction. Because they appear to act only on an impulsive behavior, the natives perform only the actions that the missionaries desire, instead of adopting the true beliefs of Christianity.

A further observation can be considered in Tommo's statement about the back-sliding Typee. Tommo's reference to the dilapidated condition of the religious temples in the valley sounds very similar to the decaying of the original churches which the Tahitian natives built upon first being converted to Christianity. There were originally thirty-six churches that were "mere barns, tied together with thongs, which went to destruction in a very few years" (*Omoo* 170). The most impressive was the Royal Mission Chapel of Papoar, which Pomaree II commissioned to be built. The natives came together bringing the supplies necessary to build the spacious building, and "[t]he materials thus prepared being afterward secured together by thongs, there was literally 'neither hammer, nor axe, nor any tool of iron heard in the house while it was building'" (*Omoo* 171). The narrator praises the church as an example of the ability of the natives to provide their own natural setting in which to practice

their new found religion.

One particular aspect about this structure garners extra praise from the narrator: “a considerable brook, after descending from the hills and watering the valley, was bridged over in three places, and swept clean through the chapel. Flowing waters! what an accompaniment to the songs of the sanctuary; mingling with them the praises and thanksgivings of the green solitudes inland” (*Omoa* 171). The narrator places special emphasis on the connection between the manner of construction and the natural setting of the building. The relationship between the natives and the paradisiacal landscape around them is very important; it represents the life-giving properties to which the natives at one time were still able to connect with, even in the early years of Christianity. At this time, they were still in touch with their surroundings and not so far removed as when Melville arrived. Now, however, “the chapel of the Polynesian Solomon has long since been deserted. Its thousand rafters of habiscus have decayed, and fallen to the ground; and now, the stream murmurs over them in its bed” (*Omoa* 171). Like the temples and idols in the Typee Valley, the original churches that the natives built seem to have been abandoned. The natives’ initial zeal for the religious practices of the missionaries exemplifies their impulse to create such a grand building, but, as the narrator stresses, signs of true conversion are questionable because of their failure to perform the necessary upkeep on the churches.

The new building constructed to missionary standards, which the narrator dubs the “Church of the Cocoanuts,” is a very different religious structure. It is a building that, while quite the achievement and symbol of missionary success, represents the natives’ further removal from their natural environment. The disparity between the Tahitian structure and the adoption to Western church

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worship can be gleaned from its description: “It is of moderate dimensions, boarded over, and painted white. It is furnished also with blinds, but no sashes; indeed, were it not for the rustic thatch, it would remind one of a plain chapel at home. The woodwork was all done by foreign carpenters, of whom there are always several about Papeete” (*Omoo* 171). Further details of the church can be found in the historical narrative of Captain Fitzroy, of the HMS *Beagle*. Fitzroy’s report resounds with disappointment at seeing the natives congregate in a foreign building: “I was sorry to see the new church, a large wooden structure capable of holding six hundred people, [...], in lieu of one formed completely in their own style. Instead of the circular end, an ugly gable terminates a high box-shaped house, resembling a factory” (qtd. in Anderson 242).¹¹ By describing the church as a factory, Fitzroy’s account exemplifies the narrator’s view that the missionaries simply produce nominal converts, but do not instill true conviction. Both Melville’s narrator and Fitzroy emphasize the removal of the natives’ natural representation in the construction of the church. The church building becomes a symbol of the Western dominance over the natives, and their lack of influence in the design seems to parallel the loss of control they once had over their environment and culture. Furthermore, these Western churches also serve as means of counting and documenting the converts to Christianity. Taking the number of attendees at a Sunday service provided “impressive figures of the number of converted heathens based their numbers—or so Melville argues—on enforced and coerced attendance at

¹¹ Fitzroy’s description of the church resembling a factory contains an interesting connection to the labor in which the missionaries encourage the natives to engage. This connection assists in supporting Melville’s view that the advent of the Fall occurred with the missionaries and colonizers.

religious ceremonies” (Edwards, *Cannibal* 107). Numbers, like Captain Fitzroy suggested, are exactly what factory owners need to produce.

When the church building is referred to as an implant from a Western setting, it becomes the representation of a foreign culture that has territorially dominated the Tahitian Islands. Stephen de Paul views the “Church of the Coconuts” as the

assimilation of Christianity into the native religion [that] assumes the form of a network of images which undermine the very purposes of the missions. [...]. It requires little embellishment to become a ready metaphor for a Christianity which is itself culturally displaced. Melville’s metaphor is initially one of cultural assimilation. [...]. Despite the authenticity of its European design [...], the church still exudes the air of a culture lost to the new religion. (*Omoo* 62–63)¹²

Losing their freedom to represent themselves, even in their buildings of worship, the Tahitians are deracinated from their culture. The missionaries attempt to both indoctrinate and domesticate them with Western symbols of cultural advancement. By herding the natives to worship in a building of Western design, the missionaries lead them further away from their natural environment—thereby bringing the natives one step closer to a cultural death. With the removal of their traditional religion, buildings, and dress, the natives suffer an acculturation that completely removes them from anything related to

¹² In a recent article that looks at Melville and Islam, the author concludes with this interesting juxtaposing of Christianity and Islam, similar on some levels to Melville’s contrast between the world of Nature and the world of Christianity: “A romantic rebel and iconoclast, Melville overtly condemned missionary proselytism in the South Sea Islands. Yet, his greatest achievement in his contribution to inter-religious dialogue is his subtle counterpoising of a conventionally Orientalist image of Islam with a more favourable, open and even admiring view which is particularly pertinent in these days of rampant Islamophobia” (Berbar 78).

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their natural inclinations.

By contrast, the natives of the Typee Valley still retain an uninhibited relationship with the natural world around them. Tommo constantly calls attention to the natives' ability to live comfortably off the land and to enjoy the natural state of prelapsarian bliss. The Biblical Fall that the narrator of *Omoo* would suggest has now occurred for the Tahitians greatly contrasts with Tommo's view of the Typee Valley. The Typee natives are able to live in the abundance of natural resources, "which God in his wisdom had ordained for the support of the indolent natives"; however, in the Tahitian and Hawaiian Islands, their food supply is "remorselessly seized upon and appropriated by the stranger, [being] devoured before the eyes of the starving inhabitants, or sent on board the numerous vessels which now touch at their shores" (*Typee* 288–89). Melville is arguing that the corruption of innocence by civilization leads to the loss of the natural resources once available to man before the Fall. The comparison becomes clearer as the connection is made in *Typee* and *Omoo* to the missionaries' endeavors to convert and civilize the natives by driving them away from their natural tendencies. Lawrance Thompson writes in *Melville's Quarrel With God*, that sometimes Melville

implies that all missionary endeavors in the South Seas cannot help but be corrupting and degrading influences, because they attempt to superimpose "civilization" on innocence. At other times, he resolves the Calvin-Rousseau conflict by insisting that God has these primitive children in his especial care; that the Eden-like settings were divinely ordered to permit these noble savages to live in accordance with God's plan. (47)

In this sense, Melville's perspective on missionary activity is that it infringes

upon the natural state of the natives with an inferior structure, a sort of foreign garment that the natives are incapable of removing after it has been imposed. It becomes clear to Melville that the colonizer and, more particularly, the missionary, has inaugurated into the natives' environment the irreversible effects of modernity.

Melville has attempted to show throughout both books that the converted Polynesians are further away from the connection with nature, and what has replaced this relationship are the vices of civilized culture. The Edenic connection that Tommo experiences is replaced by the fallen state magnified through the attempts of the missionaries to forcefully remove the "sins" of the natives. Essentially, "Melville, by reversing the categorizations of the missionaries, for whom nature represented all that was evil and civilization and Christianity all that was good, thereby gives the lie to the perception of Tahiti as a diabolical wilderness and asserts the possibility that what is truly sacred may be found in nature rather than the Ten Commandments" (Samson 504). By removing the connection to nature from the Tahitians' lives, the missionaries have made the natives dependent upon the vices of the Westerners. The Tahitians are no longer able to reap the benefits that once "would seem expressively ordained by Providence" (*Typee* 284). Now they must depend on the provisions and doctrines of the missionaries and colonizers.

The removal of the natives' natural environment signifies a deadly loss, as depicted by Jack London in 1908. For Melville, the existence of the natives depends upon a close relationship with their environment. The Typee are able to provide for themselves, while the Tahitian and Hawaiian islanders exhibit the destruction which occurs when this natural, prelapsarian world becomes forbidden to them:

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Each work reverberates the other's special theme and both merge into the one they share. *Typee* predicts the race-extirpation that civilization will soon cause among the Typees; *Omoo* contains reminders of the peace and happiness the Tahitians enjoyed before the coming of the white Christian invaders. Both books show civilization and Christianity in the South Seas as the opposite, in effect, of what they pretend to be. Civilization, presumably the ameliorator of life brings death. Christianity, presumably the bearer of light, puts out the sun—the culture—the Polynesians need to live. (Adler 96)

Adler's method of equating the sun with the culture aptly describes what Melville is attempting to do in both novels. The fallen state of man, which Melville has equated with the Western world, represents a separation from his natural state. Throughout the Polynesian islands, the natives are currently going through the process of leaving their paradisiacal world and entering into the "civilized" world of "advanced" man. For the natives, this transition is taking a great toll upon their culture and lives. Death and corruption are the results that both narrators foresee and witness through the loss of nature. For the natives, the sun is setting on the days of their cultural freedom. The missionaries, in an attempt to remove the natives' savage propensities, have actually destroyed the island culture by attempting to replace it with Euro-American standards.

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