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# Melville in Tahiti: A GIS Approach

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Good morning. My name is Jessica Ewing, and I am a graduate student in the Masters in Literature program, as well as a Teaching Assistant for the First-Year Writing Program. My work with the English Department and contributions to literary studies have been markedly influenced and inspired by Dr. Steven Olsen-Smith and his large scale, digital humanities project, *Melville's Marginalia Online*. The research project I will be discussing here today stems from my involvement with Melville's Marginalia as a Graduate Assistant and was both encouraged and facilitated by Dr. Olsen-Smith.

As you may have seen from my abstract, my project is an exercise in digital humanities studies, blending more traditional literary research methods with digital mapping technologies and methodologies. The project is significant in a number of ways: first, for the English department, the project contributes to a growing trend of merging the digital and the textual in literary research, and it exemplifies the undergraduate and graduate research conducted by and for the Melville Edition; second, for the university, the project reflects the purpose and goals of digital humanities initiatives, with much of this research progressing through my involvement with a digital humanities cohort on campus and related workshops; third and finally, the project is a significant contribution to Melville studies because the finished product will synthesize the various sources--fiction and nonfiction, primary and secondary--that document Herman Melville's maritime travels during the early 1840s and because it will incorporate digital mapping technologies, including ArcGIS software and Google Earth, to depict those travels as a virtual story map.

The purpose of this project is to synthesize and visually (re)present the most significant sources that address or otherwise trace Melville's travels from January 1841 until October 1844, focusing primarily on the period Melville spent in and around Tahiti during the late summer and early fall of 1842. This part of the biographical record is littered with conflicting scholarly accounts of Melville's whereabouts and actions and with inconsistencies--as well as outright falsehoods--among surviving documents and the author's own account of his experiences in his second book *Omoo*. The matter at hand is a charge of physical assault.

Edward Lucett, the British shipowner and merchant, and later, the author of *Rovings in the Pacific*, chronicled his imprisonment in a Tahitian calaboose and alleged that Herman Melville was the chief assailant in an assault Lucett suffered at the hands of incarcerated "mutineers" from the whaleship *Lucy Ann*. The date of this assault is under question, with various accounts linking it to the night of either November 16th or 18th. The following is an excerpt of Lucett's record of the event, which appears in his text:

Two or three evenings subsequently to our return, in taking a stroll in the cool shady walk at the back of the settlement, I stopped at an open native house to light a cigar.

Suddenly the house was surrounded by men, and two or three of them entered and commenced jostling me. [...] [T]hey began handling me in a way that excited my suspicions, and I indignantly shook myself free from their impertinences. In a moment I was prostrate: some of the younger of the party had precipitated themselves to the ground and jerked me by the ankles, which had caused me to stumble backwards across their bodies; and before I could recover myself, I was elevated on the shoulders of ten or a dozen of them, who clutched my body wherever they could find hand-room. [...] [T]o my horror, I discovered that they were taking me to a calliboose, where a party of mutineers were confined. [...] [T]hey [...] forced my ankles into a massive pair of wooden stocks, in which six or seven of the worst of the mutineers were also confined. My passion at this outrageous indignity was so great, that my tongue refused its office, and my throat became parched as if by fire. The mutineers appeared mightily tickled at my position, and indulged in exceedingly gross and insulting remarks [...]. [...] [T]here was another of them who had contrived to liberate himself when the stocks were raised for the reception of my legs; and this fellow, apparently the ringleader and spokesman for the others, commenced an oration, addressing me in the most offensive style, instituting comparisons, rejoicing that one of the 'swells' had got a taste of the stocks, and offering me a highly spiced dish of ironical sympathy [...]. [...] Uttering a volley of oaths, the dastardly dog hereupon drew his sheath knife, and threw himself upon me, helpless as I lay [...].

Later, Lucett revised his narrative to include the following indictment:

Since the above entry was made in my journal, two works have appeared, 'Typee' and 'Omoo,' purporting to have been written by Herman Melville. By his own showing Herman Melville has been a most reckless loafer, caring not a pin what enterprises were ruined so long as he could indulge the gratification of his own propensities. [...] Herman Melville, undoubtedly the ring leader of the mutineers, was lying in the calliboose when I was dragged there; and from the un-English way in which the ruffian who assaulted me handled his knife, I have the strongest suspicion that it was Herman Melville who threw himself upon a bound defenceless man [...]. [...] That he was in the calliboose at the time, there is not a question; and that the man was a Yankee who threw himself upon me I will swear, not only from the peculiar intonation of his voice, his pale unwhiskered face, and the thatch-like way in which his hair fell on either side of it, but from the glib-like nature of his tongue--a qualification by no means uncommon with ordinary American seamen [...].

These excerpts demonstrate several problems that I will cover in my paper and that have been debated by scholars: namely, the date of the event in question; the veracity of existing documentation of events on the island; and the physical appearance, moral character, and

literary practices of Herman Melville.

Major scholars since Jay Leyda have rejected Lucett's claim by arguing that Melville had escaped Tahiti by the time of Lucett's imprisonment, with Hershel Parker asserting that Melville's name and identity were "appropriated" by a remaining prisoner who perpetrated the abuse. Recently, however, Robert Suggs has sought to credit Lucett's accusation while attributing the deed to violent tendencies in Melville's character. While scholarship is divided regarding the veracity of Lucett's claim and the known whereabouts of Melville on November 18, 1842, my paper will provide the fullest examination of surviving documents since Harrison Hayford conducted his research for the Hendricks House edition of *Omoo*, published in 1969. I will compare Melville's and Lucett's accounts of the calaboose, will investigate current scholarly claims, and will focus on the existing evidence to determine what we can reliably conclude regarding Melville's involvement in the incident. Using crew and passenger list and other whaleship logs, newspaper reports from both the US and Australia, and correspondence written by the parties involved and by Melville's family, in addition to Melville's *Omoo*, Lucett's *Rovings in the Pacific*, and various books and essays published by the aforementioned scholars and others, my research unsettles the claims established on both sides of the issue and synthesizes the most reliably documented facts.

In addition to the paper, my research will present complex evidence in a vivid and user-friendly format by digitally expanding on methods of traditional scholarship to map Melville's movements by supplying relevant data and documentation at various markers of the author's travels. The layered digital maps will locate the author at specific dates and locations and will pinpoint the gaps and contradictions in our current knowledge. For example, the crew list of the *Acushnet* ship from the National Archive via the US Customs Service dates the beginning of Melville's journey to January 3, 1841; similarly, we can reliably conclude that Melville arrived back in the states in October 1844 because Navy records establish the date of the USS Frigate's return to Boston. Records are scattered across city, state, and national archives, public and private libraries, and several society collections, and I have been working to solicit digital image files of these records to embed in placemarks on the map.

However, little reliable or definitive documentation exists for the 1842 period in Tahiti: some scholars contend that Melville had left before the night of Lucett's attack; some scholars argue that physical violence is out of character for the author; other scholars claim that an assault is not such a far-fetched idea and that Melville's autobiographical writings are problematized by fictional techniques and borrowed materials. My presentation will therefore be divided between a paper that discusses these arguments and a digital map

that illustrates the voyage and corroborating documents.

To conclude: this project has been accepted at the 9th International Melville Conference, "Melville and Whitman in Washington: The Civil War Years and After," which will be held in Washington, DC during the first week in June. My presentation, "Melville in Tahiti: A GIS Approach," will be part of Dr. Olsen-Smith's panel on "New Documentary Evidence and Approaches."

Thank you.