

Queer Space in Herman Melville's *Typee*

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Abstract

The queer space in Herman Melville's first book *Typee* is primarily constructed around two recurring queer motifs: the erotic male body and the all-male loving couple. The sexual panic of the protagonist Tommo is manifested in his interactions with Typee males. His final escape from Typee island signals a surrender of his queer nature to his Christian spirit. The wretched end of *Typee* reveals Melville's pessimistic view on being a queer—there is no possibility for queer relationships to sustain. By utilizing a queer discourse, Melville attacks the sexually repressive Western culture and expresses his concern about the destiny of the marginalized queers in his time. As a queer writer living in the 19th century America, Melville calls for a tolerant and humane society in which queer love can be valued and respected.

Keywords

Herman Melville, *Typee*, Queer Space, Queer Discourse

1. Introduction

Herman Melville (1819-1891) is one of the greatest masters in the history of American literature. He leaves behind a voluminous legacy of twenty-two books of novels, poetry and prose. During a voyage to the South Seas in 1841, Melville jumped off ship with his friend Richard Tobias Greene on the Marquesas Island. They were detained by the savages for four weeks, during which time Melville witnessed the "licentiousness of the Typee people" (Leyda, 1951: p. 24). This adventure was written into his first novel *Typee*. Tracing a Westerner Tommo's adventure on the Pacific islands, *Typee* initiates an erotic journey into a lost paradise free from the sexual manacles of Melville's native culture in the mid-nineteenth century America. Robert K. Martin notes that in *Typee* "Melville built a work of released sexual pleasure, one in which the body could be celebrated and in which individuals could be free to explore their deeper natures" (Melville, 1968: p. 36). Melville's latent queerness finds its full expression in the protagon-

ist Tommo, who, when placed in the sexually liberal Typee island, eroticizes the male bodies he sees and engages himself in a queer relationship with the native male Kory-Kory.

2. The Erotic Male Body

American readers in Melville's time relished adventure novels like *Typee* because travel writing provided them with "voyeuristic 'glances' into an alien world" unbridled by the rigid sexual codes of the 19th century American society (Said, 1978: p. 11). From the first glimpse of the Marquesas Island in *Typee*, Melville immediately sets up this island as a sensual paradise by depicting the erotic encounters between the crew on the ship *Dolly* and the near-naked native girls swimming out to welcome them:

We were still some distance from the beach, and under slow headway, when we sailed right into the midst of these nymphs, and they boarded us at every quarter... All of them succeeded in getting up the ship's side, where they clung dripping with brine and glowing from the bath, their jet-black tresses streaming over their shoulders, and half-enveloping their naked forms [...] What a sight for us bachelor sailors! (Melville, 1968: pp. 12-13)

Each of those beautiful "nymphs" possesses a graceful brown body, a desirable sex object in the eyes of the sailors. The narrator Tommo records "the unholy passions of the crew and their unlimited gratification" (Melville, 1968: p. 15). This licentious scenario gestures toward an open sexuality that permeates the Marquesas Islands and reaches out to unlock the sexual power of the sailors.

However, the uniqueness of Melville's novel lies in the fact that Melville has transcended the stereotypical account of the near-naked tribal women and stepped into another realm of sexuality—He eroticizes the male body. The first eroticized man is Tommo's shipmate Toby, with whom Tommo shares "a certain congeniality of sentiment" (Melville, 1968: p. 32). Tommo marvels at Toby's "remarkably prepossessing exterior" (Melville, 1968: p. 32):

Arrayed in his blue frock and duck trousers, he was as smart a looking sailor as ever stepped upon deck; he was singularly small and slightly made, with great flexibility of limb. His naturally dark complexion had been deepened by exposure to the tropical sun, and a mass of jetty locks clustered about his temples, and threw a darker shade into his large black eyes. (Melville, 1968: p. 32)

Tommo confesses that he is entranced at Toby's appearance. The two young men make a friendship pact by an "affectionate wedding of palms" before they jump ship (Melville, 1968: p. 33). As Robert K. Martin remarks, the intimacy Tommo shares with Toby onboard the ship (a typical homosocial environment where queer acts are condoned) prepares Tommo to submerge into the Typee culture and explore all sorts of sexual possibilities, "Toby is a transitional figure, halfway between the world of the ship and that of the island, and perhaps also

halfway between conventional gender roles” (Martin, 1986: p. 188). Probably upon seeing Toby, Tommo has already felt the tender stir of his queer desire in his “gaze” at Toby’s flexible “limbs” and “jetty locks”. Uncertain about his sexual identity, Tommo probes deeper into his queer nature when living with the sexually liberal Typees.

During his stay in Typee valley, Tommo remains preoccupied with the sensual expressions surrounding him. Meanwhile he is also projecting his own sexual desires onto some beautiful natives. For instance, Melville’s description of the handsome Polynesian man Marnoo in Chapter Seventeen intertwines feminine features with queerness. Marnoo, constantly placed under the “gaze” of Tommo, displays an androgynous quality that inflames Tommo’s sexual desires. Serving as a kind of liminal figure, this twenty-five-year-old native man enjoys the prerogative of traveling from valley to valley without fear. His unparalleled beauty distinguishes him from the other islanders and at the same time, mesmerizes Tommo, who lavishes eulogies on this young man’s good looks and likens him to “the statue of the Polynesian Apollo” (Melville, 1968: p. 135), a phrase that according to Martin, “marks his cultural androgyny, at once Polynesian, or primitive, and also Greek, or civilized” (Martin, 1986: p. 189). Marnoo has “beardless cheeks”, which fits the image of a handsome Greek youth; at the same time, “the warmth and liveliness of expression” makes him a typical Polynesian (Melville, 1968: p. 135). Marnoo evokes in Tommo an image of “an antique bust” (Melville, 1968: p. 136), most probably the bust of Antinous, which Melville keeps in his own bedroom.

In Chapter Eighteen, as Marnoo walks into the meeting room, the chivalrous Tommo quickly stands up and offers his seat to Marnoo, only to be frustrated by Marnoo’s indifference. Tommo immediately becomes enraged by Marnoo’s uncordial gesture: “Had the belle of the season, in the pride of her beauty and power, been cut in a place of public resort by some supercilious exquisite, she could not have felt greater indignation than I did at this unexpected slight” (Melville, 1968: p. 136). After assuming the “masculine” role of the gallant gentleman who offers his seat to a “lady”, Tommo now identifies both himself and Marnoo as women. He likens himself to a “belle” who is slighted by someone more ravishingly beautiful than her. However, Tommo’s jealousy of Marnoo quickly gives way to a deep admiration as he indulges in this young man’s charming voice and manner in a speech:

Never, certainly, had I beheld so powerful an exhibition of natural eloquence as Marnoo displayed during the course of his oration. The grace of the attitudes into which he threw his flexible figure, the striking gestures of his naked arms, and above all, the fire which shot from his brilliant eyes, imparted an effect to the continually changing accents of his voice, of which the most accomplished orator might have been proud. (Melville, 1968: p. 137)

Gazing at Marnoo’s “naked arms” and the “fire” of his eyes, Tommo is eroti-

cizing the young Apollo and fantasizing him as a passionate sexual object. In the same passage, Tommo records the responses of both male and female listeners to Marnoo's speech: "To the females, as well as to the men, he addressed his discourse. Heaven only knows what he said to them, but he caused smiles and blushes to mantle their ingenuous faces" (Melville, 1968: p. 138). Indeed, Marnoo, the feminized Polynesian Apollo, captivates not only the female natives, but also the male natives, as well as the male Westerner Tommo. A public idol admired by people from different nations, Marnoo blurs the rigid demarcations of race, gender, and sexuality.

3. The Feminized Male

Marnoo's masculine power is ebulliently extolled as "the most striking specimen of humanity" (Melville, 1968: p. 135), yet his female side is equally highlighted and celebrated, "Marnoo's cheek was of a feminine softness, and his face was free from the least blemish of tattooing" (Melville, 1968: p. 136). Not only is Marnoo's face cast in feminine terms, his clothing is also feminine, "a slight girdle of white tappa, scarcely two inches in width, but hanging before and behind in spreading tassels" (Melville, 1968: p. 136). Marnoo's dress is virtually a piece of cloth typically worn by a Polynesian woman. Tommo's description reveals a native young man strangely bodying forth both primitive and civil forces, as well as masculine and feminine attributes. This androgynous young man becomes the primary object of Tommo's queer desire. However, the traditional sexual ethics ingrained in Tommo prevent him from gratifying his desires. To exempt himself from the charm of Marnoo, Tommo dismisses Marnoo as "a sad deceiver among the simple maidens of the island" (Melville, 1968: p. 138). As he slights the local maidens to be too "simple" to perceive Marnoo's motives, he obviously considers himself the more discriminative and intelligent one who sees through Marnoo's deception. Also, by setting up the contrast between him and the maidens, Tommo unwittingly bases his affection for Marnoo on the heterosexual ground, thus, he unconsciously feminizes himself for the second time.

Tommo's fluctuating moods reflect his intense queer love for Marnoo. He accused Marnoo as a "deceiver" a moment ago, but soon he becomes immeasurably pleased as Marnoo moves up to him and proffers his hand:

I had hardly recovered from my surprise, when he turned round, and, with a most benignant countenance extended his right hand gracefully towards me. Of course I accepted the courteous challenge, and, as soon as our palms met, he bent towards me, and murmured in musical accents—"How you do?" "How long you been in this bay?" "You like this bay?" (Melville, 1968: p. 139)

Tommo sees the handshake as a joining of the palms, an act associated with matrimonial ceremonies. Marnoo's musical murmurings are more like a lover's sweet whispers. Hearing the three questions evokes in Tommo the feeling of being "pierced simultaneously by three harpoon spears" (Melville, 1968: p. 139).

Evidently, the “piercing” spears contain powerful queer strains, as they are charged with phallic significance; hence, physical penetration is metaphorically presented. Tommo’s emotional response to Marnoo’s “simple questions” reflects his queer desire to be “pierced” by other males.

Commenting on Melville’s feminization of Marnoo, Justin D. Edwards argues that “Melville is participating in a pervasive discourse which assumed the effeminacy and inferiority of Polynesian culture” (Edwards, 1999: p. 65). Echoing Edwards, many later critics assume that the feminizing projection of the native male implicates cultural imperialism; however, these critics have generally overlooked its queer undertones. Though Said observes that “the ‘East’ has been a psychological sphere where heterosexual men can gratify their illicit sexual desires and explore different type of sexuality in Western world” (Said, 1978: p. 190), he does not mention “queer love” as part of that “different type of sexuality”. Considering the fact that “the target readers of sea adventure novels were mostly males” (Said, 1978: p. 191), the feminized “Polynesian Apollo” may serve as an erotic image for the latent queer readers in the 19th century America. Melville thus envisages an enigmatic, sensuous Eastern world where the eroticized and feminized male body takes central stage, and where queer fantasies are powerfully delivered in the context of heterosexual tradition.

From the perspective of queer theory, I would also suggest that Toby and Marnoo, the two “feminine” men, are Melville himself in “drag”. Lois Tyson defines “drag” as “the practice of man dressing in women’s clothing” (Tyson, 2006: p. 330). She further explains that, “Drag is a way for a man to express his feminine side or his sense of the outrageous or his nonconformity” (Tyson, 2006: p. 330). The feminized men are Melville’s literary performance as a “drag queen” who flamboyantly displays his femininity in the hope of catching men’s attention, and who, while flaunting his female identity not conventionally thought as belonging to the male, relentlessly mocks the rigid demarcation of gender and sexuality in the 19th century America. In the portrayal of the effeminate, Melville “drags” himself and voices his queer longings as well as his distaste for the restrictive sexual norms of his society.

4. All Male-Loving Couple

Melville’s presentation of fluid gender identity culminates in Tommo’s relationship with his loyal Typee servant Kory-Kory, who gradually leads Tommo to a final confrontation with his latent queer desires. Melville establishes Tommo and Kory-Kory as partners who depend on each other for physical comfort and sexual gratification. According to Henry Dana’s travel book, *Two Years Before the Mast*, there is a Polynesian system of male kinship known as aikane, a system in which every man owns “one particular friend with whom he is bound in a sort of alliance” (Dana, 1995: p. 153). Another form of male kinship quite resembling the former one is expounded by William Ellis as follows:

On the arrival of strangers, every man endeavored to obtain one as a friend and carry him off to his own habitation, where he is treated with the great-

est kindness by the inhabitants of the district; they place him on a high seat and feed him with abundance of the finest food (Ellis, 1833: p. 132).

Tommo, upon arriving at Typee, is assigned a body servant named Kory-Kory, who provides food and shelter for him. In Tommo's eyes, Kory-Kory, with scary tattoos covering almost his entire body, is "a hideous object to look upon" (Melville, 1968: p. 71). Tommo remarks that "his countenance always reminded me of those unhappy wretches whom I have sometimes observed gazing out sentimentally from behind the grated bars of a prison window" (Melville, 1968: p. 72). Despite his appalling appearance, Kory-Kory is a loyal caretaker to Tommo. He would bring Tommo food everyday and would often carry him on his back to a lake and carefully bathe him. Tommo's repugnance to Kory-Kory's horrible appearance gradually abates as he feels the tenderness and affection this "faithful valet" harbors for him.

Most interestingly, Melville portrays Kory-Kory in the light of a caring and loving mother, a savage man exuding feminine ethos as he tends to "every whim of his master" (Melville, 1968: p. 72). In Chapter Fourteen, Kory-Kory is presented with a maternal aureole as he wraps Tommo in a blanket of tappa to keep him away from insects. Tommo receives the best care from Kory-Kory, but at the same time the native man also functions as an outlet for his pent-up sexual needs. The two would achieve mutual sexual enjoyment as Tommo "gazes" at Kory-Kory in the dramatically depicted "fire-lighting" act, which implicates an autoerotic act on Kory-Kory's part:

At first Kory-Kory goes to work quite leisurely, but gradually quickens his pace, and waxing warm in the employment, drives the stick furiously along the smoking channel, plying his hands to and fro with amazing rapidity, the perspiration starting from every pore. As he approaches the climax of his effort, he pants and gasps for breath, and his eyes almost start from their sockets with the violence of his exertions. (Melville, 1968: p. 97)

This scene of a man engaged in his arduous fire-making business has been interpreted by some critics as a metaphorical presentation of masturbation. Edwards comments that, "the sexual images that Melville uses in this scene suggest autoerotic behavior on Kory-Kory's part, which stands in for a deferral of his sexual desire for Tom" (Edwards, 1999: p. 68). Edwards's argument is well-grounded, because throughout the novel, Kory-Kory has dutifully tended to Tommo's everyday life, during which time he has developed intense physical intimacy with his master. He always shows "the most lively affection" to his master (Melville, 1968: p. 92), and more importantly, he displays sexual cravings for his master when he watches Tommo's body being rubbed down with oil by the native girls "with the most jealous attention" (Melville, 1968: p. 97). Hence, his autoerotic act in front of Tommo strongly alludes to his queer love. Robert C. Suggs's study on the sexual behaviors of the Marquesans reveals that "homosexual and autoerotic play is standard for Marquesan children and adolescents" (Suggs, 1966: p. 31). It is very likely for Kory-Kory to develop queer affinity with

Tommo, even though Tommo may not reciprocate his love. Kory-Kory's unrequited love bursts out in this fire-lighting scene, as he finally releases his sexual tension in masturbation (in a metaphorical sense). He pants and gasps for breath "as he approaches the climax of his effort", symbolically dispersing seed or in this passage, "smoke" that dissolves into the thin air. The entire process of Kory-Kory's autoerotic act is recorded by Tommo, as he assumes the role of a voyeur who derives much sexual pleasure from Kory-Kory's erotic movements. The servant-master rapport between the two is thus converted into a queer relationship in which both are sexually gratified.

Eventually, Tommo's queer love gives way to a more profound horror of native cannibalism, which drives him to flee from the island. The break-up of this couple is actualized in a gruesome turn of events as Tommo madly throws hooks at Kory-Kory and other Typees who chase after him. He finally boards a ship and succeeds in his escape, thus cutting all ties with his queer lover Kory-Kory.

5. Conclusion

Melville's writing abounds in riddles, puzzles, ambiguities and secrets. An exploration of Melville's queer space in *Typee* reveals the author as a latent queer figure who infuses his book with queer fantasies and frustrations. In Melville's time, American society excluded "perversion", suppressed erotic desires, and condemned any pursuit of queer love. Due to the confining societal rules, the queer character Tommo cannot maintain a durable and satisfactory love relationship with any other queers. In depicting the effeminate and all-male loving couple, Melville "drags" himself and voices his queer longings, yet the split of the affectionate male bond, and Tommo's final escape from the queer land of Typee reflect Melville's own bewilderment at actualizing queer love. As a queer writer living in the 19th century America, Melville calls for a tolerant and humane society in which queer love can be valued and respected.

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