

# Exotic Bodies in Melville's *Typee*<sup>1</sup>

María Felisa López Liqueste  
*Universidad del País Vasco*

## Abstract

Not only has the body been instrumental to (post)colonial discourses of various kinds. It is also a crucial site for representation and control, as well as prime means of developing and reinforcing prejudices against specific groups. It is my intention to examine the ways in which the 'visual' and textual intrusion of "exotic" bodies have challenged or confirmed inherited or traditional consideration regarding the body. I will argue that, at least in the case of Melville's work, readers perceive an evolution from the use of exotic/colonial bodies to undermine and criticise 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' perceptions and values of the western body to a vision in which the colonial exotic body is valued on its own.

Appearances all the world over are deceptive  
(Herman Melville, *Typee*, 206)

Mine is a postcolonial as well as gendered reading which aims to reveal and articulate some of the structures and legacies of colonialism and imperialism which Melville encapsulated concerning the body. It is my intention, therefore, to examine the ways in which the "visual" and textual intrusion of "exotic" bodies have challenged or confirmed inherited or traditional considerations regarding the body. I will argue that, at least in the case of Melville's *Typee*, readers perceive the use of exotic/colonial bodies to reverse "dominant" or "hegemonic" perceptions and values of the western body.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a fragment of a work in progress about "silenced bodies" in western literature in general, and in literatures in the English language in particular to be placed with a research project granted by the University of the Basque Country (Spain) UPV/EHU 06/73.

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The body is rendered, then, as a text, a space in which conflicting discourses can be written and read, a text that demonstrates how subjectivity, however constructed “is felt”. This reminds us that imperial power operates on and through people, locating thus the body as a site for discursive control. Needless to say that, throughout the nineteenth century, the concept of the body intersects with a range of contemporary anxieties about sex and sexuality, gender, race and class. In addition, men writers have usually silenced women’s body needs and desires, which used to be interpreted in relation to themselves, or in the case of women writers, men’s bodies, but it is usually when they travel abroad that they either confirm their prejudiced visions and/or notions, their myths, their culturalized body constructs, or they confront them. Moreover, being readers before they become writers, these authors are influenced by the exotic portraits they come across in their readings. Thus, we encounter Melville’s description of Andalusian eyes –oriental eyes–, Spanish women’s little feet in his “Fragments from a Writing Desk” published in 1838, long before he travelled and witnessed exotic women first in Peru (1842 and 1843) and in Polynesia (1843).

### 1. Nature, culture and the body

Although the body has been historically placed on the side of nature, for Melville it is both natural and cultural. In fact, he describes the body as historically located, and shaped by socio-economic and cultural forces.<sup>2</sup> However, becoming aware of this is an event that usually takes place when we come across other, usually called “exotic” bodies, whose textuality is alien to us and which demand a different kind of reading. Capturing and mastering its meaning might shatter and challenge reading our own. This event usually provokes either silencing, repression or disdain, since the body stands for all visible signs of difference, and their varied forms of cultural and social inscription, forms often either undervalued, overdetermined, or even totally invisible to the dominant colonial discourse.

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<sup>2</sup> In other words, as Susan Bordo claimed: “the body that we experience and conceptualize is always *mediated* by constructs, associations, images of a cultural nature.” (1993: 35)

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In the beginning, Melville's travels allowed him to have access to the naked bodies of the newly colonised Polynesian peoples. This shameless exhibition of their physicality did certainly produce strong reactions in male travellers to those places whose geographical maps did not charter their real physicality; whose textuality was overwritten by its visual effect and affect. And it is here where Melville's first "colonial text"<sup>3</sup> *Typee* (1846), fits in.

In it, Melville's first-person narrator, Tommo, is actually visualizing and externalising, if not projecting his own desires and fears. In the first chapter, the narrator discloses American prejudices and desires of the Polynesian Other: naked houris-cannibal banquets-groves of cocoa-nut-coral reefs-tattooed chiefs-and bamboo temples; heathenish rites and human sacrifices, anticipations that haunted him (1982: 12). Although visited lately by American and British whale ships, "a fear of the natives, founded on the recollection of the dreadful fate which many white men have received at their hands, has deterred their crews from intermixing with the population sufficiently to gain any insight into their peculiar customs and manners" (13). Not the narrator, of course. His ambivalent attitude toward the natives only proves how difficult it is to debunk one's prejudices in spite of accepting the "humanity" of the Other. What strikes the narrator is the fact that the Typees "deal more kindly with each other, and are more humane than many who study essays on virtue" (276). Concerning his fears of cannibalism, Tommo ironically claims, "they say they don't like sailor's flesh, it's too salt" (36). Furthermore, he will reverse this by describing the natives' fearful reaction to encountering the whites, "a couple of white cannibals who were about to make a meal of them" (68).

Typee, a garden of Paradise, will soon turn into hell. Tommo's painful ordeal in crossing the island, will provoke his lameness. His body illness will speak for him, in clear contrast with the excellent health of the Typees.<sup>4</sup> Almost a cripple by a mysterious disease, Tommo's body expresses his restlessness. Unable to account for his malady, he keeps interpreting the natives' bodies, their gestures, through a Western code. Being ignorant of each other's language, they

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<sup>3</sup> Melville's first books were published in London by Murray with the collection under the heading "Colonial Literature."

<sup>4</sup> "Nothing struck me more than the uninterrupted healthfulness of their natural mode of life" (213).

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have to communicate with one another through body signs. Tommo's readings, nevertheless, are ambivalent. At times he even dares translate their gestures, customs, feelings and thoughts easily. At other times, however, he recognises "it was very much like seeing a parcel of "Freemasons" making secret signs to each other; I saw everything, but could comprehend nothing" (210).

### 2. White (Victorian) visions of the body

Let's remember that the Victorians were ashamed of undressing, displaying, seeing, touching or smelling others and/or themselves. The body, the animal part/side of man, used to be rejected, shunned; dangerous and uncontrollable. To them the body was an index of the mind. Victorian texts linger on the surface attributes of the individuals they describe. They dwell on skin and flesh, and on the blood and bones, only to establish a picture of that individual's "inner self". Comfortable and plain clothes for men, more colourful and elaborated for women, clothes were supposed to shroud the body of women, in "silent" modesty. What to expect from a society in which even the humble trousers were often referred to as "unmentionables" or "unspeakables". Clothing provided an index in which the class, gender, sexuality, race and general disposition of an individual might all be known from the state of one's clothing, by the outward and material "signifiers of one's position in life." Interestingly enough, it is when the natives glance at the white characters that this experience proves most unsettling:

They scanned the whiteness of our limbs, and seemed utterly unable to account for the contrast they presented to the swarthy hue of our faces, embrowned from a six months' exposure to the scorching sun of the Line. They felt our skin, much in the same way that a silk mercer would handle a remarkably fine piece of satin; and some of them went so far in their investigation as to apply the olfactory organ. (93)

It may not be by chance that in Tommo and Toby's first encounter with the natives, Tommo offers a piece of cloth to show his good intentions.

According to Tommo, the islanders appeared in all the naked simplicity of nature, stripped of the cunning artifices of the tailor, and standing forth in the garb of Eden. And, if the body speaks the mind, the "natural dress" of the natives, their nakedness apparently corresponds to their "natural mind," whereas European clothing – especially the women's would hide their "mysterious bodies and minds". However, the narrator will ironically undermine these assumptions when comparing white and native dressing customs:

A few folds of yellow tappa, tucked about my waist, descended to my feet in the style of a lady's petticoat, only I did not have recourse to those voluminous paddings in the rear with which our gentle dames are in the habit of augmenting the sublime rotundity of their figures. [...] young [Polynesian]females, not filled with envyings of each other's charms, nor displaying the ridiculous affectations of gentility, nor yet moving in whalebone corsets, like so many automatons, [are] free, inartificially happy, and unconstrained. (152)

Western fashion's attempt to "hide" women's sexual attractiveness, seems to highlight it instead. Besides, dress is described as a form of both physical and moral rigidity, in clear contrast with the native women's free movements. Apart from Tommo's critique of Western women, Polynesian women do fulfil the male narrator's desires and confirm his expectations, Mermaids, nymphs, sylphs, "their jet-black tresses streaming over their shoulders and half enveloping their otherwise naked forms ... what a sight for us bachelor sailors! How avoid so dire a temptation?" (24). In fact, the nymph Fayaway, his favourite, is described in extremely sensuous terms:

The face of this girl was a rounded oval, and each feature as perfectly formed as the heart or imagination of man could desire. Her full lips, when

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parted with a smile, disclosed teeth of a dazzling whiteness; and when her rosy mouth opened with a burst of merriment, they looked like the milk-white seeds of the "arta," a fruit of the valley, [...] embedded in the red and juicy pulp. (106)

The narrator is also struck by the way these native females dance with their whole body, through active, romping, mischievous evolutions, in which every limb is brought into requisition: "Not only do their feet dance, but their arms, hands, fingers, ay, their very eyes seem to dance in their heads" (181).

Comparisons between Western and Polynesian women are always more favourable for the latter:

People may say what they will about the taste evinced by our fashionable ladies in dress. Their jewels, their feathers, their silks, and their furbelows would have sunk into utter insignificance beside the exquisite simplicity of attire adopted by the nymphs of the vale on this festive occasion. 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. (191)

Interestingly enough, Fayaway, is described as a figure "of physical perfection with no desires of her own except to please man, an image of pure wishfulfilment, a man's dream dominating an adoring woman, and through her, symbolically, an alien world eager to be conquered (61), the perfect symbol of colonial and imperial desire. It comes as no surprise to find that the whites might willingly become prisoners of these beauties, at least, temporarily. Probably before they accept as readily another type of dressing the body: tatoos.

### 3. Tatoos

Since earlier times, the natives of the Marquesas used to be described as wondrously beautiful to behold, and as nearly resembling the people of Southern Europe. Nearly white, of good stature, and finely formed in complexion, their faces and bodies were delineated representations of fishes and other devices. Nakedness and tatooes actually are the two recurrent descriptive items that characterized the natives. Although in the beginning, tattooing is interpreted as a decorative custom, later on, the narrator will learn that it conveys a cultural code he will have to unfold. In spite of its unfamiliarity, he provides an admiring description of a warrior. Only two other descriptions of tattooed persons appear, this time in great detail. One is Kory-Kory's, "A hideous object to look upon",<sup>5</sup> and the other Marno's.

Marno's portrait is much more favourable. A Polynesian Apollo whose face was free from the least blemish of tattooing, the rest of his body appeared to have been executed in conformity with some general design:

The tattooing on his back in particular attracted my attention. [...] Traced along the course of the spine was accurately delineated the slender, tapering, and diamond-checked shaft of the beautiful "artu" tree. Branching from the stem on either side, and disposed alternately, were the graceful branches drooping with leaves all correctly drawn, and elaborately finished. [...] A rear view of the stranger might have suggested the idea of a spreading vine tacked against a garden wall. Upon his breast, arms, and legs, were exhibited an infinite variety of figures; (162)

Women's tatooes are different: "Three minute dots, no bigger than pinheads, decorated either lip, and at a little distance were not at all discernible. Just upon the fall of the shoulder were drawn two parallel lines half an inch apart, and perhaps three inches in length, the

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<sup>5</sup> Melville's descriptions are those to be seen in this page: <<http://www.tribalsite.com/articles/tatoo.html>>

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interval being filled with delicately executed figures.” (106) Later, a distinction is made between “married” and single women’s tattoos:

tattooing is not hereditary [...] mature women having the right hand and the left foot most elaborately tattooed; while the rest of the body was wholly free from the operation of the art, with the exception of the minutely dotted lips and slight marks on the shoulders, [...] The hand and foot thus embellished were [...] the distinguishing badge of wedlock, so far as that social and highly commendable institution is known among these people. It answers, indeed, the same purpose as the plain gold ring worn by our fairer spouses. (225)

The operation of tattooing, however, is described as a “suffering agony” in which the skin is punctured with mallet and chisel on the human canvas.

In spite of this free female sexual behaviour, the Typees have also developed their own taboos, one of which resembles a Western custom: “The Ti was a right jovial place. [...] Secure from female intrusion, there was no restraint upon the hilarity of the warriors, who, like the gentlemen of Europe after the cloth is drawn, and the ladies retire, freely indulged their mirth” (181). However, the taboo that prohibits women the use of canoes is not understood by Tommo, who explains that whenever a Marquesan lady voyages by water, she uses the paddles of her own fair body (23).<sup>6</sup>

### 4. Fear of being tattooed

In spite of the continual happiness which appeared to prevail in the valley, Tommo finally desires to escape. On the one hand he claims he feels a prisoner of the natives, but what strikes as more compelling is Tommo’s recognition that he does not want to ‘go native’, that is, his fear of being ‘civilized’ by the Typees. Not only the

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<sup>6</sup> Further analysis might be developed by pointing out the ‘feminine’ symbology of canoes.

idea of engrafting his tattooing upon his white skin made him shudder at the ruin that might be inflicted upon him. The whole system of tattooing was, he found, connected with their religion (255). Interestingly enough, Tommo's critique of the use of religion for colonial purposes when he declares that, "not until he visited Honolulu was he aware of the fact that the small remnant of the natives had been civilized into draught horses, and evangelized into beasts of burden harnessed to the vehicles of their spiritual instructors like so many dumb brutes!" (231), further illustrated by describing how a missionary's wife being drawn in a little go-cart by two of the islanders, does not think a little about their bodies and gets out in order to ease them, certainly works both ways.

## 5. Conclusion

Melville seems to prove that disembodied truth cannot exist. It is culture that interprets the natural body motions of native women as inviting. It is their guiltless sexual life that most surprises Western visitors. Given that the body is a "lived" cultural construction, although "exposed" differently, as happens with "tatoos", the whites' rejection of the idea of making any further non-emotional inscriptions or specifications in their bodies is demonstrated by their fear of being tattooed. Lived differently by whites—be they European or American—and the Polynesian natives, as body exposure or dressing conveys, Melville does not project resentment or anger onto the body, or the body's troubles onto the figure of woman. Assuming that, within the (post)colonial framework, it is the native Other who is gendered and therefore "feminized", we might conclude that Melville undermines this when he tries to avoid "feminizing" the natives. Although Melville's narrator seems to follow the racist ideology and imagery that construct non-European races as primitive, savage, sexually animalistic, and indeed more bodily than the white races including both non-white men and women, he keeps subverting these Western negative claims by asserting how mistaken those prejudices are.

*Typee* offers excellent insights into the materiality and historicity of the body, its situatedness in space and time, and its gender. It exposes the historically pervasive presence of gender, class and race-

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coded dualities and how they mediate in our cultural readings and representations of reality. *Typee* contributes to see the body not as a mere representation but as a site of contention in which two cultures clash, showing the ways in which culture has a direct grip on our bodies, through the practices and bodily habits of everyday life. Melville shows he was conscious of the body as an “instrument of power and culture,” and how the body is disciplined, socially shaped and historically colonized.

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