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CHAPTER FOUR

Indigenous Literacies, *Moby-Dick*, and the Promise of Queequeg's Coffin

We call him Ishmael, the enigmatic narrator of Herman Melville's epic novel *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, about whom we know only what he tells us. Ishmael is a sailor and a storyteller, a thinker and an observer, the sole survivor of the *Pequod*, and the narrator of the epic story of its demise. He is also a friend of Queequeg, a Polynesian harpooner he meets in the opening chapters of the novel. *Moby-Dick* relays the adventures of this unlikely yet "cozy" pair after setting out from the New England coast and sailing the high seas in search of whales and their precious oil. The novel ends, famously, with the destruction of the ship and the entire multiracial crew. A "romance of adventure," an allegory of Melville's America, a meditation on human nature, an ethnography of the whaling industry, an exposition of the logic of racism—*Moby-Dick* has never been easy to categorize or summarize.[1] It is much more than a story of adventure and disaster, more than the sum of its parts, and much more than the story of a whale. This unwieldy and genre-crossing beast of a book, so immensely rich in its questions and its insights, has captured the imagination of readers and literary critics because it seems to say so much about Melville's world, and our own.

It is not, perhaps, obvious that Melville has anything to say about indigenous literacies, although it is clear that writing and colonial conflict are important themes in many of his books. This final chapter argues that indigenous literacies are in fact central to, and represented as an enabling condition of, *Moby-Dick*. Like his first book, *Typee*, Melville's final novel, *Moby-Dick*, registers and probes the ways in which cultures of literacy confronted each other in a colonial sphere which was much larger than the

United States or even the Americas. This chapter traces the progression in Melville's thought about the meaning of such conflict and argues that, while early work such as *Typee* register the confrontation with indigenous forms of literacy as a threat, his great epic *Moby-Dick* ponders instead interdependence and the possibility of commensurability on both human and literary levels. In that sense, it is, for all its differences, of a piece with Guaman Poma's epic and its concern with the possibilities of literary connection. Like Guaman Poma and, for that matter, Kiotseaeton and Vimont, Melville explores linguistic and cultural exchange between different kinds of writing in the colonial conflict zone. Unfolding largely in locations outside the geographic boundaries of the Americas, *Typee* and *Moby-Dick* also register the global nature of that colonial world.

From the opening pages of *Moby-Dick*, Melville foregrounds the vexed issue of knowledge and its multiple and contradictory sources, with real and invented fragments about whales written throughout the ages and in all corners of the globe. The whale, in *Moby-Dick*, is not only the topic of many written sources but itself a site of inscription, its skin covered with marks that Ishmael compares to ancient hieroglyphs. In his musings on "the mystic-marked whale" and the hieroglyphic marks in his skin, Ishmael links the marks to the "mysterious ciphers on the walls of pyramids" and, simultaneously, to indigenous forms of writing inscribed on the American landscape that Ishmael observed once while sailing down the Mississippi: "I was much struck with a plate representing the old Indian characters chiseled on the famous hieroglyphic palisades on the banks of the Upper Mississippi. . . . Like those mystic rocks, too, the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable" (*Moby-Dick*, 306).[2]

By using terms such as "characters" and "hieroglyphic," Melville asks his readers to think about these petroglyphic marks as a kind of ancient writing. However, unlike his contemporary Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Melville does not appropriate these "Indian characters" for his narrative. Rather, the "mystic rocks" observed by his narrator remain "undecipherable" (*Moby-Dick*, 306). They are not easily translated; nor are they pressed into the service of a nationalist narrative. Instead, they stand as markers of alterity and anteriority, testaments to the presence of another literary culture belonging to the continent's original inhabitants. The term "hieroglyphic" frames this indigenous literary culture in relation to an ancient and well-known Egyptian script, one which had been deciphered only a few decades before. Egyptian hieroglyphs had long been considered mysterious and "undecipherable,"

just like the "hieroglyphic palisades" observed by Melville's narrator. In the 1820s, however, the Frenchman Jean-François Champollion caused a worldwide sensation by deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphic script with the aid of the recently discovered Rosetta Stone. This development represented the overturning of centuries of Western misconceptions about hieroglyphics. Champollion's great achievement lay in his ability to recognize that hieroglyphs were not simply "pictographs" but a writing system that combined logographic and phonographic elements.[3] For Melville, the term "hieroglyphic" could, then, simultaneously invoke both the alterity of non-alphabetic writing from a colonized territory and the recognition that such writing could constitute a different but equally legitimate literary heritage.

Melville explores the implications and ramifications of such possibilities via a colonial context with which he was personally familiar—namely, Polynesia. In *Moby-Dick*, he establishes this link by using the term "hieroglyphic marks" to refer to the symbols engraved by the Polynesian harpooneer Queequeg on his coffin. By carving "hieroglyphic marks" onto the coffin, Queequeg turns it into a text, a "mystical treatise" that becomes an enabling condition of the novel because it saves the life of the narrator. Ishmael survives the wreckage at the cataclysmic conclusion of the narrative by clinging to Queequeg's coffin as it resurfaces from the center of the vortex into which the *Pequod* and its crew have disappeared.

The pictographs on Queequeg's coffin are transcriptions of the Polynesian tattoos on his body. Pondering the mystery of these tattoos, Ishmael notes that Queequeg cannot "read" them. That illiteracy, however, is an assertion made by Ishmael that Queequeg himself never confirms. While Ishmael cannot see Queequeg as a competent reader of his own body and the hieroglyphs he inscribes on his coffin, he may be wrong. Can *we* imagine Queequeg as a literate user of an indigenous system of writing, a reader and writer just like Ishmael? Such an understanding of Queequeg is not only possible but enabled by the text. Indeed, Melville describes these tattoos as "hieroglyphic marks" that are "written" on the "parchment" of the harpooneer's skin. When the crew of the *Pequod* assembles to offer interpretations of the markings on a gold doubloon, Queequeg proves himself as capable a reader as anyone. And Melville is not Ishmael. The contradiction between Ishmael's assertion that Queequeg cannot read the "mystical treatise" that is "written out on his body" and Melville's use of terms such as "written" creates a space in which to imagine the encounter between Ishmael and Queequeg as one between readers and writers.

Of course, Ishmael and Queequeg are both fictional characters, and the notion that a Polynesian native would have a form of writing that could be carved onto a wooden coffin may appear equally fictional. But such a Polynesian script did, in fact, once exist. Today, the only surviving examples are on twenty-five engraved wooden tablets located in museums around the world and named after their current locations, just like the extant Mayan codices. While this Polynesian script remains undeciphered, like Melville's American "hieroglyphic palisades," scholars agree that it "writes what is almost certainly a Polynesian language."[4] Hence, it is possible that during the formative time he spent in Polynesia as a sailor in the early nineteenth century, the young Melville observed remnants of an indigenous system of literacy and, in his subsequent literary production, explored this prospect and its implications. Polynesians not only engraved on wood but also wrote and drew with ink on the "living parchment" of human skin. What would it mean to take seriously the relationship between Melville's alphabetic narrative and such indigenous texts? This kind of analysis reveals that indigenous Polynesian forms of literacy inform the novel in important, though deeply submerged, ways.

If we see Queequeg's coffin as an embodiment of indigenous forms of writing with the potential to resurface, how might we recover that potential? Such a project requires us to implement the method developed in the preceding chapters and allows us to test its applicability beyond the pre-national period. This method begins by taking seriously the possibility that people who inhabited colonized territories had their own cultures of literacy with the capacity to dialogize alphabetic texts. In this chapter, I take Melville's use of the term "writing" as a warrant to initiate such an inquiry into *Moby-Dick*.

To recapitulate, an "alternative literacies" analysis requires, first of all, some understanding of the internal logic that organizes the non-alphabetic system of inscription at play in a textual encounter—in this particular case, Polynesian tattoos. We can then bring to bear on the alphabetic text the logic of a different system of inscription and consider how the interaction between alphabetic and non-alphabetic forms of literacy, brought into contact and conflict by colonialism, might structure a given piece of literature. While previous chapters focused on texts produced in the context of a still unfolding colonial project, this final chapter explores how the analytical insights gained thus far offer new ways to understand later literature produced in the aftermath of colonial conflict, when alphabetic script was not

only hegemonic but often so dominant as to render other forms of writing illegible and all but invisible.

Writing on Wood, Skin, and Paper: Alternative Literacies in Dialogue

While accounts of South Sea journeys abound with references to tattoos, such graphic signs and patterns rarely figure as systems of meaning in their own right. Rather, tattoos generally function as signs of "savagery" that simultaneously fascinate and repulse Western readers and viewers.[5] In *Moby-Dick*, however, Melville represents this ink-on-skin as a kind of writing, "hieroglyphic marks" on Queequeg's skin, which serves as a "living parchment" on which a "mystical treatise" can be "written out" (*Moby-Dick*, 480). Human skin, like parchment and paper, here provides a surface on which graphic marks are made permanent with an ink-like substance and pencil-like tools. This is also the case in earlier work such as *Typee*; in fact, Melville's representations of Polynesian tattoos remain striking for their consistent use of terms associated with writing.

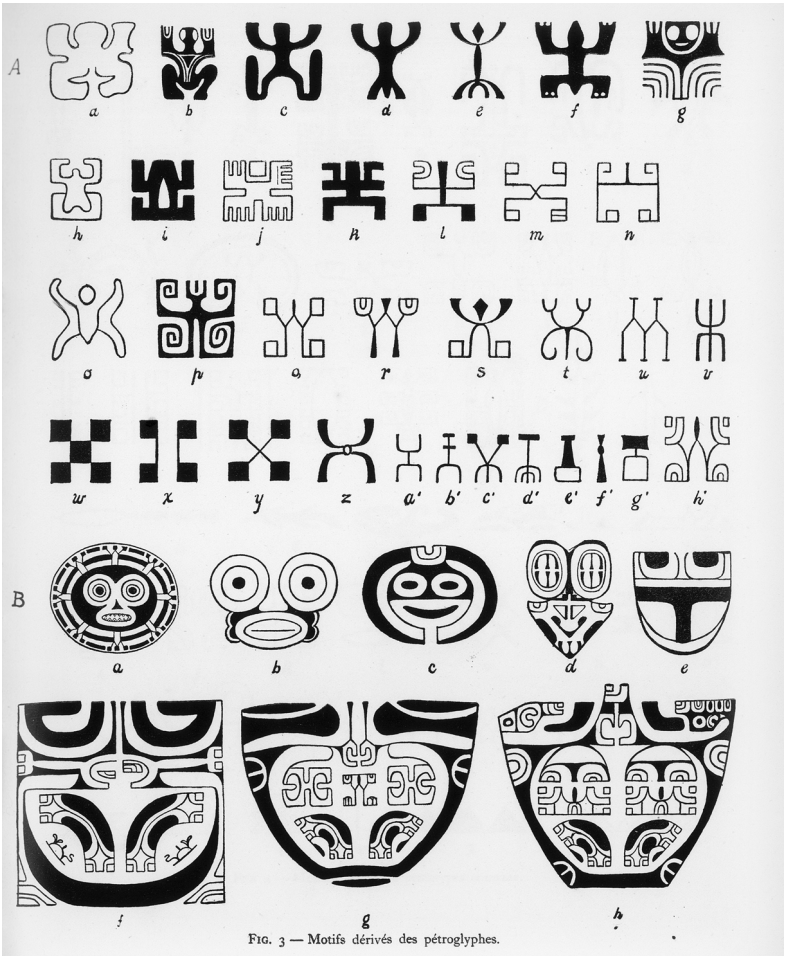
The man who became one of America's great writers first traveled to Polynesia as a young sailor in the early nineteenth century. During that time, he was able to observe regional tattooing cultures before they were seriously affected by colonial interference. Tattooing was and continues to be an important cultural practice on many Polynesian islands, such as Hawai'i, Tahiti, Tonga, and Samoa, although "the tattooing style of the Marquesas Isles was the most elaborate and extensive of any found in Polynesia."[6] Melville spent four weeks living as a "beach bum" in the Taipee Valley in 1842 and some time after that in Nukahiva, one of the centers of Marquesan tattooing, as well as elsewhere in Polynesia. In addition to observations made during this time, Melville used a number of previously published sources, including work by Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff, who wrote about and documented the visual aspects of Polynesian tattooing in the early nineteenth century. Langsdorff's travels began in 1803, and he remains one of the earliest sources available for understanding tattooing in the Marquesas. Etienne Marchand, who had traveled in the region a decade earlier than Langsdorff, provides another important source of information.[7] Like Marchand, Melville compared Polynesian tattoos to hieroglyphics, although Marchand's book is not listed among those owned or borrowed by Melville in Merton Sealts's compendium.[8] The term "hieroglyphics" was used widely

in Melville's time, and yet this usage raises the possibility that, just as Egyptian hieroglyphs were once mistakenly seen as imagery rather than script, so Marquesan tattoos might have been more than simple pictures.[9]

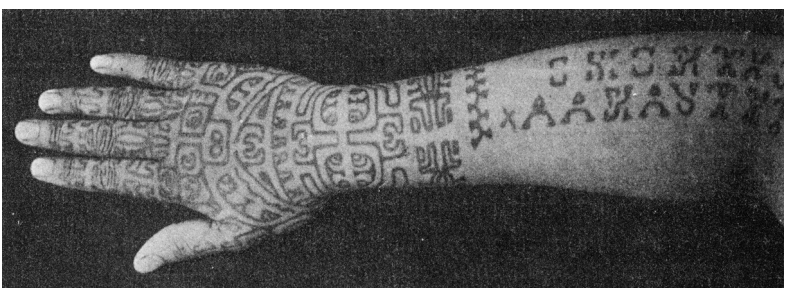
A survey of the iconography of this graphic system of inscription reveals that traditional Marquesan tattoos included "naturalistic" images, like fish, calabashes, etc., as well as more abstract designs (see figures 13 and 14). Representational designs conveyed specific and conventionalized meanings. One of the most prominent and common of such designs is a category of motifs known as *ipu*, which means "container," "vase," or "calabash." These terms overlap, as a calabash is a gourd that can be hollowed out for use as a container. The Marquesan word "*hue*" means "calabash," "gourd," "bowl," as well as, on a figurative level, "chief." *Hue* is also part of the name of a number of designs called, variously, "calabash bottom (*hue ao*)," "dirty calabash (*hue epo*)," and "flower calabash (*pua hue*)."[10] Although this is what we might call a naturalistic design, it has often been conventionalized to the point of abstraction so that familiarity with the system of meaning is necessary to recognize the design as related to calabashes.

For example, one variation of the *hue* design consists of concentric circles. This pattern was sometimes associated with the armpit and the underside of the arm, making it visible when a warrior raised his arm to strike at an enemy.[11] This fairly common pattern is relevant to our analysis not only because Melville is likely to have seen it, but also because the image of concentric circles plays a key part in the conclusion of *Moby-Dick*: "And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew . . . carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight" (*Moby-Dick*, 572). Here, the moment of impending death for the crew of the *Pequod* is linked to the image of concentric circles, just as the concentric circles of the *hue* design would be associated with impending death for a warrior in battle as he beheld the raised arm of his enemy immediately before being struck. In *Moby-Dick*, the image of concentric circles appears right before the whale brings down the ship, when Ahab raises his arm to throw the harpoon at the whale. Hence, concentric circles in *Moby-Dick* are directly associated with battle, the raised arm of Ahab attempting to strike a lethal blow and the whale, which in turn brings down the ship.

This correspondence could simply be a coincidence, of course, but it is part of a consistent pattern in which images in *Moby-Dick* correspond to images in Marquesan tattooing. In addition to concentric circles, several other key tropes in *Moby-Dick* echo images in the iconography of Polynesian



13. Abstract Marquesan tattoos. From *Art in the Marquesas* (1922) by Willowdean Handy. WHi-66977. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society.



14. A hand with abstract Marquesan tattoo designs. From *Die Marquesaner und ihre Kunst* by Karl von den Steinen. (1925–28). WHi-66979. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

tattoos. When Ishmael first encounters Queequeg, he offers a vague but important description of several tattoos that Queequeg will later transcribe from his body onto the coffin. For example, Ishmael notes that "his very legs were marked, as if a parcel of dark green frogs were running up the trunks of young palms" (*Moby-Dick*, 22). This tattoo is likely an example of what Alfred Gell calls an "anthropomorphic multiplicity motif" in which a human or animal figure is repeated.[12] When running the length of a limb, such a design might be classified as a *kake* motif.[13] Examples of *kake*, which means "to climb" in Marquesan, always have feet and heads and "represent animate beings" that range from turtles and crabs to stylized representations of back-to-back women, a reference to the mythological twin goddesses who, according to legend, brought tattooing from Fiji to Samoa.[14] Had Queequeg been a real person, the "frogs" on his legs would likely be an example of such a multiplicity motif. Given that Queequeg is identified as Polynesian, we can relate this tattoo to a pan-Polynesian context in which one possible referent would be Siamese twins, a prominent element of Polynesian iconography.

Siamese twins would then represent another example of an intertextual link between Melville's text and Polynesian tattooing, for the twin motif appears as a significant and recurring device in *Moby-Dick*. There are multiple twinned figures whose destinies are intertwined in the narrative. The image of Siamese twins more specifically also appears in the text, in chapters such as "The Monkey Rope." In addition, Ishmael refers to himself and Queequeg as a pair of Siamese twins. Because twins are such an important element of Polynesian tattooing iconography, images of twins in *Moby-Dick* can be considered examples of how Melville's novel plays with motifs that correspond to Polynesian tattoo designs.

The motif of multiplication, central to Marquesan cosmology and iconography, constitutes another instance of such linkage, because multiplication is also a narrative element in *Moby-Dick*. As is the case with twins, correspondences can be drawn between images of multiplication in the novel and in Marquesan culture. For example, the story of a mythic hero, Pohu, relates his defeat of a giant caterpillar, which he breaks into small caterpillars and thereby renders harmless. Similarly, at the end of *Moby-Dick*, when the whale is destroyed, a multitude of "unharming sharks" circle around Ishmael as if "with padlocks on their mouths" (*Moby-Dick*, 573). Pohu embodies the ability to combine parts into wholes and vice versa—to break down totalities and to recombine parts into new wholes. Like Pohu, Melville is an author who breaks down discursive formations such as "the



15. An inhabitant of the island of Nukahiwa. From Puteshestvie vokrug svieta v 1803, 4, 5 i 1806 godakh: po poveleniiu ego imperatorskago velichestva Aleksandra Pervago, nakorabliahkh Nadeshde i Neve, pod nachalstvom . . . kapitana . . . Kruzenshterna. 1809–1813. Courtesy of the Slavic and Baltic Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

whale" into their fragments and reveals new perspectives and possibilities through different combinations.[15]

Intersections between Polynesian tattooing and motifs in *Moby-Dick* often mark key narrative or thematic concerns. An important example of a multiplicity motif which relates in significant ways to *Moby-Dick* is the one Gell calls the "checkerboard pattern."[16] When Ishmael describes Queequeg's tattoos, he notes that his chest is covered by a checkered pattern. Such checkerboard designs can be observed in illustrations from the period, such as *An Inhabitant of Nukahiwa* (see figure 15).[17] This motif was called *te vehine na'u*, which, according to Langsdorff, meant "my little wife." This pattern, which looks like abstract squares of black and white, actually represents myriad "little wives" accompanying the wearer as he moves through the world.[18]

In *Moby-Dick*, the description of the "little wife" pattern precedes a pas-

sage where Melville uses terms such as "matrimonial" and "bridegroom clasp" to describe Ishmael and Queequeg, who spend the night sleeping together in the same bed. This imagery becomes even more explicit when Ishmael wakes up the next morning with "Queequeg's arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife" (*Moby-Dick*, 25).[19] Although only Melville himself might have been able to appreciate this pun, it seems quite possible that Melville was in fact punning on *te vehine na'u*.

Images in the text of *Moby-Dick* thus correspond to images in the pictographic vocabulary of Marquesan tattoos. If we think of Marquesan designs as discrete elements of a larger system of meaning, in which graphic signs represent language, narrative, words, it appears that elements of this code were literally inscribed into the narrative fabric of *Moby-Dick*. Just as the textual logic of wampum became inscribed into the *Jesuit Relations*, so the graphic signs of Marquesan narrative forms appear, transcribed as literary tropes, in the text of Melville's masterpiece—with an important difference. Whereas Vimont's reproduction of wampum textuality seems to have been unconscious, Melville's use of imagery that reproduces Marquesan iconography seems to have been based on a far greater familiarity with and understanding of the relationship between Marquesan graphic signs and their referents than Vimont displayed vis-à-vis wampum.

An "alternative literacies" analysis thus reveals that Melville reproduces significant images from Marquesan pictography as narrative images constructed with alphabetic letters, the components of his native writing system. In such narrative images, we can see the intersection of two distinct graphic systems. As the units of one graphic language, Marquesan tattoos, link up with the images of another graphic language, alphabetic script, the image emerges as the common ground between two radically different forms of writing, displacing translation as the dominant mode of cross-cultural intersection.

Polynesian Hieroglyphs: Tattooing in the Marquesas

If it was radical in Melville's America to imagine writing as a site of cross-cultural commensurability, it was equally radical to conceive of indigenous marks as elements of distinct literary cultures. For Melville, Egyptian hieroglyphics play an important role in the narrative by representing the possibility of such commensurability and legitimacy. For centuries, this Egyp-

94 Such details are particularly visible on the original manuscript. I am grateful to Ivan Boserup for permitting me access to Guaman Poma's book at the Royal Library of Copenhagen.

95 Adorno, *Guaman Poma and His Illustrated Chronicle from Colonial Peru*, 17.

96 On the publication history of Guaman Poma's work, see n. 8 of this chapter. For an overview of scholarship on the manuscript, see n. 9 also of this chapter.

FOUR Indigenous Literacies

1 Melville calls it a "romance of adventure" in a letter to Richard Bentley dated June 27, 1850: see Davis and Gilman, *The Letters of Herman Melville*, 108–46.

2 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 306. Subsequent citations are in parentheses in the text.

3 For an accessible overview of the history of the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics, see Robinson, *Lost Languages*, 51–73. For a discussion of the relationship between the Rosetta Stone and the decipherment of a range of scripts, see Parkinson, *Cracking Codes*.

4 Robinson, *Lost Languages*, 219.

5 Sanborn, *The Sign of the Cannibal*.

6 Gell, *Wrapping in Images*, 163. Two other important sources are Handy, *Tattooing in the Marquesas*; von den Steinen, *Die Marquesaner und ihre Kunst*. Handy is an invaluable source because she was able to interview Marquesan elders who had been tattooed before the ban was enacted.

7 Marchand, *Journal de Bord d'Etienne Marchand*. Handy consulted Marchand, among others, for her study, which was published four decades after the French outlawed tattooing.

8 Sealts, *Melville's Reading*.

9 Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics*.

10 René Dordillon's French-Marquesan dictionary remains the only scholarly source available for consultation: Dordillon, *Grammaire et dicionnaire de la langue des Iles Marquises*. Dordillon translates *ipu* as a small vase or glass. According to Alfred Gell, the term also refers to a category of motifs that includes stylized "calabash" motifs: Gell, *Wrapping in Images*. Dordillon translates several compound words, such as "*ipu katu*" and "*ipu óto* as *tatouage*," a kind of tattoo. The calabash, a key motif with numerous variations, represents not only a bowl or container but also a vessel broadly defined as well as a shell, usually with protective connotations. Such images abound in *Moby-Dick*. The ship is a vessel, a container, a shell; the coffin is also a container, as well as a shell with protective connotations both in its original form as a coffin and in its final form as a lifesaving buoy.

11 This image also has a mythological referent to the story of Kena, which Gell calls "the nearest thing we have to a charter myth of Marquesan tattooing." Even though Kena is only a ka'ioi, this half-mortal and half-supernatural being "cheats" his way to the best tattoos during a ceremony. The quality of his tattoos are linked to heightened erotic as well as physical power. For example, he

becomes irresistible to a woman who had formerly left him and married another man, and he becomes able to shoot lightning from his tattooed armpits: Gell, *Wrapping in Images*, 186–87. The variation of the calabash design in the armpit references Kena's "fire power" as well as his erotic endowment and the social cunning that enables him to obtain the tattoos in the first place. At the same time, it implicitly references a narrative about the power of tattoos, which is linked to "the battlefield" as a literal, erotic, and social space.

12 Such designs include tortoises, crab-like figures, and back-to-back women who may relate to the legendary Siamese twin goddesses: Gell, *Wrapping in Images*, 58–62. Gell notes that "multiplicity motifs are always to some degree anthropomorphic": ibid., 194.

13 Ibid., 193. Gell notes that *kake* means "to climb" and that Dordillon translates it as "curve motifs rising over the loins" when it refers to a tattoo.

14 While the legend of the twin goddesses is not central in the Marquesas, twinned and multiplied figures are prominent motifs in both Marquesan tattooing and carved art: ibid., 181.

15 On the Pohu myth, see ibid., 194–95.

16 Ibid., 194.

17 This image was produced by Wilhelm Gottlieb Tilesius von Tilenau, the expedition artist for A. J. von Krusenstern, who visited the Marquesas in 1804. Tilenau made sketches of a number of Marquesans. These sketches in turn formed the basis of the engravings that illustrated Langsdorff's published account of his voyage: von Krusenstern, *Voyage round the World*; von Langsdorff, *Voyages and Travels in Various Parts of the World*.

18 This pattern represented the protection of affinal alliance relations in the Marquesas. Wives not only represent the web of family relationships in which a given person was embedded, but also organized the social aspect of that person's identity: Gell, *Wrapping in Images*, 194.

19 Melville continues to play with this imagery, which he develops further in chapter 10. There he compares himself and Queequeg to "man and wife" and "some old couples" who "lie and chat over old times till nearly morning." He concludes by describing the two of them as "thus, then, in our hearts' honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg—a cosy, loving pair" (*Moby-Dick*, 53). The affectionate nature of this relationship has received a range of critical attention. See most famously Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*. For a recent, more complex reading of this relationship, see Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*.

20 In his study of the influence of hieroglyphics on the American Renaissance, Irwin argues that hieroglyphics in *Moby-Dick* represent the undecipherable and unknowable: Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics*. No doubt, one important concern in *Moby-Dick* is a critique of epistemological certainty embodied, for example, in Ahab. Yet it seems unlikely that hieroglyphics would be symbolic only of the unknowable, given that hieroglyphics had been deciphered only a few decades before the novel's publication, an event that caused great sensation in both Europe and the United States. Melville draws on a wide range of cultural refer-