

**Blackface Minstrelsy and the Theater of Empire, 1838-1860**

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## Abstract

In the early 1830s, blackface minstrelsy burst onto the American entertainment landscape and remained a dominant form of popular culture for the rest of the century. Unsurprisingly then, as the first United States naval voyages sailed into the Pacific Ocean, beginning with the United States Exploring Expedition in 1838, amateur minstrels were often present among the crews. They performed not only for their fellow sailors but also for the people they encountered abroad. This thesis explores the various roles blackface minstrelsy played in the first wave of US maritime imperialism in the Pacific, from the 1830s to the 1850s. It situates blackface minstrelsy within a landscape of other performances of the theatricality of early American imperial ventures in the Pacific, such as performatively brutal acts of violence, military pomp, and diplomatic ceremony in order to examine the ways in which minstrelsy both shaped and reflected how American racial norms impacted the United States' early imperial ambitions in the Pacific.

Through examinations of the United States Exploring Expedition (1838-1842) and the Perry mission to Japan (1838-1856), this paper investigates how blackface minstrelsy was deployed in different contexts, and how these differences reflected developments in imperial strategy over the course of the mid-nineteenth century. The U.S. Ex. Ex. performances were not part of any cohesive strategy, but a single element of many, often contradictory, performances of American presence and power. At both Tahiti and Fiji, blackface was performed for a combined audience of Americans and indigenous people. Blackface minstrelsy was initiated by everyday sailors for entertainment value and as an extension or presentation of American culture. Commodore Matthew C. Perry, meanwhile, incorporated blackface minstrelsy as part of a strategy of pageantry in Japan which specifically emphasized representations of blackness as a uniquely American diplomatic currency.

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## Introduction

In 1838, the seven ships of the United States Exploring Expedition, the first major U.S. government-sponsored voyage into the Pacific Ocean, set off from Hampton Roads, Virginia. Among the men who made up the Expedition's massive crew of officers, civilian scientists, and everyday seamen were several amateur minstrels, who staged impromptu minstrel shows in blackface across the South Pacific. Fourteen years later, Commodore Matthew C. Perry would lead the United States' voyage to establish diplomatic and trade relations with Japan. The Perry squadron also had blackface performers, this time an established troupe of "Ethiopian Minstrels," who performed at key moments for Japanese diplomats as well as for their fellow sailors. This thesis will examine the presence of minstrels on these two voyages to ask how blackface performances in the Pacific both shaped and reflected how American racial norms impacted the United States' early imperialist ambitions in the Pacific.

The period spanning these two Pacific voyages constitutes the United States' first attempt to extend its imperial reach into the Pacific and East Asia. The expeditions' planners outwardly rejected the European-style imperialism of land claims and colonies, instead calling for the United States to distinguish itself through the collection of scientific knowledge and establishment of commerce.<sup>1</sup> Still, these early attempts to assert U.S. power on the world stage were full of deeply theatrical moments which conveyed the nation's imperial ambitions, of which blackface performances were a part.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Verney, "Selling Empire: Publishing Naval Imperialism in the Early American Republic, 1842-1860," in *Knowledge Production and the Tools of U.S. Empire* (Making a Republic Imperial, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2019), 10. Paul Lyons, *American Pacificism*, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures. (Routledge, 2006), 48.

After the end of the War of 1812, the number of U.S. ships venturing into the Pacific Ocean increased dramatically. Initially, most ships were private whaling and trading vessels. These voyages inspired massive public interest, reflected in a growing body of nautical literature that both responded to American interest in the Pacific and helped generate it. The United States Exploring Expedition (U.S. Ex. Ex.), the first U.S. government-sponsored Pacific venture, formed largely in response to the public demand for information about the region, in addition to a need to keep up with European imperial projects and to establish infrastructure for trade. As the United States government began to venture into the Pacific, its aims remained largely commercial, rather than territorial.<sup>2</sup> The next major United States Pacific voyage, the Perry Expedition to Japan in 1853-1855, sought to establish diplomatic relations with the Japanese government in order to facilitate trans-Pacific trade and to gain access to more safe ports for American ships. Because of their commercial focus, the earliest U.S. imperial ventures have often not been recognized as such. Historians typically start discussions of American imperialism in the Pacific with the colonization of Hawai'i, culminating in its annexation in 1898, or at the earliest with the Perry Expedition to Japan in 1853-55.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the U.S. desire for commercial dominance, often accompanied by cultural dominance—along with explicit attempts to compete with European powers such as Britain, France, and Russia who were invested in territorial imperialism—clearly marks the American program as a form of imperial ambition.

The exact origins of blackface performance in the United States are unclear. Several of the individual elements of blackface minstrelsy— such as white actors in dark makeup

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<sup>2</sup> Lyons, *American Pacificism*, 49.

<sup>3</sup> Rob Wilson, *Reimagining the American Pacific: From South Pacific to Bamboo Ridge and Beyond* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2000), 64. Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 84.

portraying black characters onstage and music beginning to combine English, Irish, and African melodies — existed individually in American popular culture as early as 1790.<sup>4</sup> In the late 1820s and early 1830s, however, these elements coalesced into the form now known as blackface minstrelsy.<sup>5</sup> White performers in New York and other Northeastern port cities combined English and Irish folk tunes with Afro-American melodies and their own secondhand ideas about Southern Black culture and imitations of Northern free Blacks.<sup>6</sup> From early on, blackface minstrels functioned as part of a capitalist, popular culture landscape. Music publishers printed and sold sheet music to well-known minstrel songs and blackface performers took the stage in large New York City theaters. Minstrel troupes competed for audiences and market share.

At the same time, blackface minstrelsy was a constantly self-mythologizing form, which initially sought to align itself with American folk traditions, particularly those of the South, rather than commercial popular music. In *The Wages of Whiteness*, David Roediger notes the elements of false nostalgia inherent in early blackface minstrelsy, which cast it as representative of an already bygone, traditional way of American life.<sup>7</sup> Through this alignment with idealized versions of “traditional” American folkways, blackface performers were able to cast their work as authentically American. Lott argues that even by the mid-nineteenth century, many Americans still felt plagued by the suspicion that all American art was simply an inferior imitation of British and other European sources. The exception was culture produced by enslaved Africans on U.S.

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<sup>4</sup> Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xi.

<sup>5</sup> Or simply, “blackface”. Given the dominance of blackface minstrelsy in the nineteenth century, “minstrelsy” in contemporary usage typically refers to white performers in blackface, but can also refer to white popular entertainers without makeup. Cockerell (*Demons of Disorder*, xii) argues that the word was only used to refer to white performers before 1842.

<sup>6</sup> Robert C. Toll, *Blacking up* (Oxford University Press, 1974), 48.

<sup>7</sup> David R. Roediger, “Part III: Work, Culture and Whiteness in Industrializing America,” in *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, accessed July 6, 2018, 96.

soil. Many mid-nineteenth-century Americans— including blackface performers themselves— seem to have believed that minstrel songs and dances were authentic representations of Black culture, creating a situation where minstrelsy was seen as the only truly home-grown American art form.<sup>8</sup>

Minstrel performances combined elements of music, dance, and theater, with different elements more or less emphasized at different points in the medium’s history. Early on, song and dance made up the bulk of performances, but by the late 1840s and 1850s, sketches and “burlesques,” or blackface parodies of popular plays and operas, became more common.<sup>9</sup> It is difficult to overstate blackface minstrelsy’s popularity during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. In the words of William J. Mahar, “the history of blackface minstrelsy does not just ‘touch’ every form of popular *music*; it is linked to the very formation of antebellum popular *culture*.”<sup>10</sup> While blackface minstrelsy was associated with working-class white men, in particular, it enjoyed truly popular appeal across the class spectrum. Audiences ranged from sailors to presidents— in fact, minstrels performed at the White House during most presidencies between Jackson and Lincoln.<sup>11</sup>

Minstrelsy’s dominance of the popular culture landscape means that it should not be surprising that blackface was performed by sailors on early Naval forays into the Pacific. It does, however, raise the question of how the migration of blackface into these new imperial contexts changed the meanings attached to blackface performances by their performers and audiences.

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<sup>8</sup>Eric Lott, “‘The Seeming Counterfeit’: Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy,” *American Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1991): 223–54, 225.

<sup>9</sup> William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 25,

<sup>10</sup> Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, 1. Emphasis the author’s.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Lott and Greil Marcus, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Cary, UNITED STATES: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4. Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, x.

Blackface was an intensely plastic form, with the ability to change meanings according to context and to contain contradictory meanings at the same time. It was also an entertainment its performers believed was unique in its ability to represent the culture of the United States and, as comedy and satire, it contained troves of cultural assumptions, primarily about race.<sup>12</sup> For these reasons, examining the blackface performances that took place on early Pacific voyages can help us understand nineteenth-century approaches to the region.

Blackface minstrel performances functioned within a web of performatively brutal acts of violence, military pomp, and diplomatic ceremony—all of which functioned as examples of the theatricality of early American imperial ambition in the Pacific and East Asia. As the Navy stretched into the Pacific and East Asia for supposedly objective purposes of collecting scientific knowledge and establishing trade relations, it outwardly rejected the European-style imperialism of land claims and colonies. Yet such acts of dramatic performance on the world stage revealed imperial ambitions and the presence of minstrelsy structured encounters with reference to the hierarchies of U.S. racial politics. As the theater—and theatricality—of American empire in the Pacific developed over the mid-nineteenth century, these changes were reflected by differences in the expressions of minstrelsy between the United States Exploring Expedition (U.S. Ex. Ex.) and the Perry Expedition. The U.S. Ex. Ex. performances were not part of any cohesive strategy, but a single element of many, often contradictory, performances of American presence and power. Blackface minstrelsy was initiated by everyday sailors for entertainment value and as an extension or presentation of American culture; minstrelsy functioned more similarly to how it did at home in the U.S. than it would on the voyage to Japan. Perry, on the other hand,

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, The William E. Massey, Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization ; 1986. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), 13.

incorporated blackface minstrelsy as part of a strategy of pageantry which specifically deployed representations of blackness as American diplomatic currency. Blackness was performed, at different moments, to impress audiences of Japanese diplomats with performances of American military power and to help create a bond between the two governments. Throughout these voyages, minstrelsy served different purposes in different contexts, but always with the underlying function of performing American racial attitudes for their audiences.

## Chapter 1. The United States Exploring Expedition

In early 1828, prominent newspaper editor and explorer Jeremiah N. Reynolds began to lobby Congress to fund a voyage of polar exploration in the Southern Hemisphere. He hoped to expand the fur trade as well as discover new islands and create better maps of already known lands to aid American whalers.<sup>13</sup> By May of that year, the expedition's goals were expanded to include exploration of Polynesia and the entire South Pacific. While the House authorized the President to commission a naval vessel for the purpose, the proposal was held up by the Senate, whose members were hesitant to fund such a massive undertaking.<sup>14</sup> While the bill itself stalled, preparations for a major voyage of scientific discovery went ahead. Charles Wilkes—a young naval lieutenant with scientific training and surveying experience, initially appointed as the expedition's astronomer—traveled to Europe to buy the latest astronomical and mathematical instruments.<sup>15</sup> As Congress members gained an appreciation of the expedition's potential benefits to the whaling industry the legislation gained momentum, with authorization coming in late

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<sup>13</sup> J.N. (Jeremiah N.) Reynolds and U.S. Congress. House, "Explore the Southern Polar Regions. Letter from J.N. Reynolds to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, upon the Subject of an Antarctic Expedition, Accompanied with Petitions from Inhabitants of Several States, Praying the Aid of Government in Carrying the Same into Effect. January 22, 1828. Read, and Referred to the Committee on Naval Affairs.," no. Serial Set Vol. No. 171, Session Vol. No.3. 20th Congress, 1st Session. H.Doc. 88 (January 22, 1828), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Young Hayne 1791-1839, Jacksonian (SC) and U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Naval Affairs (1816-1946), "In Senate of the United States, February 23, 1829. Mr. Hayne, from the Committee on Naval Affairs, and in Behalf of a Majority of the Committee, Made the Following Report. The Committee on Naval Affairs, to Whom Was Referred a Bill from the House of Representatives, 'To Provide for an Exploring Expedition to the Pacific Ocean and South Seas,' and Also the Message of the President, on the Same Subject, Have Had the Same under Consideration, and Beg Leave to Report...," no. Serial Set Vol. No. 182, Session Vol. No.2. 20th Congress, 2nd Session. S.Doc. 94 (February 23, 1829).

<sup>15</sup> White and U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Naval Affairs (1822-1946), "Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, Jr. March 17, 1830." William Ragan Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842* (University of California Press, 1975), 19-20.

1836.<sup>16</sup> It took another two years to build the ships and assemble supplies, and the United States Exploring Expedition departed in 1838 with Lt. Charles Wilkes promoted to the role of commander. A statement to Congress by President Andrew Jackson in 1837 laid out the finalized official goals of the expedition as the following: “to explore the seas of the southern hemisphere, more particularly in the high latitudes, and in regions as near to the pole as may be approached without danger; to make, in regions thus to be explored all practicable surveys and observations, with accurate descriptions of the same, connected with geography or hydrography, by which the interests of commerce or navigation may be promoted; and to make all such researches as the opportunity of the expedition will afford, to advance all branches of science which have attracted the attention of the Governments of Europe in fitting out vessels for survey and discovery.”<sup>17</sup>

Wilkes initially agreed to be the expedition’s astronomer on the condition that he would have full control of his own ship, in order to conduct his scientific work more freely, so was promised the command of the voyage’s second ship.<sup>18</sup> When the expedition’s first commander, Thomas ap Catesby Jones, resigned due to poor health and frustration at the years-long delay in 1837, Wilkes took command of the entire expedition.<sup>19</sup> The son of a wealthy New York City family, Charles Wilkes was not a particularly experienced sailor but stood out for his dogged ambition and scientific background.

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<sup>16</sup> Pearce and U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Commerce (1819-1892), “Explore Pacific Ocean, &c. (To Accompany Bill H.R. No. 719.) February 7, 1835.”

<sup>17</sup> Jackson et al., “Exploring Expedition. Message from the President of the United States, Transmitting the Information Required by a Resolution of the House of Representatives of the 3d Instant, in Relation to the Progress Which Has Been Made with Regard to the Exploring Expedition, Authorized at the Last Session of Congress. February 8, 1837. Committed to a Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union.”

<sup>18</sup> Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842*, 56.

The Exploring Expedition was a naval voyage in that it used Navy ships and drew the majority of its officers and crew from the Navy, even though the Expedition's goals were not primarily military. The notable exception to this rule were the members of the scientific corps—composed of three naturalists, two botanists, a mineralogist and geologist, a conchologist, or scientist who studied mollusk shells, and a philologist, as well as an artist and an engraver. Civilians were hired for these positions because naval officers with any advanced scientific training were rare at the time.<sup>20</sup> While the ships were armed, the goals of the expedition were exploratory, not military. Wilkes' orders specifically instructed him to limit the use of violence unless absolutely necessary, in order to promote goodwill towards Americans.

After finally departing from Hampton Roads, Virginia, the expedition's seven ships spent the next four years on a circumnavigation of the globe which focused on the South Pacific. Sometimes the ships sailed together, but often some broke off from the group to explore different routes. The squadron's first stop was Madeira, off the North African Coast, then Rio De Janeiro. While the rest of the ships rounded Tierra Del Fuego, the *Flying Fish* and the *Seagull* continued south, attempting to sail further into Antarctic waters than Captain Cook had fifty years before, but missing the record by a single degree of latitude.<sup>21</sup> The squadron then regrouped in Valparaiso, Chile before setting off into the expanse of the Pacific.

The Expedition's first Pacific stop was Tahiti, a society largely under the control of British Congregationalist missionaries from the London Missionary Society. From there, the ships proceeded to Samoa, New Zealand, and Australia, before once again attempting to approach Antarctica. In January 1840, crewmembers of several of the ships spotted land. Wilkes

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<sup>20</sup> Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842*, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842*, 96.

later claimed that he had spotted the continent on January 19th, making him the first of the Expedition to see it. Wilkes' claim went unrecorded in any logbook and members of his crew on the *Vincennes* testified that they had not seen land that day.<sup>22</sup> The lie ultimately formed the basis of the first of several court-martial charges that Wilkes faced on his return to the United States. Sailing north from Antarctica, the expedition's ships proceeded to Tonga and then to Fiji for the entire summer of 1840. Although Wilkes hoped the surveying work carried out in Fiji would be a highlight of the voyage, it was ultimately overshadowed by the breakdown of relations between Wilkes and his crew, as well as outbreaks of violence, including Wilkes' decision to burn villages on the island of Malolo in revenge for the deaths of two midshipmen in a skirmish-- acts that also received court-martial charges. From Fiji, the squadron proceeded to Hawai'i, where it stayed based for the winter of 1840-1841 while some of the ships made shorter to surveying voyages to various parts of Polynesia. In the Spring, the *Porpoise* and Wilkes' flagship the *Vincennes* left to survey British Columbia while the *Flying Fish* and *Peacock* surveyed a series of Polynesian islands and atolls before the squadron reunited at the Columbia River. After surveying the Pacific Northwest, the Expedition crossed the Pacific a final time and returned to the United States via the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, arriving in New York in July 1842.

As the Expedition ended, many of its officers resented that they had spent the last four years as the subordinates of a commander who they officially out-ranked, especially one who was so strict and often draconian in his punishments. Many also questioned the legality of the brutal retaliation Wilkes had ordered at Fiji. For these reasons, the expedition's surgeon, Charles Guillou, and Robert F. Pinkney, a lieutenant brought seven court-martial charges— "Oppression,

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<sup>22</sup> Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842*, 286.

Cruelty, Disobedience of Orders, Illegal Punishments, violation of terms of enlistment, Scandalous Conduct Tending to the Destruction of Good Morals, and the Same Unbecoming of an Officer”—against Wilkes in 1843.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, Wilkes was only found guilty of one offense, seventeen instances of illegal punishment of sailors, for which he received only a public reprimand from the Secretary of the Navy as punishment.

Publishing the Expedition’s findings was the final step in completing the project’s work. In 1844, Wilkes published the five-volume *Narrative of the United States exploring expedition, during 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842*. Practically, the *Narrative* functioned as a report to Congress on the expedition’s activities and findings, but the manner of its publication also helped it function as a diplomatic and public relations tool. The publication of the *Narrative* was crucial to fulfilling the goal of putting the United States on par with the European imperial powers in terms of scientific achievement by “self-consciously acting the part of the Great Powers in producing knowledge about the non-western world.”<sup>24</sup> The book’s qualities as an object also helped it fill its diplomatic role. Only one-hundred copies of the richly bound and illustrated of the first edition were printed; in addition to the copies intended for the Library of Congress and the two distributed to each state in the Union, a congressional bill stipulated that U.S. diplomats should also present copies to the governments of Great Britain, France, and Russia.<sup>25</sup> In the years immediately after the *Narrative*’s publication, several trade editions of the work appeared and sold well, evidence of the widespread public interest in the U.S. Ex. Ex.’s findings.<sup>26</sup> The work was likely written with this second, popular audience in mind, as Wilkes

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<sup>23</sup> Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842*, 285.

<sup>24</sup> Verney, “Selling Empire: Publishing Naval Imperialism in the Early American Republic, 1842-1860,” 3-4.

<sup>25</sup> Verney, “Selling Empire: Publishing Naval Imperialism in the Early American Republic, 1842-1860,” 8.

<sup>26</sup> Verney, “Selling Empire: Publishing Naval Imperialism in the Early American Republic, 1842-1860,” 2-4.

consulted with novelist James Fenimore Cooper in preparing the work. Paul Lyons points to the 1840s and 50s as a moment of collapsing distinctions between fiction and non-fiction in American literature, “with novelists openly appropriating names, factual details, and scenes from non-fiction narrative,” and non-fiction taking on many of the conventions of adventure tales.<sup>27</sup> The *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition’s* genre conventions and readership placed it in a tradition of nautical literature, to be circulated and read for pleasure in ways similar to fiction. The widespread popularity of the *Narrative* gave Wilkes a chance to use the text to rehabilitate his image.<sup>28</sup> Wilkes wrote the main body of the narrative during 1843, as his Court Martial trials were ongoing, and the sections that deal with Fiji, especially, respond directly to the charges with attempts to justify his actions.

Accounts of the United States Exploring Expedition’s time in Tahiti by Wilkes, in the *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, and by the diarist William Reynolds, a midshipman on the Expedition, point to key differences in opinion—between Congregationalist missionaries from the London Missionary Society and their American associates, Wilkes, and everyday sailors like Reynolds—regarding the future form of the American presence in the Pacific. Educational policy, as well as leisure, music, and performance, emerged as major points of contention between Wilkes and the missionaries. In this context, the performance of a play with minstrel interludes by a group of sailors emerged as a locus of conflict. In order to convert more people, the missionaries were willing to ally themselves with local indigenous rulers, who they aided in consolidating power, and to limit the scope of their cultural influence, while Wilkes

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<sup>27</sup> Lyons, “American Pacificism,” 49.

<sup>28</sup> Verney, “Selling Empire: Publishing Naval Imperialism in the Early American Republic, 1842-1860,” 9.

expressed his much more ambitious desires for a future in which Americans and American culture would play a key in Tahiti's agriculture and commercial development.

Tahiti captured the imaginations of early European sailors in the Pacific, and their accounts provided Wilkes and the crew of the U.S. Ex. Ex. with a sizeable body of information that informed their opinions about the island even before they arrived. Samuel Wallis of Britain and Louis de Bougainville of France were two of the first Europeans to visit Tahiti, on their circumnavigations of the globe in 1767 and 1768, respectively. Members of Bougainville's voyage, in particular, produced written descriptions of the island that circulated widely, while James Cook and William Bligh also wrote of their visits to the island in subsequent decades. With its lushly forested volcanic mountains, Tahiti's natural beauty stood out, even among other Polynesian Islands.<sup>29</sup> The fact that many early European sailors approached Tahiti from the east, where the last land they had seen was the arid western coast of South America several months before, likely compounded their sense that the landscape itself was particularly sensual and inviting. The first European accounts of Tahitian people focus heavily on their beauty and sexuality as well. Local custom dictated partial nudity in the presence of Gods and people of high rank, so strangers were often met with a ceremony that involved young women slowly unwrapping their clothing to reveal their naked bodies as a sign of respect, a practice early European sailors interpreted as sexual advances.<sup>30</sup> This perception of the sexual availability of Tahitian women combined with the natural beauty of the island led Bougainville to call Tahiti *Nouvelle Cythère*, after the island where the goddess Aphrodite was born in Greek mythology. A

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<sup>29</sup>Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition. During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842* (Philadelphia, 1849), <http://archive.org/details/narrativeofunit02wilk> 2:3.

<sup>30</sup> Anne Salmond, *Aphrodite's Island: The European Discovery of Tahiti*, Reprint edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 19.

description written by Bougainville's naturalist described the Tahitians as worshipping "no other Gods than Love. Every day is dedicated to it, the entire island is its temple, every woman is its altar, every man its priest" and the women of Tahiti as "rivals of Georgian women in beauty, and the sisters of the unclothed graces."<sup>31</sup>

Another set of rumors, however, competed with the descriptions of Tahiti as a welcoming, sensual paradise. Midshipman William Reynolds wrote in his diary of his relief at finding out that the "Arrey", or *Areoi*, a secret society said to engage in infanticide and ritual sacrifice, had been abolished for many years by the time of his arrival at Tahiti, indicating that the U.S. Exploring Expedition members were also aware of descriptions of mysterious violence taking place in Tahiti.<sup>32</sup> Commenting on the great progress he perceived as having taken place in the decades since the first European contact, Wilkes wrote, "in former times, we read of perpetual intestine broils."<sup>33</sup>

Primed by previous navigators' descriptions to expect either paradise or grave danger, Wilkes at first found Tahiti somewhat anticlimactic.<sup>34</sup> However, he was generally impressed by what he observed of the Tahitian people. The Americans saw the Tahitians as peaceful and hospitable, though commented that ease of island life had made them lazy.<sup>35</sup> Wilkes characterized the Tahitians as one of the more rational of the Polynesian peoples, praising them for their curiosity and good humor.<sup>36</sup> Despite earlier writers' preoccupation with Tahitian sexuality, Wilkes hardly comments on the issue of sex, except to condemn other American crews

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<sup>31</sup> Salmond, *Aphrodite's Island*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> William Reynolds, Nathaniel Philbrick, and Thomas Philbrick, *The Private Journal of William Reynolds: United States Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2004), 95.

<sup>33</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2:16.

<sup>34</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2:3

<sup>35</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2: 8, 16 and Reynolds 93

<sup>36</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2:8-9

for “making brothels of their ships.”<sup>37</sup> He seems to have perceived Tahitian “lasciviousness” as a relic of a past time, shamefully still encouraged by some of the foreigners. Reynolds, however, wrote about what he perceived as an unacceptable level of sexual liberality while also making much of the beauty of local women, who he described as “the fawns of Otaheite [Tahiti]—the Sylphs of the forest, the wood nymphs.”<sup>38</sup> Both writers worried that for all the “improvements” they had brought, Europeans were also a dangerously corrupting influence on the supposedly naive and innocent Tahitians. While Wilkes was more troubled by prostitution and alcohol consumption, Reynolds complained of the new influence of money and materialism. Commenting on the trend among Tahitian women of wearing chains around their waists which carried the large decorative keys to chests that held their best Sunday clothing, Reynolds wrote, “poor creatures, they are so proud that they have any things to lock up. There was a day among them when bars & bolts were not known.”<sup>39</sup>

When the ships of the Exploring Expedition arrived in Tahiti in 1839, they encountered not only the indigenous residents of Tahiti but the island’s significant white population as well. The French had a loose claim to the island, but except for the ships that arrived to collect taxes, their presence in everyday life was minimal. British Congregationalist missionaries were, however, a dominant force in Tahiti’s political and cultural life. The first members of the South Seas Mission of the London Missionary Society (LMS) arrived in Tahiti in 1797. One of several missionary projects founded in Great Britain during the 1790s, the London Missionary Society was a non-denominational but Congregationalist-affiliated organization with missions in Tahiti,

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<sup>37</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2: 54

<sup>38</sup> Reynolds, Philbrick, and Philbrick, *The Private Journal of William Reynolds*, 97.

<sup>39</sup> Reynolds, Philbrick, and Philbrick, *The Private Journal of William Reynolds*, 94.

Tonga, and the Marquesa Islands as well as in Southern Africa.<sup>40</sup> The LMS had strong ties to Dissenting politics, meaning they opposed the Church of England and any state interference in religious life. Many missionary societies were founded by evangelical dissenting religious organizations, who took advantage of the greater operational freedom afforded in the colonies. The emphasis on the independence of the church from the state also meant that LMS missionaries had little desire to act as representatives of the British government, so establishing political control over the territories where they functioned was never a priority.<sup>41</sup>

By the 1830s, the Majority of Tahitians were at least nominally Christian; Wilkes observed that Tahitians strictly observed the Sabbath and that church-going rates were higher than anywhere else the Expedition visited.<sup>42</sup> Through the influence of missionary schools, Tahiti had a written language and high literacy rates for both children and adults.

Although Wilkes, especially, praised the missionaries for their success in establishing churches and encouraging church attendance, both he and Reynolds openly doubted the sincerity of the Tahitians' faith. "While there is no longer any worshipping of the wooden Gods," commented Reynolds, "the only worship which has succeeded this consists in a fear of the missionaries...It is idle to say that there exists on any one of the islands a dozen Natives, who may be called intelligent, devout & sincere Christians."<sup>43</sup> Wilkes, meanwhile, complained that "sincere piety was rarely to be found among the Natives," even though "the external signs of moral and religious improvement are conspicuous."<sup>44</sup> While major elements of this reflect

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<sup>40</sup> Emily J. Manktelow, *Missionary Families: Race, Gender and Generation on the Spiritual Frontier*, 1 edition (Manchester ; New York: Manchester University Press, 2013), xvii.

<sup>41</sup> Michael A. Rutz, "The Problems of Church and State: Dissenting Politics and the London Missionary Society in 1830s Britain," *Journal of Church and State* 48, no. 2 (2006): 379–98, 392.

<sup>42</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2:12

<sup>43</sup> Reynolds, Philbrick, and Philbrick, *The Private Journal of William Reynolds*, 94.

<sup>44</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2:13

imperialist and racist views of the Tahitians' lack of rationality or intelligence, Reynolds' comment about "fear of the missionaries" hinted at the crux of the issue.

In the decades prior to the Expedition's arrival in Tahiti, indigenous Tahitian rulers used Christianity as a justification for unprecedentedly aggressive territorial expansion, and Christian missionaries supported and helped codify these expansions and centralizations of elite power. Traditionally, Polynesian chiefs had been limited by an extensive system of checks on their power. The system of *tapu* (taboo) heavily circumscribed their movements and activities, restrictions on the amount of territory that could be passed on to an heir prevented the formation of a hereditary monarchy, and custom made it acceptable for common people to kill or exile an oppressive leader.<sup>45</sup> This changed with the arrival of LMS missionaries, however. Leaders such as Pomare II, who ruled as the second king of Tahiti from 1791 to 1821, converted to Christianity and used evangelization efforts as a convenient front for territorial expansion, what Gunson terms "Polynesian imperialism," while the new theology let him disregard the *tapus*.<sup>46</sup> No doubt some conversions were driven by genuine belief, but the political aspect remained a crucial factor. The institution of Tahitian kingship as it existed in the early nineteenth century developed in the last decades of the eighteenth century, partially in response to changes brought by European contact. Describing the regalia of Pomare II on his ascension to chiefdom Greg Denning writes, "He was *arii nui*, 'king,' because what he wore, his *maro ura* [feather cloak], took him back to 'Oro and the beginning of the title, but what he wore as well, the red bunting, took him back to the beginning of a new time...the coming of the Stranger" this new element of royal clothing denoted a fundamental change and expansion in the position for a new age— "a

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<sup>45</sup>Niel Gunson, "Pomare II of Tahiti and Polynesian Imperialism," *The Journal of Pacific History* 4 (1969), 65, 73.

<sup>46</sup> Gunson, "Pomare II of Tahiti and Polynesian Imperialism," 67.

status his father never had and never could reach.”<sup>47</sup> The missionaries were quick to seize on and further these political changes, realizing that indigenous leaders with more consolidated power made more effective allies.

Between 1819 and 1823, Pomare II established a new law code or constitution, based on the English constitution and supported by the missionaries. The new laws further strengthened the monarchy by officially making the role hereditary and diminishing the autonomy of regional high chiefs, who were incorporated into the King’s government as governors and judges to enforce the new body of laws, many of which were concerned with enforcing proper Christian behavior.<sup>48</sup> The institution of cash fines for common but illegal behavior, such as failing to attend church or drinking alcohol, meant that for the first time, everyday Tahitians had a reason to use money, necessitating the transition from an economy based on subsistence agriculture and barter to one in which peasants sold their labor to landowners who paid wages.

In the *Narrative*, Wilkes praised much of the missionaries’ work in general terms, giving them credit for the remarkably quick spread of Protestant Christianity and for the abolition of practices such as human sacrifice and cannibalism, which may or may not have been practiced in the first place. However, a closer reading, focusing on Wilkes’ critiques of the missionaries’ strategy in Tahiti, reveals key differences over what form the American presence in the Pacific would ultimately take. Describing a class in session at one of the missionary schools, Wilkes remarked that, “the assemblage, except from the colour of their skins, could have been, with difficulty, distinguished from a Sunday school in the United States. The exercises were opened with prayer. The children then sang the A B C song, and went through the a-b ab.” Wilkes had

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<sup>47</sup> Greg Dening et al., “Possessing Tahiti,” in *Remembrance of Pacific Pasts*, ed. Robert Borofsky, An Invitation to Remake History (University of Hawai’i Press, 2000), 115.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

little doubt that the school could teach the basic literacy skills needed to read the bible, but he went on to sharply criticize the missionaries for failing to teach natural science and encourage critical thinking: “To test the character of the instruction given in this school, I felt desirous of putting some questions on subjects foreign to the ordinary routine, and particularly in relation to natural phenomena. For this purpose I called the attention of the scholars to the eclipse of the sun which had happened a few days before. This was received with a variety of expression of countenance by different scholars, but among them I could only remark stupid wonder, indifference, or listlessness, which showed too clearly that no attempt had been made to awaken their attention to such subjects.”<sup>49</sup> Why was it important to Wilkes that the Tahitian students know this?

Although the less-than-tactful terms he used to describe the students’ responses indicate that he probably attributed the problem partly to the students’ intellectual capabilities, his phrasing of the questions as meant to “test the character of the instruction” indicates that Wilkes believed the Tahitian students were indeed capable of critical thought and more advanced learning and that the failure was their teachers’. Here, Wilkes’ assessment of the Tahitians’ abilities and the proper way to teach them differed from the missionaries, in a way which sheds light on the possible differences in scope of their end goals. Later in the chapter, Wilkes complains that the missionaries had made no attempt “to introduce the mechanic arts, or improvements in agriculture, yet it cannot be doubted that... even the simplest of these would have materially aided the progress of civilization.”<sup>50</sup> Echoing his earlier support for science and agricultural education, Wilkes showed a clear interest in efforts— even modest ones— to

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<sup>49</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2:9.

<sup>50</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2:15.

refashion Tahitian society, with the United States leading the charge. Somewhat surprisingly, Wilkes criticized the missionaries' practice of schooling their children separately from Tahitian children, saying that, "the habit [the white children] will acquire of looking upon the natives as inferiors," could not be "having a good effect on their minds if they are destined to spend their lives among the latter."<sup>51</sup> This seems somewhat contradictory, given the fact that Wilkes did seem to "look upon the natives as inferiors," yet nonetheless the Captain's interest in how education would shape future interactions between settlers and Tahitians demonstrates an interest in Tahiti beyond the Expedition's brief stay there. Taken together, these objections to the missionary strategy hinted that Wilkes may have imagined a future for Tahiti in which the United States would play an aggressive role, actively engaged in efforts to further develop agriculture and industry while dominating the cultural landscape.

In addition to education, performance and leisure culture constituted another area where Expedition members' criticisms of the missionaries crystalized. The missionaries had banned all secular music on the island, as well as dance and theatrical performances of any kind.<sup>52</sup> Both Wilkes and Reynolds chafed at these laws for impeding their ability to observe Tahitian culture— both for ethnographic purposes and to satisfy their own curiosity— and they record separate instances of sailors convincing local young women to flout the law and perform for them. In Wilkes' story, several officers convince women to perform a traditional Tahitian dance, while Reynolds comments that it was common for sailors to entertain themselves by convincing girls to sing them the sailor songs they had learned from previous visitors to the island.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2:57.

<sup>52</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2:25.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* Reynolds, eds. Philbrick, and Philbrick, *The Private Journal of William Reynolds*, 97.

Wilkes argued that too narrow a focus on teaching scripture had led to a failure to replace indigenous Tahitian culture, a necessary step if his vision of a Tahiti more fully integrated into American empire was to come to fruition. He wrote that “[the missionaries] would have succeeded sooner in eradicating the practice of reciting these legends, had they provided a substitute in works of fiction, inculcating moral and religious lessons, or teaching useful knowledge.”<sup>54</sup> Missionaries might have succeeded in developing a society where most people went through the motions of proper Protestant belief, but by banning nearly all leisure activities, they left open a cultural vacuum where Tahitian culture could survive relatively unchallenged, as long as it was practiced out of sight of the missionaries. Mythology and indigenous knowledge forms were still prevalent where Wilkes envisioned American instructive fiction, modern western science, and the trades could take their place. Consistent with the ambitious scale of the Exploring Expedition and Wilkes’ personal arrogance, Wilkes’ criticisms of the missionary leadership shed light on on a much more ambitious desire for political, culture, and economic change than the colonial project the missionaries had in mind, which was fairly contained to the church and the necessary moral and literacy education to produce passably good Christians. Not satisfied with the addition of Christian practices to Tahitian life, Wilkes was clear that he believed in the need to wipe out indigenous practices and replace them with something entirely new.

For most of the Expedition’s sailors, the time in Tahiti was spent recovering from the long trans-Pacific leg of the journey and trading for fresh food and water, as well as exploring the islands and making some scientific observations. Mostly though, everyday sailors were at

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<sup>54</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2:15.

leisure, even more so when, during the first week of October, the *Flying-Fish*, one of the Expedition's seven ships, sustained damage and both it and the *Peacock* were stuck at anchor while the necessary repairs were carried out. With extra time on their hands, a group of sailors requested permission to put on a play "for the amusements of the natives and themselves."<sup>55</sup> The common sailors who initiated and performed the play were its driving force, but the project was sanctioned by both the officers of the *Flying-Fish* and *Peacock* as well as the local indigenous Tahitian authorities, who provided a council-house for the rehearsals and final performance. The sailors performed the play, Friedrich Schiller's *The Robbers*, with comic musical interludes in blackface, including a rendition of "Jim Crow," between the acts. Schiller's play was written in 1782 and first translated and performed in English in 1792. At least four new translations appeared before 1800, indicating the play's popularity, which continued into the new century.<sup>56</sup> It tells the story of a young aristocrat who shuns upper-class society and finds freedom and emotional connection by joining a band of brigands after his brother tricks him out of his inheritance and thematically, is concerned with the problem of how to reconcile personal liberty and civil society.<sup>57</sup> The play had already been rehearsed at sea, indicating that theater, potentially including minstrelsy, was a popular form of entertainment aboard ship and performed more often than it is mentioned in the *Narrative*. The only description of the Tahitian audience's reaction to the performance comes from Wilkes, and it is unclear whether or not he even witnessed the performance firsthand. Wilkes wrote that expecting an acrobatic show, of the kind they had

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<sup>55</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2: 55.

<sup>56</sup> L. A. Willoughby, "English Translations and Adaptations of Schiller's 'Robbers,'" *The Modern Language Review* 16, no. 3/4 (1921): 297–315, 306.

<sup>57</sup> Paul E. Kerry, "Schiller's Political Ideas: Who Cares?," in *Who Is This Schiller Now?*, ed. Jeffrey L. High, Nicholas Martin, and Norbert Oellers, vol. 99, *Essays on His Reception and Significance* (Boydell and Brewer, 2011), 438–50, 444.

previously seen aboard French ships, the Tahitians were initially disappointed by the play, but came around by the end, especially to the “Jim Crow” performance.<sup>58</sup>

The theatrical performance that U.S. Ex. Ex. sailors mounted in Tahiti took place in the midst of contention over the place and propriety of popular music and theater between the local missionary authorities and Expedition members, especially Wilkes. However, it should not be read as part of the effort that Wilkes alludes to ultimately replace Indigenous art with American music and literature. Although sanctioned by the Expedition’s officers, the play was entirely the sailors’ work and idea, and because of this may represent a spot where their intentions for the performance and ideas about how to interact differed from Wilkes’, representing a third set of ideas about how to represent American culture in the Pacific. By performing on shore, in a Tahitian building, and specifically requesting that the performance be for both Tahitian and American audiences, the performers clearly hoped the Tahitians would take something away from the performance, but what this was is unclear. Second, a play highly critical of all kinds of established order and a satirical, trickster-driven minstrel form like “Jim Crow” songs hardly meet Wilkes’ criteria of clearly “inculcating moral or religious lessons”<sup>59</sup>

Wilkes’ writing about the Expedition’s time in Tahiti hints at the beginnings of a much more ambitious vision for the role of Americans and American culture in Polynesia than the missionaries’. Although the spread of Christianity was a massive upheaval, the missionaries supported a changed but intact indigenous political hierarchy and, aside from cultural practices which they saw as specifically incompatible with Christianity, did not actively seek to replace elements of Tahitian culture with Anglo-American ones. Wilkes’ criticisms of this strategy

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<sup>58</sup>Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2:55.

<sup>59</sup>Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 2:15.

indicate that he imagined a longer-term project of advancement in which indigenous Tahitians were active participants, though stripped of nearly all elements of their traditional culture. Of course, these were fairly easy claims for Wilkes to make, as he had no political power or actual responsibility for governance in Tahiti. Rather than an exact plan, therefore, Wilkes' ideas should be interpreted as one set of ideas among several about what American influence, and indeed imperialism, in the Pacific might look like.

## Chapter 2. Violence and Performance



Figure 1. *Map of the Fiji Islands*, Museums Victoria, Melbourne, <https://museumsvictoria.com.au/fiji/map.aspx>.

On May 4th, 1840, the Exploring Expedition — including Wilkes' flagship the *Vincennes*, along with the *Peacock*, and the *Flying Fish* — set sail from Tonga to Fiji, the largest island group in the South Pacific. At the time, Fiji was largely unmapped by Euro-Americans and the coral reefs and sandbars surrounding the islands presented major hazards to ships hoping to engage in the lucrative sandalwood and beche-de-mer sea cucumber trade with the Chinese. The work was so important to Wilkes that later, even as the sailors chafed at their conditions and

tensions flared between the Americans and native Fijians, he wrote, “I deemed this [surveying work] to be among the most important of the objects of the Expedition; and considering that the seas around these islands abound in dangers whose position had up to this time been entirely unknown, I resolved not only to complete the surveys, but not to leave the group until I had entirely satisfied myself of the accuracy of the work.”<sup>60</sup>

In early June, the *Peacock*, commanded by Captain William Hudson, was docked off the coast of Fiji’s Rewa province. Several dozen inhabitants of Rewa, including the King and his family, were on board, being held hostage while parties searched for the King’s brother, Ro Veidovi, who stood accused of killing British sailors from a separate voyage six years earlier. As night fell and Captain Hudson entertained the royal family in his cabin with “super, tea, and cigars”, the rest of the Fijians performed a dance on the deck of the *Peacock*. The American sailors replied with an improvised program of minstrel song and dance, which culminated with the ship’s tailor on the back of a donkey played by two other crew members, singing and dancing in blackface as “Juba,” a popular black dancer of the time and the character “Jim Crow.”<sup>61</sup> In this scene, two sets of common people, sailors and Fijian *kai-sis*, performed for each other. Americans interpreted the Fijian performance as a “native dance” and in a sense, they responded with a native dance of their own, as minstrelsy was at this time widely acknowledged as the only art form truly native to the United States. Ro Veidovi’s capture would eventually lead to an attempt to bring him back to the United States as an example of the “savage” people Americans had met and bested abroad. Also during the summer of 1840, as Wilkes burned villages to

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<sup>60</sup> Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition. During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842* (Philadelphia, 1849), 3:239.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring expedition. During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842. By Charles Wilkes... In Five Volumes, with Thirteen Maps...* (Philadelphia, 1849), 3:130.

avenge the killings of two sailors, the violence was calculated to be communicative. Although one instance was meant to ease tensions and one to terrorize, both minstrel performance and violence are examples of the theatricality of the imperial project

This section will investigate how Wilkes explained and justified within the *Narrative* the Expedition's use of exceptional violence in Fiji as a performance of the United States' ambition to establish imperial authority in the Pacific and how minstrel performance functioned both in tandem with and independently from the imperial theater projected by Wilkes. While the summer of 1840 was conflict-filled for the Expedition, two main events stand out. The first is the capture of Ro Veidovi, the prince who years earlier led an attack on a British trading vessel, while the second is the burning of two villages on the island of Malolo. The United States Exploring Expedition spent the summer months of 1840 in Fiji, and this time represents a key turning point for the voyage. Firstly, from the perspective of the voyage's organizers, the surveying work accomplished in Fiji was to be one of the major accomplishments of the expedition. Because of the amount of scientific work to be done, all of the Expedition's vessels were sent to Fiji and they spent more time there than almost anywhere else on the Expedition. The entire third volume of the five-volume *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition* is devoted to this period. Secondly, the relatively long period spent in Fiji allowed the Americans time to be drawn into a political world that was complex and conflict-ridden even before the addition of European and American visitors. Wilkes was court-martialed after returning to the United States, largely for events that took place while in Fiji. Crewmembers filed official complaints against Wilkes for cruel punishment, "conduct unbecoming," and abuse of his sailors and officers—concerns which festered during the weeks when crews were ordered out in the small boats to survey different

parts of the island group, doing grueling work and living in cramped conditions while exposed to potential Fijian attacks. Even more gravely, Wilkes was charged with murder after he burned two villages on the Fijian island of Malolo in revenge for the death of two sailors in a skirmish. The centrality of the Expedition's time in Fiji to the court-martial trial gives this section of the *Narrative*, a work which was compiled as the court-martial proceedings were taking place, an especially polemical cast, as Wilkes attempted to account for his actions in hindsight and shifted the blame to others in order to recover his reputation.

Unbeknownst to Wilkes and his crew, or even to the few white castaways, deserters, and missionaries who had arrived in the Islands since 1800, at the time of the Expedition's arrival, Fiji was in the midst of a long period of political upheaval and military conflict. Oral histories and archaeological evidence suggest that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Viti Levu, the largest island in the Fiji Group, was in a state of "constant upheaval," as various chiefs and groups battled over land claims.<sup>62</sup> While the conflict's exact origins are unclear, Tongan invasions may have been a factor. As the wars went on and villages were destroyed, the new refugee populations exacerbated the instability.<sup>63</sup> Around 1800, smaller villages and groups began to consolidate their power through alliances and military conquest, leading to the emergence of federations or *vanua*, led by powerful chiefs, and a few even larger confederations or *matanitu*, sometimes ruled by hereditary kings.<sup>64</sup> <sup>65</sup> According to Michael C. Howard, the first half of the 19th century in Fiji was largely characterized by "rivalries between competing chiefs and of increasing chiefly dominance over commoners," as "respect for the rights of commoners

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<sup>62</sup> Tim Bayliss-Smith et al., *Islands, Islanders and the World: The Colonial and Post-Colonial Experience of Eastern Fiji* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 20.

<sup>63</sup> Michael C. Howard, *Fiji: Race and Politics in an Island State* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1991), 18.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Bayliss-Smith et al., *Islands, Islanders and the World*, 50.

gave way increasingly to harsh exploitation, including exacting more tribute and making greater demands for labour,” in order to meet the demands of war and of the European traders who began to arrive around 1800.<sup>66</sup>

Wilkes’ writing in the *Narrative* shows that he was keenly aware of the current conflict, but, ignorant of a time before the wars and without any inclination to find an explanation for why they began, he simply attributed the frequent violence to the uniquely warlike character of the Fijian people, commenting that “where there is so strong a disposition to attack their neighbors, plausible reasons for beginning hostilities are not difficult to find....The wars of the Feejeeans generally arise from some accidental affront or misunderstanding, of which the most powerful party takes advantage to extend his dominions or increase his wealth. This is sometimes accomplished by a mere threat, by which the weaker party is terrified into submission to the demand for property or territory”<sup>67</sup> Wilkes used this understanding of Fijian culture as inherently violent and Fijian war as essentially a meaningless power play with no significant human consequences but “misunderstanding”, to justify his extremely violent incursions into Fijian affairs.

Wilkes saw violence as simultaneously both fundamental to gaining any legitimacy in the eyes of the Fijians, perceiving them as mocking, “the lenity [sic] with which they had heretofore been treated both by the French and English men-of-war,” and as lacking long-lasting consequences, as when he commented that “three or four weeks of labour would, therefore, suffice to rebuild their houses, and restore them to the same state as before the burning,” to justify burning villages and crops in retribution for the death of two sailors.<sup>68</sup> Repeatedly, over

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<sup>66</sup> Howard, *Fiji*, 20.

<sup>67</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:78.

<sup>68</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:286 and 3:244

the course of the Exploring Expedition's summer in Fiji, Wilkes acted in ways that made it clear he thought of the Expedition as one of the "powerful parties," who could make and act on threats with minimal repercussions and whose use of violence could, therefore, be used to carry symbolic meaning, in spite of their relative unfamiliarity with the situation.

Soon after the fleet's arrival in Fiji, Wilkes, on *The Vincennes*, established a base at Levuka, a small, centrally-located settlement that, while it held no great importance in Fijian politics, was home to most of the white settlers and missionaries in the islands. Here, the Expedition established a sizeable scientific outpost with tents for the larger instruments and a garden for horticultural samples. Wilkes divided the crew and scientific corps and despatched them in pairs of smaller boats to survey different regions of the island group, work which occupied most of the summer.

As the summer of 1840 progressed, the Americans came into increasingly frequent violent conflict with the Fijians. A few weeks later, "determined to make an example of," a group of Fijians who took possession of a grounded boat and returned it with all the possessions that had been inside it gone, Wilkes ordered his men to burn their village.<sup>69</sup> Unlike in later incidents, however, he warned the Fijians to stay away at the time the attack would take place.<sup>70</sup> Explaining his motives he wrote that, "the infliction of this punishment I deemed necessary; it was efficiently and promptly done, and, without the sacrifice of any lives, taught these savages a salutary lesson. In the first cutter was private and public property to the value of over one thousand dollars, which was all lost. By reference to my instructions, it will be seen that cases of theft were expressly mentioned as occasions that might require punishment to be inflicted on the

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<sup>69</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:242.

<sup>70</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3: 243.

natives; yet this transaction formed the gist of one of the charges preferred against me by the administration, on my return to the United States.”<sup>71</sup> Even by the standards of the time, then, Wilkes’ actions during the second half of the Expedition’s time in Fiji were seen as unacceptably harsh—so much so that they this incident made up one of the several charges for which he was later court-martialed.

The burning of two villages and their crops on the island of Malolo was the most horrific moment of conflict between the Americans and Fijians, and ultimately led to another court-martial charge for Wilkes. In late July, a party surveying the small island of Malolo attempted to trade for some food to supplement their small ration of “wormy” ship’s bread. When the sailors reached the shore and found only two pigs waiting for them, rather than the agreed upon four, a small argument broke out. At the same time, the Fijian hostage they had taken on-board tried to escape the boat and swim toward the beach.<sup>72</sup> At this point, somebody fired a musket, initiating a skirmish in which two sailors, Lieutenant Joseph A. Underwood and Wilkes’ nephew, Midshipman Wilkes Henry, died.<sup>73</sup>

Wilkes immediately planned to carry out a revenge mission against the towns of Sualib and Arro for their inhabitants’ alleged participation in the attack.<sup>74</sup> Conscious that readers familiar with the court-martial charges against him might view his actions in Fiji with skepticism, Wilkes was careful to portray his desire for revenge as well-planned in order to avoid a cycle of violence. and as functioning as part of a larger project of moral education that would benefit the Fijians in the long-term:

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<sup>71</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:244.

<sup>72</sup> William Ragan Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842* (University of California Press, 1975) 197.

<sup>73</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:265.

<sup>74</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:273.

“The blood of the slain imperatively called for retribution, and the honour of our flag demanded that the outrage upon it should not remain unpunished. On the other hand, it was necessary, in order that any proceedings I should adopt should be such as would be capable of full vindication and meet the approval of the whole civilized world, that my action in the case should not appear to be instigated by mere vindictiveness, and should be calculated to serve, not as an incitement to retaliation upon future visitors, but as a salutary lesson, as well to the actual perpetrators of the deed, as to the inhabitants of the whole group.”<sup>75</sup>

Wilkes ordered his men to burn Arro, which was already deserted by its residents, who had fled into the hills or to Sualib. After burning yam huts and gardens in between the two towns, the men proceeded to Sualib.<sup>76</sup> The Fijians had retreated into the fortified town, expecting a siege, but Wilkes ordered that it be burned too, with the villagers inside.<sup>77</sup> The following day, with at least fifty-seven Fijians dead, Wilkes refused to accept the gift of a white chicken because he assumed that it was a peace offering, and instead chose to wait for the Fijians to officially admit defeat and sue for peace according to his understanding of local custom.<sup>78</sup>

“Notwithstanding that the opinion of all the officers who were present and cognizant of all the facts was, that I had not gone far enough in the punishment I had inflicted, I found myself charged on my return by the administration, as guilty of murder, and of acting on this occasion in a cruel, merciless, and tyrannical manner. To make out the latter charge, it was alleged that I had made the natives actually crawl to my feet to beg pardon. The part of the whole affair for which I take some credit to myself is, that when I judged it had become necessary to punish, it was in like manner obligatory on me to study how it could be done most effectually; and from the knowledge I had obtained of the customs of the natives, during the time I had been engaged in the group, I was enabled to perform this painful though necessary duty, in a manner that made it vastly more effectual, by requiring of them their own forms of submission, and their own modes of acknowledging defeat.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:244.

<sup>76</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:276.

<sup>77</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:278.

<sup>78</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:279-280.

<sup>79</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:285.

In this passage, Wilkes argues that he avoided acting “tyrannically” by deferring to Fijian custom and that his actions were more legitimate because they were not an imposition of new rules. In doing so, he drew the attention away from the acts of violence themselves, to the culture and customs surrounding how they were carried out.

In early June of 1840, Wilkes learned from Paddy Connell, an Irish deserter who had been living in native Fijian society for several decades, that six years earlier, in August of 1834, Ro Veidovi, an important chief and the brother of the King of Rewa province, had conspired with a few other chiefs to attack a British trading vessel that Connell worked on, the *Charles Doggett*, and murdered most of its crew.<sup>80</sup> In Connell’s telling, Ro Veidovi and his accomplices then ate the bodies.<sup>81</sup> This is a plausible story, given that Fijians at the time likely did practice anthropophagy. European and American reports of cannibalism, however, were more often highly embellished in order to justify violence against indigenous Fijians.<sup>82</sup>

After hearing Connell’s story, Wilkes then took it upon himself to avenge the killed sailors and set out to capture Ro Veidovi in retribution for allegedly organizing the attack. In the *Narrative*, Wilkes gave no justification for why it was his responsibility or jurisdiction to avenge the British ship. Connell’s allegation that the attackers had been cannibals would have made the attack seem particularly grievous and worthy of retribution in Wilkes’ eyes, but even this does not explain why Americans would take responsibility for avenging a British ship. In one sense, it was a moment of solidarity between colonial powers, in which Wilkes chose to help Britain as an ally in the “civilizing” effort. At the same time, however, the moment was one of competition, as

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<sup>80</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:103.

<sup>81</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:104-105.

<sup>82</sup> Tracey Banivanua-Mar, “Cannibalism and Colonialism: Charting Colonies and Frontiers in Nineteenth-Century Fiji,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 2 (2010), 256.

Wilkes attempted to distinguish the U.S. from Britain and France, who he believed had lost the Fijians' respect by being too lenient in their treatment. Rather than explain his motives, Wilkes wrote only, "having heard this statement, I determined to capture Vendovi [Ro Veidovi], and asked Paddy [Connell] if he would carry a letter immediately to Captain Hudson, who was then, with the *Peacock*, at Rewa," Veidovi's home province.<sup>83</sup>

A few days later, Captain Hudson learned that King Kania of Rewa and his family intended to pay a visit to the ship to exchange gifts, and seized on the opportunity to draw out Ro Veidovi in the process. When the King, his wife, two of his brothers, and daughter, as well as about seventy *Kai-Sis*, or commoners, boarded the *Peacock*, an interpreter informed them they were being held prisoner until Ro Veidovi could be captured.<sup>84</sup> As Ro Veidovi was on bad terms with his brothers, Kania agreed to send a party to look for the Prince, after a short negotiation. Captain Hudson and Kania sent Ngaraningiou, the third brother, to attempt to capture Ro Veidovi because "Vendovi [Ro Veidovi] had always been [Ngaraningiou's] rival, and the temptation to get rid of so powerful an adversary was an opportunity not to be lost by a Feejee man, although that adversary was a brother."<sup>85</sup>

While the Rewans were aboard the ship, both parties made attempts at cordial, diplomatic behavior, with the King emphasizing his desire for peace and his previous peaceful dealings with white sailors. Captain Hudson, meanwhile, at least played at respect by housing the King and his family in his private cabin and supplying them with good food and *ava*, a traditional Fijian

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<sup>83</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:105.

<sup>84</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:127-128.

<sup>85</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:129.

beverage, when the King requested it, with a member of the *Peacock's* crew serving as royal cupbearer.<sup>86</sup>

As evening descended, the Fijians were organized along the American shipboard hierarchy, with the chiefs housed on a sheltered portion of the deck, and the Kai-Sis on deck. They were also fed according to their social stations, with the commoners fed simply hard-tack and molasses. After the meal, the Kai-Sis performed a number of dances on deck. These are described in the *Narrative* as group affairs, with the whole company moving synchronously to a monotone rhythm.<sup>87</sup> In response, members of the *Peacock's* crew improvised a minstrel performance in blackface. In the first dance, the ship's tailor played the character "Jim Crow," careening across the deck on the back of a donkey played by two other sailors. This was followed by "the dance of 'Juba,'" another minstrel song based on the style of a famous black dancer of the day.<sup>88</sup> The *Narrative* records the King and Queen as responding to the performance with a mixture of delight and incredulity, even fear, at the disguises. Wilkes commented that "the Jim Crow of Oliver, will long be remembered by their savage, as well as civilized, spectators. The whole company seemed contented and happy; the king had his extra bowl of ava; the queen and chiefs their tea and supper; and all enjoyed their cigars, of which they smoked a great number."<sup>89</sup>

The next morning, Ngaraningiou's search party returned with Ro Veidovi. After he was brought aboard the ship, the Americans immediately placed him in chains and had him stand trial for murder. He was found guilty and taken prisoner on board the *Peacock*. The episode of Ro

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<sup>86</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:130.

<sup>87</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:130.

<sup>88</sup> Eric Lott, "The Seeming Counterfeit': Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy," *American Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1991), 225.

<sup>89</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3:130.

Veidovi's capture ended with the remaining Fijians leaving the Americans mostly on good terms, although a major threat hung in the air. According to Wilkes, as the Royal family left the ship, Captain Hudson commented, "that the course the affair had taken had saved them much trouble, and probably fighting, for he would have thought it incumbent upon him to burn Rewa, if Ro Veidovi had not been taken."<sup>90</sup>

Ro Veidovi died in a New York naval hospital just days after the *Peacock's* return to the U.S. in 1842. While Wilkes does not specify his intention in instructing Hudson to capture Ro Veidovi and take him to America, rather than execute him, it was clearly a calculated decision. Quite possibly, the captains intended Ro Veidovi as a type of living specimen, functioning as both an example of indigenous Fijians as a cultural and racial type and of the success of American efforts at imposing discipline on Fijian society. The fact that after his death, Ro Veidovi's head was removed, preserved, and exhibited as "artifact no. 30" in the Expedition's collections lends further credence to this interpretation.<sup>91</sup> Antony Adler contextualizes the entire affair as an elaborate performance of American justice and the "civilizing" mission. In this reading, Ro Veidovi becomes "an involuntary participant in an elaborate spectacle of reformative assimilation."<sup>92</sup> The audience to this spectacle was a combined one, made up of both Fijian witnesses to the ordeal, sailors, and—presumably, had Ro Veidovi lived long enough—Americans at home would also have been among the intended audience.

Throughout this volume of the *Narrative*, Wilkes paints violence, especially that which the Expedition members supposedly engaged in according to Fijian terms and cultural norms, as

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<sup>90</sup> Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 3: 136.

<sup>91</sup> Antony Adler, "The Capture and Curation of the Cannibal 'Ro Veidovi': Reality and Representation of a Pacific Frontier," *The Journal of Pacific History* 49, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): 255–82, 273.

<sup>92</sup> Adler, "The Capture and Curation of the Cannibal 'Ro Veidovi,'" 263.

justified, “salutary”—part of a mission of “improvement”, as well as necessary for preserving American honor and distinguishing the U.S. as a power in its own right. In the context of Ro Veidovi’s arrest and the plan to exhibit him in the United States as an example of the nation’s disciplinary and reformatory efforts in Fiji, the minstrel performance resonated with other episodes of imperial theatricality. With its racist depiction of another dark-skinned people, it implied American control over the tense situation. Occasionally in the *Narrative*, and especially in other journals from the Expedition, Fijians were directly compared, or even argued to be physically indistinguishable from, American Black people.<sup>93</sup> Through appropriation and imitation, blackface limited and controlled the potential modes of expression within blackness, preventing black people from fully expressing their humanity.<sup>94</sup> In this context, however unwittingly, blackface did function as an imposition of American racial stereotypes onto its Fijian audience. In the *Narrative*, Wilkes depicts his uses of violence and Ro Veidovi’s punishment as justified in part because their performative qualities made them function, in his eyes, as both performances of American strength and as “civilizing” disciplinary tools. By emphasizing the civility and ceremony of watching cultural entertainment, Wilkes depicted the dances’ as fostering an atmosphere of diplomatic civility in a people who he believed lacked it.

The actual circumstances of the minstrel show, however, complicate a view of the performance as entirely motivated by the desire to communicate cultural dominance. The minstrel show was organized and initiated by the sailors themselves, not by Wilkes (who, on a different ship at the time, did not even witness the scene) or by Captain Hudson. The performance was both reciprocal-- part of a diplomatic back and forth between the Fijian

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<sup>93</sup> Joyce, *The Shaping of American Ethnography*.

<sup>94</sup> Lott, “The Seeming Counterfeit.”, 229.

commoners accompanying the King and the *Peacock's* crew-- and arose improvisationally from the crew, rather than as a strategic move from the vessel's leadership. Minstrel songs like "Jim Crow" and "Juba" were probably chosen because of blackface's widespread popularity among lower and middle-class people such as sailors, and because the medium was seen at the time as a quintessentially American performance form. Minstrelsy would have been one of the only forms both available for ready performance by sailors and suitable to represent the United States as its own entity, without the taint of European culture, when called upon to do so in response to the Fijian's presentation of their own music. Wilkes' connection of the performance to discipline or improvement, then, is probably mostly a connection drawn out in the *Narrative* rather than an intention of the performers themselves.

In his account of the United States Exploring Expedition's months in Fiji, Wilkes casts violence, especially revenge, as not only necessary self-defense in order to carry out the Expedition's scientific goals and for preserving US honor, but also as instructive— crucial to his idea of the development of the Fijian people. Wilkes' account of the minstrel production on the *Peacock* in some ways labors to write it as part of a similar performative civilizing effort as Ro Veidovi's capture and intended display and the calculated destruction of Malolo. However, Wilkes neither produced nor witnessed the blackface performance on the *Peacock*, and the intentions and reactions of those who did mount and witness the show are more obscure.

### Chapter 3. The Perry Expedition

In the late-1840s, several geopolitical and technological developments in the United States sparked a renewed interest in the Pacific. Many focused particularly on Japan, ruled at the time by the Tokugawa Shogunate, who favored a strictly isolationist foreign policy. Laws that limited the number of foreigners allowed into Japan and prevented Japanese people from leaving or returning had been in place since the seventeenth century, but the policy of *sakoku*, or national isolation, permitting limited trade with only China and the Netherlands and diplomatic communication with just the Ryukyu Islands and Korea, developed between 1793 and 1825, in response to incursions by British and Russian ships into Japanese territory.<sup>95</sup> After the British victory in the First Opium War in 1842, the Treaty of Nanking forced China to open ports to foreign trade. U.S. merchants also gained access to these ports and as the China trade grew, many hoped to expand their trade in East Asia to Japan.<sup>96</sup> In addition, the development of steamships as a viable technology drastically shortened the voyage from the American East coast to Japan. The prospect of a transcontinental railroad and the Pacific ports newly under U.S. control after the Mexican-American war offered the possibility that the journey might be shortened even further. With the voyage from New York or Boston to Edo shortened from one-hundred to one hundred and fifty days down to thirty, the Pacific was no longer simply a far-off object of study and curiosity but an increasingly viable economic arena.<sup>97</sup> A toast given

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<sup>95</sup> Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan*, Revised edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 117. Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, *Anti-Foreignism and Western Learning in Early Modern Japan: The New Theses of 1825* (Harvard Univ Asia Center, 1986), 59-60.

<sup>96</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *"Old Bruin": Commodore Matthew C. Perry, 1794-1858: The American Naval Officer Who Helped Found Liberia*, 1st edition (Little, Brown, 1967), 262.

<sup>97</sup> U.S. Congress. *Congressional Globe*. 28th Cong., 2nd sess., 1845. Vol. 14, no. 14.

by one Japan Squadron officer, William Speiden, Sr., summed up this newfound feeling of proximity—“California and Japan, next door neighbors, may they soon step in and spend the evening with each other.”<sup>98</sup>

Two previous attempts to establish diplomatic relations with Japan, one in 1832 and one in 1845, had been unsuccessful, but by 1851 members of both Congress and the executive branch thought the time was right to try again.<sup>99</sup> In a memo to Secretary of the Navy John P. Kennedy, Secretary of State Charles M. Conrad summarized the official goals of the new Japan expedition. He sought to begin diplomatic relations with Japan to ensure good treatment for shipwrecked American sailors or those seeking shelter from bad weather in Japanese harbors and to open ports where ships whaling in the North Pacific could restock.<sup>100</sup> Others in Congress, however, continued to hope that new connections with Japan would allow merchants in the United States access to new markets, in which they might dominate the trade in manufactured goods as well as new import materials.<sup>101</sup> As in the 1830s, the US sought a form of control distinct from the territorial domination practiced by European imperial powers. By the 1850s, commercial imperialism was clearly one of the forms this would take. As characteristic “gunboat diplomacy” the Japan expedition had both military and diplomatic elements and was overseen by both civilian and military leadership. The Japan Expedition’s personnel and ships all came from the Navy, but the Secretary of State authorized its commander, Commodore Matthew C. Perry,

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<sup>98</sup> David Ranzan, John Wolter, and John J. McDonough, *With Commodore Perry to Japan: The Journal of William Speiden Jr., 1852-1855* (Annapolis, UNITED STATES: Naval Institute Press, 2013), 117.

<sup>99</sup> Pierce et al., “Message of the President of the United States, 5.

<sup>100</sup> Pierce et al., “Message of the President of the United States, 6.

<sup>101</sup> U.S. Congress. *Congressional Globe*. 28th Cong., 2nd sess., 1845. Vol. 14, no. 14.

of the U.S. Home squadron, to “negotiate treaties of amity and navigation with any and all established and independent sovereignties in those regions.”<sup>102</sup>

Like Wilkes, Perry was appointed to the command of his expedition at the last minute. Originally, Commander John H. Aulick of the U.S. East India Squadron was assigned to command the voyage to Japan. Before the squadron could depart, however, Aulick became embroiled in a feud with a Brazilian diplomat and was fired from the mission. Commodore Matthew C. Perry, a high-ranking naval officer known for both his military and diplomatic successes, had previously expressed his interest in an American treaty with Japan. He was an obvious choice to command the squadron.<sup>103</sup> Perry was born into a naval family in Newport, Rhode Island in 1794. His father sailed with the Continental Navy during the American Revolution and the United States Navy during the Quasi War with France while his older brother, Oliver Hazard Perry, played a critical role as a commander at the Battle of Lake Erie during the War of 1812.<sup>104</sup> Perry was an early supporter of the American Colonization Society, which hoped to resettle freed slaves in Africa. Early in his career, Perry escorted the first group of Black American colonists to Liberia in the *USS Cyane* and he later rose to prominence as Commodore of the U.S. Africa Squadron in the 1840s.<sup>105</sup> Although personally interested in the possibilities of the Pacific, Perry’s naval career had kept him in the Atlantic and Mediterranean for most of his life as he rose through the ranks.

The Japan squadron departed from Norfolk, Virginia in late November of 1852. The ships crossed the Atlantic, rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and sailed toward Japan across the

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<sup>102</sup> Pierce et al., “Message of the President of the United States, 9. Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan*, Revised edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 540.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Morison, *Old Bruin*, 3.

<sup>105</sup> Morison, *Old Bruin*, 62.

Indian Ocean, stopping frequently to replenish their supplies of coal. Arriving in Japan, Perry proceeded directly to the capital, Edo, and demanded an audience with the emperor in order to hand over letters of introduction from President Millard Fillmore. City officials denied his request, but after negotiations, Perry was allowed to present the letters, which detailed the expedition's diplomatic requests and desire to commence trade, to the Tokugawa Shogun's representatives. Perry gave the Japanese negotiators time to consider the terms and the squadron retreated to Hong Kong for the winter, promising to return in the Spring with more ships. In February 1853, Perry returned to Japan, where the Shogunate had decided to accept most of the Americans' demands. The resulting Treaty of Kanagawa established diplomatic relations between the two nations and granted American vessels trading access to two ports— Shimoda, just south of Edo, and Hakodate in the north. From Edo Bay, Perry proceeded to both ports to negotiate detailed trading terms with their local governments then started home, returning to the United States in 1855.

Like the United States Exploring Expedition, the Perry Expedition was chronicled in an official narrative, published on the expedition's return. Even before the Perry set sail, Navy officials expressed a desire to control the information coming from the expedition. Sailors received orders to be vague about the squadron's exact activities in their letters home and the Navy claimed all journals and logs kept on the voyage as government property subject to publishing by Department of the Navy.<sup>106</sup> Francis L. Hawks, a biographer, Episcopal priest, and author of church history compiled the *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan: performed in the years 1852, 1853, and 1854, under the command of*

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<sup>106</sup> Pierce et al., "Message of the President of the United States, 3.

*Commodore M.C. Perry, United States Navy, by order of the Government of the United States* for presentation to the Senate and commercial publishing in 1856. The work is primarily based on Perry's journals, but is supplemented with material from officers' journals and logs. Most of the work is written in a strange, first-person narrative voice distinct from Hawks', whose voice is clearly present in the preface commenting on the *Narrative's* construction. Nor is it Perry's voice, from whose journals it is mostly composed, since the narrator often refers to "The Commodore" in the third person. Instead, it seems to be that of an anonymous, composite officer.

Perry and his men perceived the Japanese as a particularly formal people and viewed this formality as a kind of performance, which needed to be met with performances of their own from the American negotiators, ones which Gretchen Murphy characterizes as "a sort of diplomatic yellowface."<sup>107</sup> As Perry stepped into the role of American negotiator, he essentially created a character based on what he thought he knew about Japanese culture. On the one hand, this performance was intended to genuinely facilitate connection, but it was also based on assumptions that cast Japanese people as duplicitous and hierarchical. While diplomacy is an inherently performative process, the *Narrative* makes it clear that Perry saw the need for performativity as going above and beyond what was usually expected and standing in conflict with American "genuineness".<sup>108</sup> The orders for the expedition describe the Japanese as "said to be proud and vindictive in character," and order Perry to adjust his behavior to their standards and submit to humiliation if necessary rather than cause disagreement.<sup>109</sup> In the *Narrative's*

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<sup>107</sup> Gretchen Murphy, "Selling Jim Crow from Salem to Yokohama," in *Hemispheric Imaginings*, by Gretchen Murphy, ed. Donald E. Pease (Duke University Press, 2005), 62–96, 73.

<sup>108</sup> See Kitahara for a sociological discussion of performativity in Perry's diplomatic interactions with Japan. Murphy, "Selling Jim Crow from Salem to Yokohama," 73.

<sup>109</sup> Pierce et al., "Message of the President of the United States, 8.

preface, the compiler, Hawks, headed off the potential criticism that the work was “needlessly minute... in describing the pageantry of receptions, entertainments, &c” commenting that “Beside, the pageantry was often an important part of the history of the negotiation itself, with a people so ceremonious as the Japanese.”<sup>110</sup>

The depiction of Japanese culture in the *Narrative* as excessively formal and performative was partly an after-the-fact summation based on Expedition members’ observations and judgments of Japan during the squadron’s visit. Those interactions, however, were informed by Perry and others’ assumptions about the Japanese, formed prior to their visit. While most mid-nineteenth century Americans had no firsthand knowledge of Japan, literate Americans could access books about the nation. Perry read extensively to prepare for the Japan Expedition, drawing from a transnational body of knowledge produced and circulated among competing colonial powers. In the 1850s, the 1727 *History of Japan*, by German naturalist and explorer Engelbert Kaempfer was still the primary European source of information on Japan available in Europe and the Americas.<sup>111</sup> Perry is also known to have read some of the physician and botanist Philipp Franz Von Siebold’s writing from the 1830s and 40s—mostly botanical and ethnographic writing produced while the German scientist was attached to Dutch trading missions—as well as the accounts of William Robert Broughton, an English Captain who surveyed the coast of Japan, Okinawa, and the Sakhalin peninsula in the 1790s.<sup>112</sup> A final source of information about Japan

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<sup>110</sup> Matthew Calbraith Perry and Francis L. Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan, Performed in the Years 1852, 1853, and 1854, under the Command of Commodore M. C. Perry, United States Navy, by Order of the Government of the United States.* (Washington :, 1856), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t4xg9wb55>, v.

<sup>111</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 448.

<sup>112</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 451, 469

came from Japanese people themselves. By law, Japanese trading ships were usually confined to within a short distance from the coast. Those blown off course were not allowed to return to shore, and a few of these castaways ended up working on American whaling ships, providing an early point of face-to-face contact.<sup>113</sup>

Informed by his reading and by early interactions with Japanese negotiators in the subject kingdom of Ryukyu, Perry landed at Oragawa in Edo Bay prepared to weaponize ceremony as a diplomatic strategy. In his description of the Commodore's preparations to meet with imperial representatives, Hawks wrote, "in a country like Japan, so governed by ceremonials of all kinds, it was necessary to guard with the strictest etiquette even the forms of speech; and it was found that by a diligent attention to the minutest and apparently most insignificant details of word and action, the desired impression was made upon Japanese diplomacy; which, as a smooth surface requires one equally smooth to touch it at every point, can only be fully reached and met by the nicest adjustment of the most polished formality."<sup>114</sup> Hawks' metaphor of touch "at every point" evokes skin, while his argument for the necessity of adaptation suggests that skin might be mutable through performance. Here, Murphy's concept of "diplomatic yellowface" evokes not only the elements of artifice in adopting another set of customs, but the genuine sense that cross-racial performance might facilitate real communication. "Ceremony" appears in this passage primarily as a heightened attention to detail and a level of attunement to hierarchy. But for Perry and Hawks, these formalities were inherently disingenuous and affected; it was a fairly short conceptual leap from there to literal performance. The American diplomatic strategy,

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<sup>113</sup> Peter Duus, *The Japanese Discovery of America: A Brief History with Documents*, First Edition edition (Boston ; New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996) 83.

<sup>114</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 238.

therefore, included not only attention to the details of Japanese etiquette, but theatrical performance—in which blackface minstrelsy would be a central component—as well.

The importance of diplomatic ceremony as both heightened formality and performance was evident during Perry's second set of negotiations with imperial representatives outside Edo in the Spring of 1854. The squadron had landed in Edo Bay the previous summer and presented a series of letters from President Millard Fillmore requesting an opening of diplomatic relations between the two countries to representatives of the emperor for consideration. On the squadron's return— this time with a larger fleet, implicitly threatening retaliation if the Japanese did not comply— Perry was able to secure a deal opening two ports to American trade.

During the final stage of negotiations, the Americans presented the Japanese with a selection of gifts and the Japanese returned the favor, filling the temporary building where negotiations had taken place with luxury goods. The *Narrative* describes the room full of gifts in lavish detail that highlights the items' sensory and tactile qualities: “The red-covered settees, numerous tables and stands, and even the floors were heaped with the different articles. The objects were of Japanese manufacture, and consisted of specimens of rich brocades and silks, of their famous lacquered ware, such as chow-chow boxes, tables, trays, and goblets, all skilfully wrought and finished with an exquisite polish; of porcelain cups of wonderful lightness and transparency, adorned with figures and flowers in gold and variegated colors, and exhibiting a workmanship which surpassed even that of the ware for which the Chinese are remarkable.”<sup>115</sup> While Perry and his retinue were still inside examining the gifts, the Japanese dignitaries brought a few dozen Sumo wrestlers to the beach. There, they first demonstrated their strength by loading

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<sup>115</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 367.

massive bags of rice—a traditional component of every gift from the emperor to other dignitaries—onto the American boats before participating in a series of matches for the American audience.<sup>116</sup> In loading the rice, the Sumo wrestlers' actions bridged the gap between gift-exchange and entertainment, blurring the line between the more abstract diplomatic "performance" of gift giving and literal athletic and then theatrical performances later on. The Americans then continued the pattern of exchange by exhibiting a small train and a telegraph system, then invited the Japanese officials for a set of "entertainments" on the flagship the *Powhatan* two days later.<sup>117</sup> Perry's ship was named after Wahunsenacawh, commonly called Powhatan, an Algonquian leader in what would become Virginia at the time of the founding of Jamestown. By naming a ship after Powhatan, the Navy implicitly claimed him as American while shaping his legacy into a mechanical object that could be controlled by white Americans and erasing the violence necessary to assimilate into the national body and history.

When the Japanese party arrived onboard the *Powhatan* they were greeted with a demonstration of the ships' guns and a tour of the gun decks and engine rooms. In a concession to local custom, Perry had two separate dining areas prepared, because, "it was known that the strictness of Japanese etiquette would not allow the high commissioners to sit at the same table with their subordinates, [so] the Commodore ordered two banquets, one to be spread in his cabin for the chief dignitaries, and another on the quarter-deck."<sup>118</sup> After dinner, prepared from the stock of "live bullocks, some sheep, and a supply of game and poultry," and "the ordinary cabin

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<sup>116</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 370.

<sup>117</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 371.

<sup>118</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 374

stores of preserved meats, fish, vegetables, fruits, and a choice supply of the best wines,” which Perry had specially reserved for the occasion when “negotiations with the Japanese took a turn sufficiently favorable to justify some degree of convivial rejoicing,” both dining parties gathered on the deck for a minstrel concert.<sup>119</sup> Hawks writes that, “After the banquet, the Japanese were entertained by an exhibition of negro minstrelsy, got up by some of the sailors, who, blacking their faces and dressing themselves in character, enacted their parts with a humor that would have gained them unbounded applause from a New York audience even at Christy's,” the city’s preeminent minstrel theater.<sup>120</sup> The text’s reference to the New York theater as high praise works on the assumption an American audience would be more discerning viewers and therefore that minstrelsy is best appreciated by Americans. Yet Perry’s insistence that the squadron’s Japanese guests saw a minstrel performance in spite on these considerations attests that he viewed minstrelsy as effective at communicating American culture even to those who were less familiar with it. By all American accounts, the Japanese audience enjoyed the performance— Hawks wrote that the performance inspired “general hilarity,” while pursers clerk William Speiden Junior wrote that the Japanese “kept in one incessant roar of laughter, being all a little tinged from the effects of ‘old tom’ alias cherry cordial and Champagne, etc.”<sup>121</sup>

The performance made enough of an impact on the spectators that an image of minstrels dancing and playing instruments is included in an elaborately painted scroll set depicting key scenes from the American Squadron’s visit to Yokohama (Fig. 2). The image depicts a row of

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<sup>119</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 374, 376

<sup>120</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 376

<sup>121</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 376. Ranzan, Wolter, and McDonough, *With Commodore Perry to Japan*, 117.

nine seated minstrels playing instruments while two dance. The minstrels' loud costumes of yellow printed tailcoats and clashing striped trousers indicate that the song they performed likely satirized free Black men in the North. The stereotype of freedmen as dandies became especially popular minstrel fodder after the Panic of 1837, but they continued in popularity for decades and laughing at these characters reinforced audience members' ideas of themselves as hardworking and masculine in contrast.<sup>122</sup> Within the larger visual sequence of the scroll set, the diagonal line of musicians echoes the line of American sailors marching on parade in the neighboring panel (Fig. 3). But while the sailors are in uniform navy blue and each individual is tiny, the bright color and large scale of the blackface minstrels present a radical break in the work's continuity. The minstrels are clearly in motion, some even seem to be laughing, while the sailors stand still. The performance was disruptive to staged and formal diplomatic ritual, even as it was used in the service of diplomacy.



Figure 2. Detail of a minstrel performance from *The Mission of Commodore Perry to Japan, 1854*, Probably Hibata Osuke and Onuma Chinzan, 1858, 28.9 cm by 1525 cm, British Museum, London.

<sup>122</sup> Lott, *Love and Theft*, 142.



Figure 3. Detail of US Marines and a military band from *The Mission of Commodore Perry to Japan, 1854*, Probably Hibata Osuke and Onuma Chinzan, 1858, 28.9 cm by 1525 cm, British Museum, London.

While the narrative only describes the performance as “got up by some of the sailors,” indicating a level of autonomy and improvisation from below, in Speiden’s account, Commodore Perry himself came from the below deck where he had been dining with the highest Japanese officials to invite the other officers and Japanese officials to “all go forward and hear the Japanese Olio Minstrels,” suggesting that the performance was either planned especially for the occasion or a regular occurrence that the Commodore made the decision to bring the visiting Japanese dignitaries to.

In this episode, the minstrel performance sits within an elaborate multi-day performance of diplomatic pageantry that both the Japanese and Americans participated in, and the inclusion of minstrelsy was a calculated decision. Murphy argues that as a comedic, vernacular performance form, minstrelsy was important for Americans in Japan for its ability to “dissolve formal dignity,” undermining Japanese formality and asserting American national identity as

distinct from both “the European aristocracy and the ‘ceremonious’ and ‘sagacious’ Japanese.”<sup>123</sup> However, minstrelsy’s status as masked theater simultaneously allowed it to fill a role as pageantry in the diplomatic pattern the negotiators had established over the previous days. This subversion of the perceived Japanese norms of ceremony and pageantry and introduction of a uniquely American performance form helped Perry establish the idea of the United States as the dominant partner in the new diplomatic relationship.

Although not a blackface performance, the case of Perry’s black guards on his first march into Oragawa is another revealing case of blackness instrumentalized as American pageantry. The American squadron first entered Edo Bay on July 8, 1853, nine months before the events described above. Perry refused to speak in person with anyone but a direct representative of the emperor and sent the Governor who came to meet him to his officer instead.<sup>124</sup> For a few days, the Japanese and American officials negotiated the terms on which Perry would be allowed to hand over the letter from President Fillmore he was sent to deliver to the Emperor. Perry engaged with the diplomatic back and forth for a while, but eventually cut through with outright threats, moving the ships into a battle formation and remarking that “if the Japanese government did not see fit to appoint a suitable person to receive the documents in his possession addressed to the Emperor that he, the Commodore, whose duty it was to deliver them, would go on shore with a sufficient force and deliver them in person, be the consequences what they might.”<sup>125</sup> Eventually, the local authorities summoned Prince Toda of Idzu and Prince Ido of Iwami, two of the Emperor’s advisors, and invited Perry to land and present the princes with the president’s

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<sup>123</sup> Murphy, “Selling Jim Crow from Salem to Yokohama,” 73, 78.

<sup>124</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 238

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

letters.<sup>126</sup> Perry landed in Oragawa and came ashore as part of a grand military procession. The Commodore and his retinue, which included flag-bearers and two boys holding the documents in elaborate gold boxes, followed columns of as many marines and sailors as could be spared from the ships. “On either side of the Commodore marched a tall, well-formed negro, who, armed to the teeth, acted as his personal guard. These blacks, selected for the occasion, were two of the best looking fellows of their color that the squadron could furnish. All this of course,” Hawks comments, “was but for effect.”<sup>127</sup>

In the *Narrative*, Hawks gives no more information about these Black sailors’ identities. The squadron, like the U.S. Navy as a whole, was majority white. While small numbers of enslaved and free blacks had served in the Continental Navy during the War of Independence and in the United States Navy during the War of 1812, they faced backlash and by 1839 the Secretary of the Navy imposed a quota on Blacks recruits, and the total proportion of Black sailors hovered around 2.5 percent until the start of the Civil War.<sup>128</sup> A small, but a visible minority of the Japan expedition’s sailors were black, and they caught the attention of Japanese onlookers. In the painted scroll set, two of the three everyday sailors depicted up close are black men (Fig 4). Two of the sailors can be identified as coal stokers by the shovels they lean on. They stand next to an officer in full dress uniform making sketches—likely William Heine, the squadron’s artist, and a Chinese interpreter. The sailors are depicted with the same level of detail and size as these important characters, meaning they were just as important to the scroll’s viewer. This composition reflects the paradoxical position of black sailors on the expedition. Black

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<sup>126</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 250

<sup>127</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 225.

<sup>128</sup> Dennis J. Ringle, *Life in Mr. Lincoln’s Navy*, (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 12.

sailors certainly did not make up two-thirds of Perry's crew, so these two were likely picked out for depiction because of their race, but they are not exoticized more than the rest of the Americans in the depiction itself.



Figure 4. Detail from *The Mission of Commodore Perry to Japan, 1854*, probably Hibata Osuke and Onuma Chinzan, 1858, 28.9 cm by 1525 cm, British Museum, London.

Hawks' comment that the guards were chosen because they, "were two of the best looking fellows of their color" indicates that the guards were in all likelihood regular sailors who held no special position or rank in the squadron, reinforcing the idea that from Perry's point of view, the black guardsmen were a purely aesthetic choice, part of the pageantry of the negotiations. In his description of Perry's guards, Hawks simultaneously casts the black sailors as threatening and as beautiful and exciting products of the United States, to both awe Japanese onlookers and be displayed for their consumption. In doing so, he drew on stereotypes about black men that were well-worn tropes in the U.S. but not as well known in Japan. Still, that Perry chose to draw on these ideas in order to create the most dazzling and imposing image he could choice shows their potency. From the Japanese perspective, the effectiveness of the image was

likely more due to the fact that Black people were still a rare sight in Japan, and in this case, were essentially seen as an “exotic” product of America. Hawks writes that on entering the treaty house, “The two stalwart negroes followed immediately in rear of the boys, and marching up to the scarlet receptacle, received the boxes from the hands of the bearers, opened them, took out the letters and, displaying the writing and seals, laid them upon the lid of the Japanese box—all in perfect silence.”<sup>129</sup> The use of black hands to conduct the physical transfer of documents from one nation to the other cemented an objectified, performative mode of blackness as one important component of Perry’s strategy of pageantry in Japan, whether in the more solemn and formal register here or through minstrelsy.

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<sup>129</sup> Perry and Hawks, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 256.

## Chapter 4. The Theater of Empire

After signing the Treaty of Kanagawa with the Emperor in Edo, Commodore Perry and the American squadron sailed on to the two ports which the agreement granted them trading access, in order to confirm the details of the treaty with local officials and accomplish any further surveying or logistical work that might be necessary to ensure smooth access for subsequent American visitors. Shimoda, just south of Edo, was the Squadron's first stop, after which they proceeded to Hakodate, a port on the southern end of Hokkaido, the northernmost island of what is now modern-day Japan. As Hokkaido was close to some of the North Pacific's best whaling grounds, Perry hoped that he could convince local leaders to agree to sell food, water, and coal to American ships.

In the 1850s, Hakodate stood in a borderland, where representatives of the Japanese imperial state fought for control over the land and people of Hokkaido. While supporting Japanese claims to hegemony over the region, Perry and the American Squadron were very aware of the presence of indigenous Ainu people and Japanese attempts to assert dominance over them. When read in combination with Hawks' rhetoric in the *Narrative of the American Squadron in the South China Seas and Japan* about humor and caricature as marks of sophistication, the minstrel concert as performed in a diplomatic context at Hakodate can be interpreted as an acknowledgment of the Japanese state as a fellow imperial power.

In the *Narrative*, Hawks describes the Commodore sailing to Hakodate across the strait between the "Japanese islands of Nippon and Yesso."<sup>130</sup> This comment, which implies that Yesso

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<sup>130</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 430.

(modern Hokkaido) is Japanese in the same way and to the same extent as Nippon (modern Honshu) seems to indicate that the American officers saw Hokkaido as definitively part of the Japanese state. With this view, they repeated and reinforced the Japanese government's colonial claims to control over the region. In reality, however, Perry's assumption that Hokkaido was uncontestedly Japanese territory was less borne out on the ground. Most of Hokkaido was not under ethnic Japanese control at all, and the Southern tip of the island, where the Squadron landed, was a contested borderland where the imperial Japanese state, represented by the local Matsumae lords, attempted to extend control over the indigenous Ainu people and their lands. The majority of Hokkaido's population was made up of indigenous Ainu people, native to the island and the neighboring Sakhalin peninsula and Kuril Islands of Russia. The Ainu practiced hunting and gathering alongside small-scale agriculture, spoke a language not related to Japanese, and practiced an animist religion distinct from Japanese Shinto or Buddhism. Around the fourteenth century, Japanese merchants— or *Wajin*— from Honshu began to establish small trading posts around the southern portion of Hokkaido, but as a small minority they were mostly integrated into the local economy.<sup>131</sup> In 1551, the Kakizaki, a Wajin family, consolidated territorial control over a small peninsula on the southern tip of Hokkaido, just east of Hakodate, and established a monopoly over all trade goods that passed through the area through a profit-sharing agreement with Ainu leaders.<sup>132</sup> Armed Ainu rebellions and violent retaliation became common during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as the Wajin presence expanded and became more aggressive in their trading practices.<sup>133</sup> In 1604, the Kakizaki family, now

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<sup>131</sup> Michael Weiner, *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity*, (London: Routledge, 2008), 24.

<sup>132</sup> Richard M. Siddle, *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan*, 1 edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 31.

<sup>133</sup> Weiner, *Japan's Minorities*, 24-25.

called the Matsumae, saw their lands officially incorporated into the Japanese state as a semi-independent fiefdom, with a specific mandate to defend the border from Ainu “barbarians.” In response to Russian exploratory missions in northern Hokkaido, Japan annexed the entire island between 1799 and 1807 and instituted an official assimilation policy which attempted to forcibly spread Japanese culture among the Ainu.<sup>134</sup> By 1821 however, Edo abandoned Hokkaido and the region around Hakodate fell back under Matsumae control, with no clear border.<sup>135</sup>

In the eighteenth century, the Matsumae lords had shifted their economic strategy from an attempt to trade with the Ainu to an attempt to control the labor of Ainu people. Wajin forced Ainu people into labor without pay except for small rations of food and other necessary goods.<sup>136</sup> As in earlier centuries, the Ainu continued to rebel quite frequently, but the Matsumae maintained a tenuous hold on power. Unlike the imperial assimilation policy, the Matsumae favored sumptuary laws and heavy restrictions on Ainu people’s use of Japanese-style clothes and hairstyles, access to land for agriculture, and Japanese language and literacy, visibly othering the Ainu as a permanent underclass.<sup>137</sup>

Although they confirmed Japanese claims to the Hakodate region and Hokkaido as a whole, Perry and the other officers whose journals contributed to the *Narrative* noticed and commented on the Ainu’s presence as an indigenous other in the area during their visit. While the port city of Hakodate was mostly inhabited by government officials and poor, ethnic Japanese migrant workers, squadron sailors encountered a few Ainu workers in the city and more

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<sup>134</sup> Weiner, *Japan’s Minorities*, 27.

<sup>135</sup> Weiner, *Japan’s Minorities*, 27.

<sup>136</sup> Weiner, *Japan’s Minorities*, 26.

<sup>137</sup> Weiner, *Japan’s Minorities*, 27.

while surveying the nearby coast.<sup>138</sup> The *Narrative* describes the Ainu as an “indigenous race.” At the time, this term lacked some of the political connotations it has today. However, its appearance in the work is notable, indicating that the Americans viewed the Ainu as both a people with a unique connection to the land in which they lived, not shared by the Wajin, and as racialized others within Japan, even as they saw the Japanese themselves as a racialized people.

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This connection was further borne out later in the chapter when sailors on a surveying trip saw a boat rowed by, “Indians (as they are called,) the native ainos [sic].”<sup>140</sup> This language serves as evidence that the contributors to the *Narrative* had a sense of indigeneity as a category that existed a different national context. The explicit comparison of Ainu people to North American “Indians” helps mark the situation of the Japanese state as similar in this regard to the American one. The added, “as they are called,” is also notable. This could be Hawks, the *Narrative’s* compiler, commenting on an American contributor's language, but, given that elite Japanese people had significant second-hand access to Euro-American culture and recent history through books, it seems possible that one of the Squadron’s Japanese interpreters first made this connection.<sup>141</sup> Squadron sailors described the Ainu they encountered as “strange,” “hairy,” “ragged,” and “disheveled,” with “dirty and poverty-stricken aspect[s],” language that portrayed

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<sup>138</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 442.

<sup>139</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 454.

<sup>140</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 469.

<sup>141</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 464.

the Ainu as pitiably oppressed but also as less advanced than themselves or the Japanese.<sup>142</sup> These people were primarily fishermen who worked, “under the eye and for the benefit of their Japanese taskmasters, to whose absolute will they are subject.”<sup>143</sup> Clearly, the Americans were aware of the harsh, often violent, conditions of exploitation under which the Ainu worked, but they carefully neither publicly condemned nor endorsed this treatment.

In spite of their frustrations with local officials, who when the Squadron arrived claimed not to have heard of the Treaty signing and refused to grant Perry an audience with the Matsumae Prince, the Squadron’s observations of Japanese society in Hakodate were mostly positive, as portrayed in the *Narrative*. The contributors praised the local craftsmen as experts in “the mechanical arts,” but limited by a lack of new information from the outside world and a government that they believed restricted innovation.<sup>144</sup> The Americans were especially impressed with the Japanese art they saw, commenting that it was, “far removed from the gaudy tendencies of oriental taste, that, as we look, we are almost persuaded that we have here a beginning of that unextravagant expression of nature which, in the early Greek efforts, though crude, is so interesting to the antiquarian and artist. The character and form in these Japanese illustrations, though apparently much in advance of Chinese art, are still typical rather than naturalistic.”<sup>145</sup> This comparison of contemporary Japanese art to ancient Greek painting indicates that the Americans saw a society with great potential that still fell short of their ideas of societal

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<sup>142</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 454-5.

<sup>143</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 455.

<sup>144</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 455.

<sup>145</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 459.

complexity. Even as it was intended as a compliment, it held Japanese society to a strictly linear and hierarchical trajectory of development in which American society was the standard.

Hawks uses a shopping trip in Hakodate, likely a composite of several officers' accounts, to frame this overview and assessment of Japanese art through an examination of different prints and books. The section concludes with a description of a satirical illustrated book depicting scenes from Japanese life, potentially aimed at children. The *Narrative* praises the book for its range of subjects and "humorous conception," comparing it favorably to the "mechanical trash which sometimes composes the nursery books found in our shops. A people have made some progress worth studying who have a sense of the humorous, can picture the ludicrous, and goodnaturedly laugh at a clever caricature."<sup>146</sup> Here, the contributors to the *Narrative* establish an understanding and appreciation of comedy, as well as the creativity required to produce successful humor, is a mark of a sophisticated society, and one that distinguished the Japanese from other Asian and Pacific peoples in the Americans' eyes. Understanding comedy in this way helps illuminate the importance and specific appropriateness of minstrelsy during American-Japanese diplomatic negotiations, functioning for the American hosts of the banquets at which it was performed as both a test and an acknowledgment of Japanese officials' sophistication.

At Hakodate, Perry entered into a series of negotiations with the local Matsumae authorities, and the governor, Yendo Matzaimon. Initially, the Commodore insisted on negotiating with the Matsumae prince and asked to have him summoned from Matsumae to

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<sup>146</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 462-463.

Hakodate, but the local Matsumae representative refused.<sup>147</sup> Negotiations went back and forth, with Perry eventually agreeing to speak to local officials. The Japanese representatives visited the *Powhatan* on a regular basis, where they were entertained with banquets and amusements.

On May 29th, 1854, this entertainment took the form of an “Ethiopian Minstrel” concert performed by the “Japanese Olio Minstrels,” a blackface minstrel troupe made up of sailors on the *Powhatan*. The *Narrative* summarized the officers’ response to the minstrel performance:

“The performance undoubtedly showed that talent for grotesque humor and comic yet sentimental melody which are, as some think, characteristic of the sailor, the monotony of whose life on ship-board is often compensated by that hearty flow of animal spirits with which natures, invigorated by a hard and hazardous occupation, console themselves for its risks and privations. The sentimental strain, too, in which the sailor sometimes indulges, is naturally the antagonistic tone with which the mind, surrounded by its rude associations, opposes their petrifying influence. All the sailors’ rough humor is hence toned down by a gentler touch of feeling. The negro minstrelsy, which not only wrinkles the face with a broad and noisy laugh, but also can moisten the eye with a tear, is consequently a great favorite with Jack.”<sup>148</sup>

In this passage, minstrelsy, with its opposing forces of “grotesque” humor and sentimentality, is cast as a natural and fitting response to the hardships of maritime life. In *The View From the Masthead*, Hester Blum describes how middle-class Americans in the nineteenth century believed that the danger and constant boredom at sea made sailors especially prone to debauchery and moral decay, but that many reformers who sought to decrease drinking, increase

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<sup>147</sup>Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 468.

<sup>148</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 470.

religiosity, reform punishment, adopted more positive discourses about sailors that cast them as especially intelligent and interested in self-improvement in the free time at sea.<sup>149</sup> The description in the quotation above seems to reflect elements of both side's point of view. While the "risks and privations" of life at sea might lead to debauchery, the passage's narrator seems confident that sailors would also naturally "oppose their petrifying influence." While "gentler touch of feeling," and "sentimental strain" in minstrel performance might in other contexts be saccharine or inane, for sailors they served a clear purpose. While these qualities might then make it seem out of place in diplomatic context, the same tactic of balancing bawdy, physical comedy with emotion and reference to other art forms helped make it suitable for performance in a diplomatic context.

During the 1830s, 40s, and 50s, minstrelsy developed rapidly and the concert aboard the Powhatan differed from the kind of blackface minstrelsy performed by the sailors of the United States Exploring Expedition in several key ways. Since the early 1840s, the minstrel show had standardized into longer concerts with a set two or three-act structure typical of plays or light opera and performances moved from taverns and down-market music halls to more upscale theaters.<sup>150</sup> After about 1848, three-act minstrel shows like the one on the Powhatan usually concluded with "burlesques" or parodies of popular plays and operas performed in blackface and dialect.<sup>151</sup> This upscaling and evolutionary convergence between blackface and "straight" theater helps explain why minstrel performance was seen as appropriate entertainment for a diplomatic

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<sup>149</sup> Hester Blum, *The View from the Masthead* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 30.

<sup>150</sup> Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, x.

<sup>151</sup> Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, 25.

function— humor and casualness could help ease the tension between the two parties, while remaining within the realm of appropriate formality.

Yet in spite of formal developments toward more “respectable” performance forms, the content of minstrel performances remained resolutely uncouth, ribald, and racist. A playbill for the performance printed up by the sailors (Fig. ) on the shipboard printing press gives a snapshot sense of the performance.<sup>152</sup> <sup>153</sup> The featured songs and skits, all performed in blackface, were divided into three acts: the first, “As the ‘Colored ‘Gemmen’ of the North”; the second, “As Plantation ‘N\*\*\*\*s’ of the South”; and the third, “A *Burlesque* on Bulwer’s Celebrated Play the *Lady of Lyon*”. The performances included “Old Gray Goose”, sung from the point of view of a man who hates his dying wife, meets a new woman at her funeral, and remarries two days later; “Virginia Rosebud” a satire in the form of a sentimental ballad where the singer plays a slave mourning either a child or lover sold away to a different plantation; “Susey Brown” a suggestive courtship tale; and the burlesque on the hit English play *The Lady of Lyon*, about two lovers separated by their class differences, in which the female characters would have been played by performers in both blackface and drag.<sup>154</sup>

Hawks writes that the minstrels “produced a marked effect even upon their sedate Japanese listeners, and thus confirmed the universal popularity of ‘the Ethiopians’ by a decided hit in Japan.”<sup>155</sup> William Speiden, Jr., a sixteen-year-old purser’s clerk, confirmed in his diary

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<sup>152</sup> Victor Fell Yellin, “Mrs. Belmont, Matthew Perry, and the ‘Japanese Minstrels,’” *American Music* 14, no. 3 (1996): 257–75, 268.

<sup>153</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 470.

<sup>154</sup> Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, 324, 36-7, 168, 172.

<sup>155</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 470.

**UNION OF AMERICA**

**UNITED STATES STEAM FRIGATE POWHATAN,**  
**Hakodadi, Island of Yesso, Empire of Japan. May 29th.**

An Ethiopian entertainment will be given by the  
**JAPANESE OLIO MINSTRELS,**  
on board this ship, this evening, weather favorable, to which  
the OFFICERS invite your attendance.

**PROGRAMME.**

PART FIRST.  
*As "Colored 'Gemmen' of the North."*  
**GRAND OVERTURE.**

1. VIRGINIA ROSE BUD . . . . . *Mr. Dabney.*
2. DARKIES SERENADE, . . . . . " *DeCosta.*
3. LADIES WON'T YOU MARRY? . . . . . " *Tripp.*
4. SALLY WEAVER, . . . . . " *Dabney.*
5. OH! MR. COON, Duett, *Messrs. Dabney & Reeves.*
6. OLD GREY GOOSE, . . . . . *Mr. Tripp.*

PART SECOND.  
*"As Plantation 'Niggas' of the South."*

1. LIFE BY DE GALLEY FIRE, . . . . . *Mr. DeCosta.*
2. GET UP IN DE MORNING, . . . . . " *Reeves.*
3. MASSA'R IN DE COLD! COLD GROUND, . . . . . " *Pablo.*
4. OLD AUNT SALLY, . . . . . " *Dabney.*
5. SUSEY BROWN, . . . . . *Full Band.*

**SOLO ON VIOLIN, by C. McLewee.**

The whole to conclude with a burlesque on  
Bulwer's celebrated play,  
**THE LADY OF LYONS,**  
introducing a new and much admired *pas de deux*, with  
the following cast of characters:—

CLAUDE MELLNOTTE, *alias* SAM JOHNSING, *Mr. Dabney.*  
PAULINE, *alias* POLLY ANN, . . . . . *Miss Tripp.*  
GINGER, . . . . . *Mr. McLewee.*  
MINSTRELS, &c., . . . . . *By the whole band.*

*Manager, Mr. W. J. Dabney.*  
*Musical Director, Mr. C. McLewee.*  
Performance to commence at 7 o'clock, precisely.

*Japan Expedition Press.*

Figure 5. Program for an "Ethiopian Concert", 1854, in Samuel Eliot Morison, "Old Bruin": Commodore Matthew C. Perry, 1794-1858, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 351.

that the Governor of Hakodate and his party “seemed highly pleased.”<sup>156</sup> While it is impossible to say much more about why the performance elicited such a response from the text alone, we can infer quite a bit. In blackface performance, the racial stereotype was the comedic lens that made things funny, turning songs and situations into satire. The caricatures likely resonated both because Japanese audiences may have already had some context for the anti-black tropes used and because they echoed with local humor traditions.

The high-ranking Japanese viewers of the Hakodate minstrel concert likely had some prior exposure to Euro-American racial hierarchies and anti-blackness. Despite Japan’s official isolation, “the higher classes of the Japanese ... were not only thoroughly acquainted with their own country, but knew something of the geography, the material progress, and contemporary history of the rest of the world. Questions were frequently asked by the Japanese which proved an information that, considering their isolated situation, was quite remarkable, until explained by themselves in the statement that periodicals of literature, science, arts, and politics, were annually received from Europe through the Dutch at Nagasaki.”<sup>157</sup> Euro-American ideas about race almost certainly circulated in nineteenth-century Japan alongside these other new ideas. Trade with the Dutch had also brought a small number of Black people to Japan. Depictions of Black sailors appear in Japanese prints from the sixteenth-century on and a small number of Black servants worked in Honshu’s port cities in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>158</sup> Used to seeing Black people in low-status jobs and looked down on by white people, these became the prevailing images of Black people in Japan. It is likely, then, that the Japanese audience

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<sup>156</sup>Ranzan, Wolter, and McDonough, *With Commodore Perry to Japan*, 133.

<sup>157</sup> Perry and Hawkes, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 463.

<sup>158</sup> Weiner, *Japan’s Minorities*, 85, 87.

members knew enough about the treatment of Black people in the west, and had perhaps internalized some of those norms themselves, to contextualize what they saw as a mockery of a specific internal other.

Simultaneously, nineteenth-century Japan also had a strong tradition of visual stereotype and cartoonish caricature of undesirable people, particularly the urban poor, disabled people, and the Ainu in art, especially prints.<sup>159</sup> For officials whose mandate was defending and extending the Japanese state into indigenous land, stereotypes of the Ainu probably resonated most closely. By the turn of the nineteenth century, a stock depiction of Ainu people had coalesced in Japanese visual art and performance. Ainu figures were depicted as large and hulking, with unibrows and often hair covering their whole bodies, and without distinctive features to distinguish individual Ainu figures even in images where Wajin figures are depicted as recognizable and unique.<sup>160</sup> In this context, although the relevant stereotypes were different, the minstrel performance reads as an attempt— and may have functioned successfully— to unite Americans and Japanese viewers as sophisticated enjoyers and producers of satire, which far from undermining an established social order, actually reinforced their position as imperialist states.

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<sup>159</sup> Siddle, *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan*, 49.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

The United States Exploring Expedition and the Perry Expedition to Japan represent a first phase of U.S. imperialism in the Pacific. Unlike European imperial efforts at territorial conquest, American efforts strove for commercial and scientific dominance, while at the same time explicitly acknowledging being in competition with Britain and France. Blackface minstrelsy existed within these efforts as part of the landscape of performance of U.S. imperial culture and power that also included violence calculated to instruct or discipline, martial displays such as military parades, and diplomatic ceremony. Minstrelsy on early Pacific voyages reflected American ideas about race and shaped how those ideas were conveyed and interpreted during early contact between Fijians, Tahitians, Japanese, and representatives of the American government. In the context of these expeditions, blackface performance served a number of purposes: simple entertainment, communicating American identity as distinct from European powers, and facilitating encounters through the exchange of performances. They also helped to elaborate the relationship and racial hierarchy between the Americans and the Pacific audience, whether that be a highly conditional equality as in Hakodate, or American superiority.

During the United States Exploring Expedition, blackface performances originated with the sailors, as opposed to the expedition's officers, and there were clearly gaps between the performers' intentions, the audience reception of the performance, and Wilke's interpretation of the events after the fact. In Tahiti, sailors performed within the context of disagreement with the missionaries of the London Missionary Society the over goals and methods of Euro-American imperialism in the Pacific. By allowing the performance of *The Robbers* and seeking out

musical performances from young Tahitian women the U.S. Ex. Ex. Officers circumvented missionary law that prohibited all non-religious performance and literature. Wilkes envisioned spreading American culture such as moralist fiction and technical tracts in Tahiti as an instructive element, but his embrace of these media for imperialist purposes opened up space for American culture beyond the appropriately middlebrow— including popular theater and blackface minstrelsy—to appear.

During the Exploring Expedition's time in Fiji, acts of violence such as Ro Viedovi's capture and the burning of Malolo, while devastating on a practical level, were also calculated to be communicative. They were a display of U.S. power, an effort to draw a clear distinction between the United States and European colonial nations, and intended as part of an instructive attempt to bring order and American justice to the islands. The blackface performance on the Peacock acted as an instance of cultural exchange between non-elites attempting to share elements of their respective cultures. Nonetheless, because of its racialized content, minstrelsy at times resonated within the imperial theater surrounding it and reinforced the justifications for imperial and racial violence.

On the Japan expedition, Perry deployed blackface minstrelsy as part of a strategy of theatricality that used performances of blackness as a uniquely American diplomatic currency. Perry perceived Japanese society as hyperformal and performative, requiring a commensurate response. While diplomacy dictated that Perry match Japanese standards in order to ensure the successful negotiation of a treaty, he believed doing so would run counter to American values of frankness and egalitarianism. As performance, blackface was able to fill a necessary role in the exchange of pageantry while at the same time undermining the formality Perry saw present in

Japanese culture. Furthermore, blackness was seen in Japan as exotic and foreign, and Perry's conspicuous choice of Black guards for his landing at Edo Bay and his choice to bring Japanese diplomats to minstrel performances, characterized blackness as an "export" for Japanese consumption and even suggested the presence of people of different races as a point of national pride. Actual black sailors, who were present on the expedition, were stripped of agency in the *Narrative's* narration of the treaty negotiations.

As Perry's crew and the diplomats of Hakodate sat together and watched the "Japanese Olio Minstrels" perform on the *Powhatan*, they shared in laughter at the expense of a range of black characters. While the particular characters the minstrels chose to represent originated from social conditions specific to the United States, they still resonated strongly with Japanese visual culture traditions of caricaturing foreigners or outsiders. In a borderland context like southern Hokkaido, where Japanese representatives attempted to wrest control from the island's indigenous Ainu people, comedic performance which mocked one nation's internal "Other", helped diplomats bond over the shared experience of—or at the very least desire for—imperial dominance. By 1854, then, the United States was in a position such that Perry could symbolically welcome Japanese diplomats into the club of imperial powers as a form of flattery and an affirmation of goodwill. This was a major contrast from the Wilkes expedition, only a decade and a half earlier, when the United States had been at pains to prove itself as a maritime, imperial power in its own right through knowledge production and destructive shows of force. In this context, blackface had functioned more as a quintessential representation of American culture to culturally distinguish the United States from European colonial powers. Minstrelsy also functioned, as in Fiji on the deck of the *Peacock*, as part of exchanges of cultures between

indigenous people and Americans sailors who were deeply curious about the Pacific world. These bodies in motion helped facilitate encounter and provide moments of connection and enjoyment.

Minstrelsy carried within it multiple meanings, depending on the role of the observer and the context of the performance. For performers themselves, the minstrel performances during the two expeditions I study were moments of cultural exchange that helped facilitate communication, particularly between Americans sailors and indigenous Fijians and Tahitians, throughout the encounter. For the commanders, the performances took on very different interpretations. Wilkes, who wrote after the performances, and had not been present for them, choose a specific interpretation that helped reinforce the justification for his actions. Perry, meanwhile, actively guided what his Japanese audience experienced, deftly incorporating the “Japanese Olio Minstrels” concert into his own theater of empire.

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