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Hester Blum

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Keynote Addresses

Melville in the Arctic

HESTER BLUM

The Pennsylvania State University

Arctic expeditions in search of the missing British explorer Sir John Franklin carried copies of *Typee* and *Omoo* in their libraries in two notable examples. How does one read Melville's Polynesian romances in the Arctic? In the context of their interactions with Inuit and other indigenous people of the North, Arctic sailors might have concluded from their reading of *Typee* or *Omoo* that white, Western ways were not supreme. Ideologically instantiating Western primacy would have consequences both for indigenous and colonial populations. The story of Melville in the Arctic is a history of refusing national or imperial sovereignty in favor of the open spaces of the sea.

In 1845, British naval captain Sir John Franklin launched a large Northwest Passage expedition aboard the ships *Erebus* and *Terror*. When there had been no notice of the 129 men on the voyage after several years, a search began. And not just one search: at least forty rescue and recovery missions sought evidence of the Franklin expedition's baffling terminus within the first fifteen years of their disappearance alone. Sympathy for Franklin and his men compelled some unlikely individuals to head for the Far North; Philadelphia surgeons and Cincinnati newspapermen alike found common cause in seeking news of the missing British expedition. Broad public curiosity kept interest in the *Erebus* and *Terror* alive, and investigations continued for decades afterward, helping to propel a new age of Arctic and Northwest Passage exploration. To this day the majority of the bodies of the lost men have never been found, other than a handful of remains of individual sailors who died early in the expedition. Two dramatic breakthroughs in the long mystery have come recently. One of Franklin's missing ships, the *Erebus*, was finally located on the Arctic seafloor near King William Island in the summer of 2014—167 years after the first searches—by a state-sponsored submersible mission led by Parks Canada. The second ship, *Terror*, was located in Terror Bay in the fall of 2016 by a private expedition. The discovery of the *Erebus* in 2014 prompted that nation's

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then-Prime Minister, Stephen J. Harper, to avow that finding the British ship, lost for 169 years, “strengthened Canadian sovereignty in the North,” one of the Harper administration’s broader aims (Harper).

In the nineteenth century, however, only scattered relics of the expedition (and scattered graves) were discovered by Anglo-American search parties, including a copy of Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* found on the ice. The novel was among a cache of Franklin relics that also included twine, bristles, wax-ends, sailmakers’ palms, needle and thread cases, several bayonet-scabbards cut down into knife-sheaths, two rolls of sheet-lead, eleven large spoons, eleven forks, and four teaspoons, many of these last bearing Franklin’s crest. The presence of the *Vicar of Wakefield* on this Northwest Passage expedition was not itself surprising, as most long-voyaging ships were provided with libraries. Polar voyages, which anticipated enforced periods of relative inactivity during the winter, had larger libraries than many ships; Franklin’s *Erebus* and *Terror* had 3000 volumes between them. What is surprising about the *Vicar of Wakefield* was that it was important enough for it to be man-hauled among other essential supplies by members of the Franklin expedition, trudging for their lives after abandoning ship.

One of the early Franklin search operations began in 1850, led by the British ships *Resolute* and *Assistance*. During the total darkness of polar winter, when their ships were frozen in place for an average of six to nine months, polar sailors passed the time by creating coterie newspapers for the limited circulation of the ship itself. The flagship of the 1850 Franklin search attempt, the *Resolute*, produced a paper called the *Illustrated Arctic News*, while her sister ship *Assistance* published the *Aurora Borealis*. (I discuss these and other polar newspapers at length in my forthcoming book, *The News at the Ends of the Earth: The Ecomedia of Polar Exploration* [Duke UP, 2018]). Among punning articles on the “bear” necessities of Arctic life, enigmas, and a story on an Atlantis-like city named Bus, the first number of the *Aurora Borealis* included two catalogues of the library aboard the *Assistance*: one listed “Books supplied by the hydrographer’s office for the use of the Officers” (*Aurora Borealis*). These included the voyage narratives of previous polar expeditions, as well as various volumes of nautical science. The other—longer—catalogue was entitled “List of books supplied for the seamen’s library,” or those available to “the men,” the common seamen, the crew as a whole. The men had access to travel narratives, histories, conduct books (*Bathing and Personal Cleanliness* was one available title), poetry (William Cowper’s poems are listed on the first page), and novels by Jane Austen, James Fenimore Cooper, Henry Fielding, and Walter Scott (plus the latter’s *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*).

In the ship's library catalogue, amid a cluster of books published by John Murray of London and listed shortly after "Darwin's naturalist voyage," we find *Typee, or the Marquesas* and *Omoo*. Of the two Melville novels that accompanied the *Assistance* on its 1850 Franklin search mission, *Typee*, at least, made it on a second Arctic expedition, also aboard the *Assistance*, this one commanded by Edward Belcher from 1852–1854 and also in search of Sir John Franklin. Belcher had a printing press aboard ship, with which his expedition's printer, Henry Briant, published the catalogue of the vessel's library. A representative page of the booklist includes a volume on "Domestic Portraiture," several religious titles, and novels by Charles Dickens, Scott, Cooper, Frederick Marryat, and Austen (*Pride and Prejudice*). Listed among the Ms is the title "Marquesas Islanders (Melvilles)," which is parked next to Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* ("A Catalogue of the Library"). *Omoo* may not have made it onto the *Assistance* for the return trip to the Arctic, or it might have been overlooked by the cataloguer. It is possibly accounted for under the entry "Pacific narratives," or else it may have been read to pieces; one can hope.

How does one read Melville's Polynesian romances in the Arctic? I will offer some possible (if at times oblique) ways to read *Typee* and *Omoo* in the Far North. In what follows I touch on one aspect of the publication history of *Typee* and *Omoo* briefly and then say a few words about the novel-reading of Arctic sailors. No romance of the sea would be complete, naturally, without such nautical pit stops and pitfalls as encounters with island or indigenous populations, a loss of a ship or two, sexually transmitted diseases, and cannibalism. Despite its interest in rovers seeking escape from forms of national sovereignty, this story ends up, for now, at the desk of the President of the United States.

Both *Typee* and *Omoo* were first published in England by John Murray as part of a series launched in 1843 and initially called the "Colonial and Home Library," which promised "popular reading for all classes." A year later it was renamed the "Home and Colonial Library" when the reception of the series did not meet expectations. The books were inexpensive and priced to sell to "the less wealthy" (*Narrative of a Four Months' Residence* 15). They had three main constituencies: "what we might call 'cultural monitors' (factory masters, school inspectors, and librarians); itinerant readers (travelers, emigrants, and military personnel); and domestic readers with limited means" (Keighren 203). The Home and Colonial Library held particular appeal for travelers "as portable and cheap volumes to read on the road, or for whiling away the monotony of a sea voyage" (*Omoo* 2). Murray advertised the volumes, notably, as a "Library for the Empire": he imagined that "the settler in the Backwoods of America, and the occupant of the remotest cantonments of our Indian dominions" alike

would find “recreation and instruction, at a moderate price” (*Narrative of a Four Months’ Residence* 15).

In these terms, Melville’s first two books become part of a broader British imperial project. Murray was primarily a publisher of nonfictional narratives, and he marketed himself as “publisher to the Admiralty” (Parry, title page). What most now know as Melville’s first two novels were initially presented as narratives of genuine travels, even as the publisher had concerns about the reliability of the writer of *Typee*. Murray’s firm had an investment in confirming that its young author was not a gentleman playacting at sailing, but had really been before the mast. When asked by Murray for “documentary evidence” of his time in Polynesia, Melville replied that it was “indescribably vexatious” to be challenged on that score (*Correspondence* 65). The title that Murray gave Melville’s first book, *Narrative of a Four Months’ Residence among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas Islands; or, A Peep at Polynesian Life*, is consistent with the expository form taken by most sea narratives and other nonfictional narratives of travel. Melville preferred the Nuku Hivan word “Typee” [Taipi] as the volume’s title, believing that the “magic, cabilistic, *tabooistic*” quality of the word would perversely signal the authenticity of its contents (*Correspondence* 65). He had the same feeling about *Omoo*: the title’s “oddity, or uniqueness,” Melville argued, “conveys some insight into the nature of the book” (*Correspondence* 78). The very exoticism of the supposed Polynesian words testified to the veracity of his accounts, Melville believed; the “magic, cabilistic, *tabooistic*” experience Tommo first undergoes on Nuku Hiva, in turn, resolves itself to a reasoned cultural relativism and condemnation of many Western notions of reform. These conclusions run counter to Murray’s ambitions for the Home and Colonial Library volumes, in which the traveler or agent of British exploration would find recreation in narratives like *Typee* and *Omoo*, as well as instruction that reinforced Western norms.

This presumption is not necessarily in line with what we can discern about narrative and novelistic reading practices in the Arctic regions, drawn from libraries aboard ships engaged in rescue and recovery missions for the lost Franklin expedition. A pungent example of Arctic literary reading comes from the *Port Foulke Weekly News*, a manuscript newspaper written by the men of Isaac Israel Hayes’s Open Polar Sea expedition aboard the *United States* (1860–61). As Murray’s promotional materials for the Home and Colonial Library series confirm, book availability is associated, reasonably enough, with education, knowledge, and expanded views. But sailors usually take a cynical view of attempts to reform or improve them through reading. In a riotous “Literature” column in the *Port Foulke Weekly News*, Henry Dodge from Brooklyn, a great wit and notorious drunk, writes that “we are such an enlightened set of

mortals that Books are unnecessary either for our amusement, or knowledge.” In fact, Dodge writes blithely, “We know enough.” Demonstrating collective knowledge of his fellow sailors, he boasts:

We all know who wrote Shakespeare; we all know that John Bunyon wrote *Paradise Lost*; we all know that Napoleon Bonaparte was the greatest general of his age, until he was defeated by Caesar the Great, who in his turn was defeated by General Walker, who is now the greatest man alive. We all know that in 1942 [sic] a man by the name of Columbus discovered the New World, in a small vessel called the “Great Eastern,” and that he opposed the landing of the Pilgrims, in which engagement he was killed. . . .

What, then, is the use of books? It is a great deal better to employ our time in learning the art of spinning yarns, and in acquiring a knowledge of the valuable sciences of “cribbage,” “faro,” “vingt et un,” “Kimi, &c”. . . .

Then who cares for books; is it not better to be able to amuse “my mess” with yarns, which are of old standing, may be a hundred years old, (in which of course “I” am the principle actor) than to be able to answer our “learned Astronomer,” why we have so many successive months of darkness and light here? Of course it is! Then overboard with the books! who cares for “general information”? Not I! I would rather read one copy of the “N. Y. Ledger” or “Clipper,” than the whole ships company’s collection of books. (Dodge 8–9)

Within the pages of a ship’s newspaper, Dodge elevates the value of newspapers over books. He cites as proof of the exhaustion of books’ value the sufficiency of knowledge gained by the crew of the *United States*. But their knowledge, is of course, all wrong, comically false. Instead, sailors trust their own yarn-spinning, storytelling practices. Dodge is wittily playing with the idea of sailor knowledge as more properly the province of experience and oral history than abstract book knowledge. Yet Dodge’s humor is also at the expense of the kind of information that newspapers provide, and in this sense he anticipates Walter Benjamin’s well-traveled sailor-storyteller, long on experience and ill-served by “general information.” Yet for Dodge (unlike Benjamin), the impoverished media form providing unwelcome information is the book, rather than the newspaper, a genre Dodge embraces as more relevant to sailor experience in its immediacy, community appeal, and ephemerality.

In this context, Murray’s questions about the veracity of *Typee* take on a different cast. Sailors are clever enough to navigate generic forms, recognize allusions, and display literary taste. In their Arctic newspaper writing, polar sailors stage literary debates and parody familiar poems such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven.” More to the point, sailors emphasize the primacy of oral forms of storytelling, the yarns by which sailors create narrative community. These conversations are motile and nimble, and the forms of knowledge that they establish reflect such qualities. In this sense, sailor knowledge is consistent

with Inuit-Anglo encounters in the Far North and Polynesian-Anglo encounters in the South Pacific. Inuit knowledge was often described in the nineteenth century as “traditional” knowledge (as distinct from the contemporary scholarly designation “traditional ecological knowledge” or TEK). Labeling indigenous knowledge as “traditional” was not intended as an endorsement; in its orality and experiential communality, traditional knowledge was thought by Anglo-Americans to be antithetical to fact-based knowledge.

And yet “traditional” experience is key to Anglo-American encounters with Inuit communities and Western employment of Inuit guides. Native encounters are central, too, of course, to Polynesian travel narratives. An instance in which indigenous knowledge purports to appear in Arctic newspapers comes from the *Aurora Borealis*—the newspaper that gives evidence of Melville’s novels in the Arctic—in a call-and-response sequence of articles that is massaged by white writers. The Anglophone historical record provides some background on the subject of the articles, Qalassirssuaq, one of a number of indigenous Greenlanders who ended up in service to British and American whaling voyages or polar expeditions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The young Inuk guide served on the *Assistance* after being engaged by the expedition at Cape York, Greenland. Qalassirssuaq (the modern Inuktitut spelling of Kallihirua) was renamed Erasmus York by the officers of the *Assistance*, in nods both to Commander Erasmus Ommanney and the location where he was taken aboard. The crew called him Kalli and taught him English. Qalassirssuaq eventually traveled to Britain, where he had some measure of fame abroad and where he attended St. Augustine’s College, a missionary school for the Church of England. He died young in 1855, the terrible, all-too-common fate for indigenous peoples brought to the imperial metropole. After his death, a clergyman published *Kalli, The Christian Esquimaux* (1856), which went through several editions in London and New York. *Kalli* includes a poem adapted from lines spoken by one of the men aboard the *Assistance*; it paints a somewhat different picture of the teenaged Qalassirssuaq’s ostensibly willing decision to join the British expedition. The poem describes “little” Qalassirssuaq—whose name means “big belly button”—as weeping and straining his eyes “to try if he could see again / His mother and his home.” But ice is forming in the inlet, and the captain prefers to press on rather than return the “sad” boy to a maternal embrace. Kalli “learn’d to make the best of it” in the end (Murray 15).

The *Aurora Borealis* features another side of Qalassirssuaq. He provides a reply, supposedly, to an article claiming that “Arctic Highlanders” (the descriptor given to the Inughuit by the British Arctic explorer John Ross in 1818) or “Esquimaux” are dull and incapable, which is part of a broader piece on the inferiority of northern indigenous peoples. In the article, “Calahierna,

alias Erasmus York” first wonders why, if white men are so smart, would they leave relatively temperate England for the frozen regions of the North? The initial droll tone of this response does not last, however, and Qalasisrsuaq shifts to a series of paeans to the imagined magical powers of the whites, who “must be an extraordinary people”: they launch explosives that “multiply the many stars that pave the heavens,” send aloft “extraordinary round skins” to which are attached “long slips of pretty coloured paper” as part of the balloon messages designed to aid the Franklin search, and read by “looking for hours into a series of leaves bound up together,” through which “good and bad Augerkoks [shamans] talk.” In this particular Inuit iteration of the trope of the talking book, the white sailors stay true to Jack Tar type, rejecting wholesome literature in favor of salacious reading and “prefer[ring] the tongue of the bad Augerkoks to that of the good.” Qalasisrsuaq also guesses that “two different genii preside” over the expedition’s four ships, much “as birds are propelled by wings” (*Arctic Miscellanies* 91–92). All the racialized clichés of native awe in the face of imperial mastery are in play here: the spirit ships propelled by unseen forces, the wonder book, the whites’ command over the firmament and the natural world. It is easier to invoke the type of Kalli the awestruck primitive, in other words, than to be alive to the plight of Qalasisrsuaq the denaturalized boy sobbing for his mother. If white sailors evince a racist belief in the limits of indigenous knowledge, such a belief is consistent with their own impatience with the forms of knowledge available to them, but they try to ease such ideological commitments with humor.

Melville tells this narrative with a difference, as his “cabilistic” hopes suggest. His remote islands in distant seas are characterized by fears of massacres (by white colonials and Natives alike), sexually transmitted diseases (passed initially from whites to Polynesians), and rumors of cannibalism. Such are legion within maritime narratives, as I noted at the outset. One of the grounds on which Belcher—captain of the Franklin search ship *Assistance*, on which both Melville novels were stocked—granted a divorce to his wife was his own venereal disease, for instance. What is more, racialized fears of cannibalism recur in Arctic narratives, too. Scotsman John Rae returned from the north in 1854 with word of Franklin expedition relics in the possession of the Inuit, who had encountered a large party of struggling white men or “kabloonas” [Qabluunak] who had lost their ship; the Inuit also reported finding bodies a season later. They noted signs of cannibalism among the corpses, Rae wrote in a letter from the Arctic: “From the mutilated state of many of the bodies and the contents of the kettles, it is evident our wretched Countrymen had been driven to the last dread alternative, as a means of sustaining life” (Rae 342).

Skeptics of John Rae's conclusions feared that Franklin's men had been torn apart by bears, possibly, or massacred by the Inuit; one of the strongest of these voices was that of Charles Dickens, who characterized Inuit evidence in *Household Words* as "the chatter of a gross handful of uncivilised people" (Dickens 392). The evidence that Rae presented from Inuit oral history and the remnants of the expedition was generally greeted with skepticism if not hostility or hatred. Some observers invoked Franklin's harrowing early voyage in 1819 as justification for finding it preposterous that his men would resort to human consumption: although the early-century expedition members had been driven to eating lichen and their shoe leather during a terrible overland crossing to the Coppermine River delta, they never resorted to cannibalism (supposedly, even as eleven of the twenty men on the venture died). Franklin became known for this first voyage as "the man who ate his boots." The English commander's own principles were not the only reason Rae received pushback on his reports. A pseudonymous group pamphlet addressed what the authors called the "Great Arctic Mystery":

It may suit Dr. Rae's purposes to insist upon the tragical termination of cannibalism to the career of the Franklin party, but we well remember the burst of incredulity, mingled with disgust, which was felt by the public when Dr. Rae's unwarranted conclusion from third-hand Esquimaux evidence was published. For it is important to remember that the intelligence reached Dr. Rae in the thrice-diluted form through his Interpreter, who heard it from the Esquimaux, who heard it from other Natives, who said they had been at the spot where the death of forty of the Franklin party is stated to have occurred. These facts show the traditionary nature of the Esquimaux report, and, considered in connection with the conduct of the Natives, who are notoriously addicted to falsehood and deception, naturally lead us to receive the story with very great caution. . . . all the experience of our Arctic Explorers proves that Esquimaux are not to be trusted. (Φίλοι Συμβουλευόμενοι 9)

In fact the evidence told precisely the opposite story, as the experience of white Westerners in the Arctic proved that indigenous knowledge was to be heeded, whether in the form of eating raw seal to prevent scurvy, choosing furs over wool, or employing dogsleds rather than manhauling supplies on sledges. What Arctic sailors might have taken from their reading of *Typee* or *Omoo* is that white, Western ways were not supreme and that ideologically instantiating their primacy would lead to terrific loss both for indigenous and colonial populations.

I close this story of Arctic and South Pacific roving with a return to Captain Belcher and his Melville-stocked ships *Assistance* and *Resolute*. Belcher had the terrible naval misfortune to be forced to abandon both ships to Arctic ice in 1854. The *Assistance* has never been found. The adrift *Resolute* was spotted on

September 10, 1855, by the American whaler *George Henry* near Baffin Island, 1,200 miles from where Belcher and his men had left her; the United States returned the ship to Britain. A plaque on the desk of the president of the United States tells the story and its aftermath:

H.M.S. "Resolute," forming part of the expedition sent in search of Sir John Franklin in 1852, was abandoned in Latitude 74° 41' N. Longitude 101° 22' W. on 15th May 1854. She was discovered and extricated in September 1855, in Latitude 67° N. by Captain Buddington of the United States Whaler "George Henry." The ship was purchased, fitted out and sent to England, as a gift to Her Majesty Queen Victoria by the President and People of the United States, as a token of goodwill & friendship. This table was made from her timbers when she was broken up, and is presented by the Queen of Great Britain & Ireland, to the President of the United States, as a memorial of the courtesy and loving kindness which dictated the offer of the gift of the "Resolute." ("Treasures of the White House")

What does the *Resolute* desk tell us about sovereignty, or about reading Herman Melville in the Arctic? It is not necessarily possible to intuit a salvaged ship's timbers from the form of the ornate desk used by most US presidents in the



The *Resolute* desk. Gift of Queen Victoria, 1880. Photo by Bruce White.

past century. The connection of the *Resolute* desk to the ship is visible only in its name, a legacy of the renaming practices by which imperial sovereignty forcibly transforms existing lands and peoples for its own uses. In recognizing the sovereignty of Britain in returning a lost ship, the US in turn became a recipient of imperial benevolence and goodwill, as the decommissioned ship was crafted into a desk for the operation of another state's sovereign power.

But if we think of the *Resolute* desk from an oceanic perspective, then that oaken paneling is not so firm a barrier. Although the desk now serves as a symbol of sovereign power, its origin story does not begin at a fixed point or intact root. Abandoned, drifting for over 1,000 miles, the *Resolute* is a story of oceanic dispersion. So, too, are *Typee* and *Omoo*, in which Melville's protagonist abandons ship himself in order to roam and rove throughout the Pacific, finding both freedom and constraint. All are stories of loss and recirculation. *Typee* and *Omoo* remind us that sailors are ever interested and invested in shaping the dissemination of their own narratives. The story of Melville in the Arctic is a history of refusing national or imperial sovereignty in favor of the open spaces of the sea.

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