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# Pacific Horizons: The Transformation of European Perceptions of Paradise, 1880-1900

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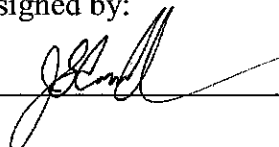
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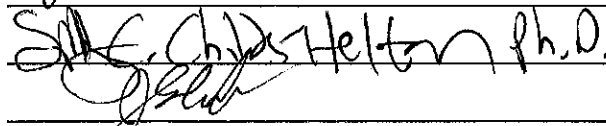
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**Pacific Horizons: The Transformation of European Perceptions of Paradise, 1880-1900**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of History

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Luke Sebastian Scalone

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In 1902, Laura Stubbs traveled from England to Samoa for one reason: to make a pilgrimage to the tomb of Robert Louis Stevenson. She was familiar with his books and appreciated him immensely. A year after her voyage, she published a short book describing the events of her adventure. In it, she writes, “I, a lover of the man, personally unknown to me, save through the potency of his pen, journeyed across the world in order to visit his grave, and to get into direct touch with his surroundings.”<sup>1</sup> To Stubbs, visiting Samoa gave her a sense of national pride. Stevenson was simultaneously a symbol of the United Kingdom and of Polynesia. On his grave, Stubbs remarks that on both sides of the inscription of Stevenson’s tomb were “graven a thistle and a hibiscus flower.”<sup>2</sup> Doubtlessly, Stubbs recognized the symbolism of both the thistle and hibiscus and took delight in their juxtaposition.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Stubbs’s trip to the Pacific was more casual than many voyages in times before. While many who traveled to the Pacific in its earlier history often stayed for extended periods of time, she went merely to see Stevenson’s grave. In her book, she writes that “[she] set out on [her] pilgrimage with but one end in view, namely, the grave.”<sup>4</sup> Laura Stubbs’s pilgrimage provides an excellent example of the divergence in ideas about South Sea utopias. While she viewed the islands of Samoa as a paradise, it was for different reasons than earlier voyagers would have conceived.

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Stubbs, *Stevenson’s Shrine : The Record of a Pilgrimage*, London: A Morning, the de la More Press (1903), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>3</sup> Historically, the thistle has been a symbol of Scotland, while the hibiscus is symbolic of the Polynesian world.

<sup>4</sup> Stubbs, 58.

From the earliest days in the Pacific Ocean, European visitors have remarked on its immense beauty and calm characteristics. Ferdinand Magellan gave the ocean its name in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, citing its peaceful qualities. Books and other writings have historically been filled with Edenic descriptions of the various Pacific islands. Some writers emphasized the beauty of the landscape, while other writers emphasized the appearance of the people who lived there; Helen Hay, for example, romanticized a young islander woman in her work, *The Rose of Dawn*. She writes, “As dusky wealth of Autumn, her sweet breast, / Gleaming and bare, was hung with ropes of flowers / Yellow and white, and in her curling hair / Glimmered the pure gardenia.”<sup>5</sup> While all of these examples show that writers viewed the Pacific islands as an idyll, they are continuations of the mythologies established by Captains Cook and Bougainville in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

But in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, European ideas of the Pacific as a utopia shifted in a number of ways. First of all, Europeans who traveled to their countries’ colonies felt patriotic due to their sense of cultural superiority. This new pride in one’s home country established the identity of individual islands as being deeply linked to the identity of the motherland. Secondly, the travelers who opted to visit the Pacific islands felt an intense transience, deepening the emotions that Europeans felt when visiting. Part of this ephemerality was due to the relatively brief duration of their stay on each island.

Thirdly, many Europeans were anxious that Pacific civilizations would be eclipsed by European hegemony. There was fear among many Europeans that their

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<sup>5</sup> Helen Whitney Hay, *The Rose of Dawn: A Tale of the South Sea*, New York: R.H. Russell (1901), 11.

society was expanding to the point where it would lead to the destruction of native society. When Stubbs took her trip to the Pacific, she exemplified both of these themes: her pilgrimage to Stevenson's tomb was a source of national pride, and her trip was short and impermanent.

Moreover, Europeans were deeply influenced by the natural environment and climate of the Pacific islands. The "air" of the islands is one the concept that recurs in writings on the topic. Echoing fears that modernity was causing the destruction of native societies, Europeans also saw the effects that industrialization and modernization had on Europe's landscapes. As a result of modernization, many Europeans saw the Pacific islands as a space that was untainted by industrialization. The distaste for European expansion caused many people to go to the islands. However, opinions about modernization were ambivalent. Some travelers considered European expansion to be a fundamentally good thing. As such, they took pride in being part of the development of new societies.

Among these four factors, Europeans came to view the Pacific islands as a paradise in the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The reasons that Polynesia was viewed as a paradise differed from those in decades prior. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans viewed the Pacific islands as a sexual space and the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the Pacific islands as a geography full of "heathen" savages. The ideas presented in this thesis show that the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century constituted a break from earlier representations of the Pacific islands.

## The Pacific Paradise, 1750-1880

The early mythology and utopian spirit of the Pacific Ocean was a product of the Enlightenment. Before navigators like Captains Samuel Wallis, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, and James Cook began charting the islands of the Pacific Ocean, Jean-Jacques Rousseau published his *Discourse on Inequality*. In this text, he suggested that long ago there was a property-free golden age before societal inequality began to take root. To him, humans living in the golden age were both compassionate and innocent, unlike Europeans steeped in what he viewed as corrupt civilized society.<sup>6</sup> Readers of the period understood this to mean that primitive societies had a good moral quality to them. This assumption that primitive societies were often benevolent has historically been called the myth of the noble savage.

Bougainville's ideas about the Pacific were a mirror of Rousseau's, who was a contemporary. The day after Bougainville landed on Tahiti in 1767, he remarked that

the periaquas were so numerous all about the ships, that we had much to do to warp in amidst the crowd of boats and the noise. All these people came crying out *tayo*, which means friend, and gave a thousand signs of friendship; they all asked nails and ear-rings of us. The periaquas were full of females; who for agreeable features, are not inferior to most European women; and who in point of beauty of the body might, with much reason, vie with them all. Most of these fair females were naked; for the men and the old women that accompanied them, had stripped them of their garments which they generally dress themselves in. The glances which they gave us from their periaquas seemed to discover some degree of uneasiness, notwithstanding the innocent manner in which they were given; perhaps, because nature has every where embellished their sex with a natural

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin Books, 1984 [1755]), 89 and 101.



timidity; or because even in those countries, where the ease of the golden age is still in use, women seem least to desire what they most wish for.<sup>7</sup>

Bougainville's remark that the people of Tahiti still live in the golden age suggests that he was thinking back to the "golden age" of Rousseau's work. From the moment he published his travel journal, the thought that the noble savage existed on the Pacific islands became pervasive. As Denis Diderot wrote his *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage* as a critique of European society, it becomes clear that he also believed in the nobility of the primitive Tahitian. In this short work, he wrote, "The life of savages is so simple, and our societies are such complicated machines! The Tahitian is close to the origin of the world, while the European is closer to its old age."<sup>8</sup> In a letter written by Philibert Commerçon, Bougainville's naturalist, the author calls Tahiti "Utopia" and its inhabitants "Utopians," evoking images of Thomas More's ideal society from two centuries prior.<sup>9</sup> This mythology spread throughout Europe and became widely held within the broad reading public.

Shortly after Bougainville completed his voyage around the world, Captain James Cook visited Tahiti. Even though Cook wrote a nuanced account of native life, his editor did not. When Cook gave his journal to John Hawkesworth to edit, Hawkesworth sensationalized it. In his rewriting of Cook's work, Hawkesworth mirrors Bougainville's

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<sup>7</sup> Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, *A Voyage Around the World Performed by Order of His Most Christian Majesty, in the Years 1766, 1767, 1768, and 1769*, trans. J.R. Forster (London: J. Nourse, 1772). Quoted in Bolyanatz, *Pacific Romanticism*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Denis Diderot, "Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage," *Political Writings*, ed. John Hope Mason and Robert Wokler (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992 [1796]), 40.

<sup>9</sup> Harry Liebersohn, *The Travelers' World: Europe to the Pacific*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (2006), 28.

conception that Tahiti was still in the golden age. At one point, he writes, “under these trees were the habitations of the people, most of them being only a roof without walls, and the whole scene realized the poetical fables of Arcadia.”<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, the Polynesian friendliness that Bougainville and Cook wrote about were a response to the actions of Captain Samuel Wallis. When Bougainville arrived on the island, he thought that he was the first European to ever set foot there, but Wallis was arrived there approximately nine months prior. Due to the speed that 18<sup>th</sup> century ships traveled, it would have been impossible for Bougainville to know about Wallis’s visit. During Wallis’s stay, the Tahitians attacked the *Dolphin* and its crew, but were defeated. According to Alexander Bolyanatz, the Tahitians learned that they could pacify Europeans through three strategies:

1. Any delay in giving women to European sailors was dangerous.
2. Overt displays of friendship were necessary.
3. Women were not permitted to hesitate or refuse sexual relations with Europeans.<sup>11</sup>

From this, it is clear that there were never any so-called noble savages on Tahiti. Despite this, the idea that Tahitians had objectively good moral qualities spread throughout literate Europe. However, these conceptions of Pacific islanders would be challenged by missionaries in the coming decades.

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<sup>10</sup> Byron et al., *An account of the voyages undertaken by the order of His present Majesty for making discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere*, ed. John Hawkesworth (London: Printed for W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1773), 83.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Bolyanatz H., *Pacific Romanticism: Tahiti and the European Imagination*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers (2004), 95-96.

In 1795, the London Missionary Society was formed as an organization that would traverse the world to convert other peoples to Christianity. From the genesis of the society, missionaries were determined to visit Tahiti as one of the first missionary destinations, rather than anywhere else on earth. According to George Cousins, Cook's sensationalized journal "aroused much interest" in the reports about Tahitians and other islanders in the South Pacific. Indeed, they were appalled by the stories they read.<sup>12</sup> By 1800, the first chapel had been established on Tahiti. In spite of this achievement, the London Missionary Society's expedition was an absolute failure until King Pomare converted to Christianity in 1812 as a way to consolidate political power. Moreover, 1811 saw the arrival of more reinforcements for the missionary cause. Between 1815 and 1830, the Society Islands experienced a rapid Christianization.

As the Pacific islands became increasingly Christianized, the Rousseauian concept of the noble savage and golden age died. In 1851, Ida Pfeiffer, an early globe-trotter, wrote that "the Tahitian people are endowed with none of the more noble sentiments of humanity, but that their pleasures are merely animal."<sup>13</sup> While she did not view Tahitians as having any moral significance, she lamented the islanders' lack of naïveté. Upon arriving at the island, she wrote, "before we could come to an anchor we were surrounded by half-a-dozen piroques, or boats, manned by Indians, who climbed up

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<sup>12</sup> George Cousins, *From Island to Island in the South Seas; Or, the Work of a Missionary Ship*, London: London Missionary Society (1894), 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ida Pfeiffer, *A Woman's Journey Around the World, from Vienna to Brazil, Chili, Tahiti, China, Hindostan, Persia and Asia Minor*, trans. Percy Sinnett (London: Ingram, Cooke, & Co. 1851), 84.

for [sic] all sides upon the back to offer us fruit and shell-fish, but not as formerly for red rags or glass beads – such golden times for travelers are over.”<sup>14</sup> While Pfeiffer’s sentiments show a break from the ideas that Enlightenment explorers had about Pacific islanders, they also express her view that the age of the traveler has expired. Certainly, she thought there was nothing new to learn about the world. She could not have been more mistaken.

### **Colonialism, Race, and Superiority**

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was an explosion in global tourism, and those who came to the Pacific Ocean often felt a sense of cultural superiority over the native inhabitants. While travelers visited the islands for various reasons, voyages to the Pacific reaffirmed European beliefs about progress and led to a sense of patriotism. In doing so, Europeans perpetuated racist concepts of white supremacy and “white man’s burden.” Indeed, Europeans who arrived in the Pacific islands believed they were civilizing the people who lived there. While this civilizing project began with the London Missionary Society’s expeditions, the impact of Europe’s civilizing mission gained much force at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

There were many different ways in which Europeans placed themselves at the top of Pacific Islander society. For one, many travelers and colonial administrators viewed the world in nationalistic terms. British colonial administrators, for example, were more inclined to view their territories as being distinctly British. The French also took great

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 71.

pride in their colonial possessions. Besides nationalism, Europeans also saw the world in terms of whiteness. Certainly, the concept of white supremacy was at the center of 19<sup>th</sup> century colonialism. As in other colonial possessions, Europeans placed themselves at the top of the social hierarchy because they were white. This supremacy finds its roots in social Darwinism, which was an ideology that was becoming widespread in European society by the turn of the century.

Many visitors from the United Kingdom opted to judge various territories in terms of their “Englishness.” Katherine Bates, a woman who traveled through Oceania and the Pacific Rim, writes, “Australia, as a whole, appears to me, I must confess, most uninteresting; a second or third rate England, with the substitution of a 'climate' for our own fogs and bitter winds.”<sup>15</sup> The lack of Australia’s Englishness was actually a detriment to it in Bates’s opinion.

Lady Barker was another early globe-trotter. She lived in a number of British colonies with her husband, who was a colonial administrator. In her book, *Colonial Memories*, she states that “New Zealand has always been beautifully and distinctly English, and the grand imperial idea has there fallen on congenial soil and taken deep root.”<sup>16</sup> In 1893, William Lever, who would later become a member of the British parliament, visited Chicago’s Columbian Exposition and took a trip around the Pacific.

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<sup>15</sup> Katherine E. Bates, *Kaleidoscope: Shifting Scenes from East to West* (London: Ward and Downey, 1889), vi.

<sup>16</sup> Barker, 2.

Lever would agree with Lady Barker's assertion that no land on earth compares to the Englishness of New Zealand. In his *Following the Flag*, he writes,

There is no country we have visited on our travels that resembles in so many respects the best of all we have at home—the best of our climate, the best of our soil, the best of our people; and for scenery and natural beauties and wonders we have nothing even to compare with what is to be seen in New Zealand. We agree with the prophecy that in the future it will be the Britain of the Pacific.<sup>17</sup>

Not only does Lever take immense pride in the territory that is possessed by his homeland, but he subscribes to a belief in progress with Britain at the apex of global civilization. It is important to note that he does not mention the native Maori, but instead “the best of our people.” Such a statement suggests that the British viewed themselves as being better than the indigenous peoples of the Pacific colonies. By defining the islands of the Pacific as being British, settlers and visitors were able to raise the status of their island and compare it to Britain proper. From this perspective, it is easy to see that the islands of the Pacific were constructed as a subjective utopia. Rather than attempting to objectively classify Oceania as the world's most perfect place, the islands were more perfect than everywhere else on the planet.

The importance of European-ness was not limited to landscapes on various islands. Europeans also judged the value of the Pacific in terms of the inhabitants who lived there. In the eyes of travelers and settlers, those who seemed more European were better than those who did not. Writers in the late 19th century perceived Europeans as having a form of civility that other races did not. To some authors, it seemed that white

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<sup>17</sup> William Hesketh Lever, *Following the Flag; Jottings of a Jaunt Round the World* (London: S. Marshall, 1893), 91.

men could do no wrong. In *An Affair in the South Seas*, Leigh Irvine tells the story of a group of men and women in San Francisco who travel to a fictional island called Atollia to establish a utopian community. When telling the narrator about the island, Dr. Saville, the leader of the expedition, states that the island is “not peopled by whites but it’s a white man’s country.”<sup>18</sup>

When the settlers arrive at Atollia, they develop a close relationship with the natives, though Europeans are the island’s administrators. Some of the settlers discover that the natives do not have a sincere loyalty to the government, as another man convinced them that he is a magician and has special powers. To break the other man’s chokehold on the native population, the settlers bring a number of phonographs into a cave and play a recording that claims to be from the ancestors of the natives. The recordings tell the native populations that they must not listen to the magician. Instead, the recordings say, “follow the white man and victory is yours.”<sup>19</sup> From this statement, there is the implication that Europeans viewed victory as their teleological end.

This statement is mirrored in Alfred St. Johnson’s *A South Sea Lover*. In this text, the Englishman Christian North falls in love with a Pacific Islander woman called Utamè, but she has a tabu placed on her by Faaori, the chief of Oneroa.<sup>20</sup> Despite this, they fall in love and often sneak away from the village to spend time together. Unfortunately, Tama-iru, another man, is also in love with Utamè and tries to snatch her away, so she

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<sup>18</sup> Leigh H. Irvine, *An Affair in the South Seas: A Story of Romantic Adventure* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1901), 28.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>20</sup> In the story, Oneroa is the eastern portion of an unnamed island in the Pacific.

kills him. In response, the neighboring tribe declares war on North's tribe. In the ensuing chaos, North and his best friend, Soma (an islander), are taken as prisoners. After many months, the chief of the neighboring tribe decides that he will sentence North and Soma to death. Faaori's men tie up Soma and North, then leave them in a hut while they make preparations to burn them alive. Due to these circumstances, Soma falls into a deep despair.

In response to this, the author writes, "it is in times of this sort that the superiority of the European shows itself; the Polynesian fights boldly as long as he has a chance of victory, but he has none of the moral courage which struggles on as bravely against defeat and disaster."<sup>21</sup> Like Irvine, St. Johnson's writing shows that he subscribed to the belief that Europeans were more civil than other races around the world. This represents the new Pacific utopia well because it is constructed with Europeans possessing beneficial qualities that Pacific islanders were incapable of having.

Like the landscapes of the Pacific, natives were judged in terms of their whiteness. If natives had any amount of white ancestry, they were viewed as being more civilized than those who did not. In *The Rose of Dawn*, Helen Hay constructs a number of characters with caricatured racial features. In this story, Taka is a young Fijian woman who is planning to marry a man called Uhila. However, she falls in love with another man called Malua. When Uhila discovers that Taka is secretly spending time with Malua, he is overcome by jealousy but is able to suppress it. About this, Hay writes, "A

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<sup>21</sup> Alfred St. Johnson, *A South Sea Lover: A Romance* (New York: Macmillan, 1890), 271.



great nobility / Slept in his native breast, and those pale drops / Of northern blood had taught him self-control.”<sup>22</sup> Hay did not depict Uhila as learning civility, but instead it was innate merely because he was of European descent. Conversely, she portrays the indigenous people as being violent and irrational. Later in the tale, Uhila succumbs to his jealousy and decides that he will try to kill Malua. Hay writes, “The primal lust had burst the slender bar, / Weak white man’s morals. Now to slay and slay.”<sup>23</sup> In this instance she creates a dichotomy between the European and the native where the European has important virtues valued in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The typical European reader would likely have been disgusted by the violence that natives supposedly exhibited. This further places the white man at the top of the Pacific utopia. In earlier conceptions, Europeans were perceived as being more balanced with Pacific islanders in terms of social status and virtue.

In spite of all the negative depictions that were created about Pacific islanders, Oceania remained a paradise in the minds of Europeans because it reaffirmed their belief in cultural superiority. With the Pacific, travelers could go there and compare themselves to the inhabitants based on Eurocentric views of morality, intelligence, and other virtues. Indeed, the Pacific islands became a utopia distinct from any that had ever existed in times past. While the view that the South Seas were an Edenic paradise persisted, the thought that Europeaness made a land better became prominent. However, this was not the only way that the Pacific differed from previous ideas of utopia. The advent of

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<sup>22</sup> Hay, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 43.

modernity led to rapid changes in the life of Europeans, including the way that they thought about time and space. This reconfiguration of modernity made the Pacific a much more accessible places. Rather than remaining intangible like Thomas More's Utopia, Francis Bacon's New Atlantis, or Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's New Cythera,<sup>24</sup> this Oceanic utopia was a place where more Europeans could actually go. The introduction of the steam ship allowed numerous people to circumnavigate the globe quickly and more affordably than ever before. However, this is not to say that traveling to the Pacific was inexpensive. Indeed, it was an endeavor in which only the upper classes of European society could take part.

### **Modernity, Space, and Time**

Writers as early as 1880 could see the shrinking distances around the world and the faster pace of time. With this shrinking sense of space came the possibility for voyagers to travel all around the globe. Katherine Bates points out that "every one travels over the whole world nowadays. The unknown in geography has vanished, as time and space seem to be vanishing in these days of telephones and phonographs."<sup>25</sup> The inclusiveness of Bates's word "every one" exemplifies the idea that it was far more than just the supremely wealthy who traveled. Lady Barker would concur with Bates.

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<sup>24</sup> While people like Bougainville actually did go to Tahiti in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was unreasonable for anybody to go there besides navigators and long-term settlers like missionaries due to the length and cost of the trip. To circumnavigate the globe, it would have taken two and a half years.

<sup>25</sup> Bates, x.

She writes that “the home-dweller proper hardly exists in this twentieth century, and the globe-trotter has taken his place.”<sup>26</sup>

Books at the end of the nineteenth century were published with titles ranging from *Sunshine and Surf; A Year's Wanderings in the South Seas* to *Following the Flag; Jottings of a Jaunt Round the World*, it is clear that travel could happen in less time than ever before. The ease of movement allowed figures like Laura Stubbs to make pilgrimages as a way to show respect for cultural icons. In times prior, it would have been impossible to make a voyage for a reason such as this. European colonialism in the Pacific Ocean redefined a utopia as a place you could go to visit, rather than have to stay permanently. Regrettably, the increasing ease of arriving in Oceania also meant it was easy to depart. As such, the Pacific utopia was impermanent.

When Laura Stubbs went to visit Stevenson’s tomb in Samoa, she left as quickly as she arrived. She undertook this trip simply for the sake of making a pilgrimage to the burial site of a man she respected immensely. The understanding that people could arrive at an island and depart whenever they chose was also shown in Irvine’s work, *An Affair in the South Seas: A Story of Romantic Adventure*. The narrator was apprehensive about joining Dr. Saville’s utopian community, so the doctor responded, “if you don't like the looks of things, you can return with the ship that we send back for more machinery and provisions.”<sup>27</sup> As there were well-established networks of trade and travel across the

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<sup>26</sup> Barker, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Irvine, 18.

Pacific by the end of the nineteenth century, it was not unreasonable for people to come and go at their own pace.

While a number of travelers came to various islands in the Pacific to find paradise, the French placed their emphasis on the island of Tahiti. Gauguin came to Tahiti in 1891 as a way to escape from what he perceived as being a corrupted European civilization. As he came to the end of his first stint in Tahiti, he decided, seemingly spontaneously, to leave his lover and go back to Europe. Without any elaboration, Gauguin writes, “I was compelled to return to France. Imperative family affairs called me back.”<sup>28</sup> He also notes that he was not the only one leaving Tahiti that day. When remarking on the sadness of his child lover as his ship departed, Gauguin writes, “here and there were others like her, tired, silent, gloomy, watching without a thought the thick smoke of the ship which was bearing all of us—lovers of a day—far away, forever.”<sup>29</sup> To Gauguin, Tahiti was a paradise that existed for ever the slightest amount of time. This is a departure from previous forms of utopia, where they existed permanently. In previous conceptions of Oceanic utopia, there was not the opportunity to come and go, but only to remain.

Another French sailor who spent some time on Tahiti during his time in the navy was Julien Viaud, who took the pen name Pierre Loti. After he left the navy, Viaud wrote a semi-autobiographical book called *The Marriage of Loti* about his experience on

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Gauguin, *Noa Noa: The Tahitian Journal*, trans. O.T. Theis (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1985 [1901], 64.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

the island and his love of its women. While Rarahu is his only lover in the story, her character was a mixture of a number of different women that he met there. One thing notable about the story is the emphasis on the transience of his time there. Throughout the second half of the book, the reader can find sentences and phrases like “the hour of departure drew near,” “it was the last evening of our stay,” and “this, my last evening, was at an end.”<sup>30</sup>

Not only did Viaud feel anxiety about leaving the island, but he felt that he might never come back. About his last night on Tahiti, he writes, “I was in dread of seeing daybreak, and of arriving only just in time to join the Reindeer without being able to go back to my dear little home, or even giving a last embrace to Rarahu, whom I might never see again.”<sup>31</sup> As it turned out, he did have another opportunity to see her, but his second visit was wrought with the same transience. Viaud’s angst about losing Tahiti was a recurring event, felt by numerous sailors in the French navy. While Viaud had some hope that he would return, it was dim. He writes, “I could leave her with a doubtful but consoling hope of returning—and with perhaps a vague hope of eternity.”<sup>32</sup> The desire to remain in the Pacific colored the memories of all sailors and travelers who visited.

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<sup>30</sup> Pierre Loti, *The Marriage of Loti*, trans. Clara Bell (New York: Frederick A Stokes Co., 1925 [1880]), 132, 133, and 136.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 141. In this quote, the “Reindeer” was the name of the narrator’s ship.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 191.

## European Hegemony in the Pacific

While the impermanence of the Pacific paradise could be taken to mean that European visitors would not stay very long, there was also an anxiety that the peoples and cultures of Oceania would be eclipsed by European society. From the beginning of Captain Cook's first voyage, he mandated that his crew did not overpower natives because he knew the European society had a tendency to destroy other cultures. When the missionaries arrived, they actively tried to replace Pacific culture with Christian culture with substantial success.

By the end of the century, some Europeans began to feel that their continent and culture were becoming decadent. Even though Europeans thought themselves to be morally superior, they did not wish for Pacific civilization to be entirely replaced by European society. The desire to preserve the peoples of the Pacific was, in part, a result of the strong *mythos* of Oceania. A number of Europeans compared the South Seas of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with that of the age of Cook and Bougainville. About Hawaii, Lever writes,

Travelling in the Sandwich Islands is quite easy. The islanders have adopted European methods, and also even our forms of government. If Captain Cook returned he certainly would not know the place nor the habits and customs of the natives, for now-a-days instead of settling the question of the government by a "Battle Royal," followed by a banquet for the victors, with "Long Pig" (cannibal style) for the principle dish, the Islanders adopted the comparatively peaceful and unpicturesque ballot box, with election address, caucuses, and all the modern "improvements."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Lever, 22.

Because Cook's goal was to preserve the peoples and cultures of the Pacific, he would have been disappointed with the actions of European colonial administrators and missionaries because they replaced much of classical Pacific civilization with European civilization. Alfred St. Johnson was also critical of European expansion into the Pacific. He writes, "before the blighting breath of civilisation, which since then has done so much to ruin the islands of the South Pacific, had blown upon them, all white men were considered by the unsophisticated people to be peers."<sup>34</sup> The fear that native Polynesian cultures were facing extinction caused Europeans to give thought to the preservation of these societies. As a result, the men and women who feared the disappearance of cultures in the Pacific developed warmer feelings for the entire region. While this was not a view shared by all travelers to the Pacific, it was an anxiety shared by a wide variety of people.

Paul Gauguin also felt that the Pacific islands were dying as a result of European hegemony. When he arrived, he was disappointed that the Tahitian capital seemed too European. About this, he writes,

Life at Papeete soon became a burden. It was Europe—the Europe which I had thought to shake off—and that under the aggravating circumstances of colonial snobbism, and the imitation, grotesque even to the point of caricature, of our customs, fashions, vices, and absurdities of civilization. Was I to have made this far journey, only to find the very thing which I had fled?<sup>35</sup>

Gauguin's disgust in what he saw in Papeete also shows that travelers defined Europe as being civilized in contrast to the incivility of Pacific islanders. To Gauguin, the goal was to escape from civilization because he found primitive life to be more desirable. In his

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<sup>34</sup> St. Johnson, 52.

<sup>35</sup> Gauguin, 2.

early days at Papeete, Gauguin found a lover named Titi, but he wound up rejecting her because of “her half-white blood.”<sup>36</sup> After rejecting her, he says that he “felt that she could not teach [him] any of the things [he] wished to know, that she had nothing to give of that special happiness which [he] sought.”<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Childs argues that Gauguin believed that he was a witness to the final stages of a vanishing paradise.<sup>38</sup> Gauguin thought it important that he get to experience the authentic Tahiti that Bougainville and Cook would have experienced, not the setting of European colonialism. To Gauguin, this fading culture became a utopia because of its ephemerality. It would not last much longer so it was necessary to experience it as soon as possible. Of course, Gauguin’s belief was misguided. Tahitian culture did not die under pressure from European civilization. Instead, Tahiti became a “third space,” or a hybrid of Europe and Tahiti. The death of Tahiti existed only in his mind, very much like the utopia that he constructed to describe it.

### **Environment and Paradise**

Europeans admired the South Pacific based on a sense of cultural superiority and changing senses of time and space. Further, they viewed the Pacific islands in a utopian manner for environmental reasons. First of all, the islands in the Pacific had a salubrious and vibrant landscape. European settlers and other voyagers had no difficulty acclimating to the climate. Moreover, the rise of Western modernity caused Europeans to

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth C. Childs, *Vanishing Paradise: Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), xvii.



place extra value on the land and environment that surrounded them, as they realized modern innovations like roads, trains, buildings, and other structures would eclipse the natural landscapes of the region. To those living through rapid modernization, it seemed that everything in European society was decaying. As a result, they sought an escape from these issues and sojourned to the Pacific.

One location that has always been well-loved by travelers is New Zealand. Situated further south than other islands in the Pacific, New Zealand occupied a unique place in the hearts of settlers and other European travelers. Lady Barker is one woman who spoke highly of New Zealand. As the wife of a colonial administrator, Lady Barker spent her life all around the British Empire, and New Zealand was a colony that was more deeply cherished than many of Britain's other global colonies. In her memoir of life in New Zealand, she writes, "The surrounding country was a sort of rolling prairie, ideally suitable for sheep, with the magnificent Southern Alps for a background. And what a climate, what a sky, and what an air!"<sup>39</sup> It is significant that she chooses to focus on the air of the colony above any other part of the environment. Certainly, the salubrious air trumps even the landscape.

Another 19<sup>th</sup> century writer, Leigh Irvine, writes about the climate of the Pacific islands in his work, *An Affair in the South Seas*. As stated earlier, the narrator refused to join an expedition to an imaginary island called Atollia. The Pacific islands, in his mind, are far too isolated from the rest of Western society. Despite his apprehensions, he

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<sup>39</sup> Barker, 3.

reluctantly chooses to join this voyage. Upon the troupe's arrival on Atollia, Irvine writes that the island's "air was tropical, the sun bright, the sky ripe with the colors of the afternoon."<sup>40</sup> While it appears that this line is indicative of visual stimulation, it is important to note that the author describes the air as being "tropical." It is evident here that Irvine is placing significance on the air's quality, which has the connotation of being distant, warm, and peaceful. Irvine's characterization of the Atollian climate as being salubrious is a reflection of what other Europeans thought.

Besides the intangible quality of the climate of the Pacific islands, descriptions of physical setting are common in fictional novels, memoirs, ship logs, and other records. However, writings about the Pacific islands focus on the crispness, vibrancy, and beauty of the islands and sea. Certainly, a beautiful setting was crucial to European representations of the South Pacific. Many people who learned about these islands would have found them paradisiacal based on physical setting alone. This is integral to the love that Europeans had for the Pacific islands.

George Cousins wrote extensively about the beauty of the Pacific islands, namely the Society Islands where he did his mission. While he held Polynesian natives in contempt due to their perceived moral depravity and "gross licentiousness," he admired the Pacific islands as a space of unimaginable beauty.<sup>41</sup> When he was in the Society Islands, he wrote that "[Tahiti] is of volcanic origins and its lofty sharply-cut mountain peaks, its deep luxuriant valleys, and its rich fruits and flowers make it quite a gem of the

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<sup>40</sup> Irvine, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Cousins, 15.

ocean.”<sup>42</sup> Cousins’s admiration towards the island’s environment is imbued with a form of religious reverence.

Laura Stubbs also writes about the ecology of Samoa, where she took her pilgrimage to the tomb of Robert Louis Stevenson. From the moment she steps on the island, she is dazzled by the scene before her. In 1903, she published an account of this voyage and states,

Here I stood on a little grass-covered wharf, and, looking down through the translucent water, made my first acquaintance with a coral garden. Oh! that wonderful water world with its wealth of sprays, flowers, and madrepores, amongst which the tiny rainbow-coloured fishes darted in and out like submarine humming-birds—wingless, but brilliant—living flecks of colour, flashing through a fairy region. The unreality of the scene took hold of me. If this were real, I must be enchanted, looking downwards with enchanted eyes.<sup>43</sup>

One of the most striking aspects of her depiction is that she described the scene as being “unreal.” To Stubbs, it seemed that the beauty was so powerful that it could not even be an actual part of the earth. Instead, the only realistic option was that she “must be enchanted.” There is no doubt that she saw Samoa as the sort of paradise that can be found in dreams. Yet, this depiction was not based around native peoples, or technological advancement, or other common comparative qualities. Instead, Stubbs was “enchanted” by the island’s setting alone.

In addition to the physical properties of the Pacific islands, representations of the Pacific paradise also emerged from the comparisons that Europeans made between the Pacific islands and the European continent. This comparative perspective is linked

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 14-15.

<sup>43</sup> Stubbs, 6.

deeply to the industrialization that occurred in Europe during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Europeans saw the effects that industrialization had on the landscape and began to pine for the more “natural” Europe that existed before industrialization. As a result, Europeans sought out less “developed” territories to experience primitive lives. In the rhetoric of 19<sup>th</sup> century European colonial discourse, this was called “going native.” However, some colonial territories began to develop. In his progressivist history, Edward Wakefield, for example, says that New Zealand “resembles a photograph of a horse at full gallop.”<sup>44</sup> While colonists were ambivalent about this development, it was more common for Europeans to feel nostalgic for the Polynesia that existed at the time of Cook and Bougainville’s first contacts with Tahiti.

Alfred St Johnson’s work also focuses on aspects of the environment. Near the beginning of the novel, St Johnson makes it clear where the story is placed temporally. He writes that the narrative took place in days where “ships were of oak, and smoke and steam had not conspired to defeat the will of God and the pure airs of heaven.”<sup>45</sup> Certainly, Europeans recognized that the society of Europe and the Pacific were changing quickly, but this story took place in a grander time where airs were “pure” and the world was still as God wanted. This suggests that Europeans revered the Pacific in the years before European contact. In spite of this development, some Europeans went to the Pacific in hopes of fleeing Western society.

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<sup>44</sup> Edward Wakefield, *New Zealand After Fifty Years* (London: Cassel & Company, Ltd., 1889), v.

<sup>45</sup> St Johnson, 4.

Paul Gauguin, mentioned earlier, is one man who left his life in France because he hoped to live a more primitive, pure life in the South Pacific. Like many Europeans, Tahiti was his destination of choice. Upon landing in Papeete, the capital of Tahiti, he was shocked to find the city resembled those back in Europe. In his work, *Noa Noa*, he claims that he was disappointed that Papeete was in the shape of “filthy Europe.”<sup>46</sup> To escape this, he fled to a less developed region of the island in order to live in a small Tahitian community, untouched by Western society. This anecdote adds nuance to the Pacific paradise because it shows that Europeans did not just want to experience the Pacific to engage with other Europeans, but they needed the so-called primitive aspects to make the islands into a true utopia.

It is quite clear, then, that Gauguin felt nostalgia for a Tahiti that was untainted by Europeans, although he had never experienced it himself. Others, however, found that the modernization of Pacific islands was good. William Hesketh Lever, who went to the Columbian Exposition of 1893, thought this. When he refers to New Zealand as the “Britain of the Pacific,” his statement is not just one of nationalism, as mentioned earlier in this text. Instead, it also carries the hope that New Zealand will also be an industrial society like Britain. Lever’s tone is one of admiration. It is clear he is not condemning the development of New Zealand, but, like Edward Wakefield, he finds the progress to be beneficent.

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<sup>46</sup> Gauguin, 2.

Even though figures like Paul Gauguin, Edward Wakefield, Alfred St Johnson, and William Lever experienced a developing Polynesia, there were many people on various islands who did not. When Laura Stubbs went to Samoa, she described the island as being “a memory apart” and “virginal.”<sup>47</sup> To her, Samoa was entirely undisturbed by the growth of Europe into the rest of the world. While it seems that this may have just been a matter of perception, she notes clearly that there were not any roads on the island.<sup>48</sup> Evidently, Samoa was barely disturbed by European expansion. Indeed, most disturbance would likely have come from Robert Louis Stevenson, who the natives called “Tusitala,” or “storyteller.”

It thus becomes clear that there were two ways which Europeans began to view the Pacific as an environmental utopia. First of all, the warm climate, healthy air, and vibrant landscape stood in contrast to Europe, with its fluctuating, cooler, and less pleasant climate. As such, many Europeans sought to travel to the islands as a way to experience the climate and landscape. Figures like Robert Louis Stevenson moved to the Pacific islands solely because the sojourners were getting old and the climate of the Pacific could sustain them longer than if they were in Europe. Moreover, the rapid modernization and industrialization of Europe and its colonies exacerbated the desire to visit more primitive lands.

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<sup>47</sup> Stubbs, 7.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 6.

## Conclusion

The utopia that Europeans constructed in the South Pacific at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was far more than a dying paradise. In addition to the belief that European civilization was eclipsing the Pacific, the Oceanic utopias were created by innovations that reshaped the way Europeans thought about space and time. Thanks to the rise of the steamship, figures like Laura Stubbs, Lady Barker, and Katherine Bates were able to travel around the Pacific quickly and with ease. For individuals like Julien Viaud, these innovations were both a blessing and a curse. While it did become easy to go to a destination, it was equally easy to depart.

Furthermore, the rise of imperial nationalism created hierarchies that gave Europeans immense pride in their home countries. Europeans who traveled to colonies in the Pacific simultaneously saw the expansiveness of their home countries' empires, as well as reaffirmed their cultural and racial status as being more virtuous than Pacific islanders.

Environmental aspects also contributed to the idealization of the Pacific islands as a paradise. Throughout writings about the Pacific islands, mentions of the Pacific's clean, salubrious air is pervasive. Moreover, voyagers saw the landscapes of the Pacific islands as being sublime. In the minds of some writers, experiencing the Pacific was nearly a divine experience.

Among these four core concepts, the changing definition of utopia in the South Pacific moved from the sexual utopia of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the heretical savagery of

the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the paradise of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as marked by cultural and racial supremacy, modernization, and the environment. The Pacific islands became a suitable utopia for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Today, we must continue to consider these themes because they are still significant to our perceptions of the Pacific islands. A great many tourist pamphlets, websites, and more advertise the islands with rhetoric that claims that the Pacific islands continue to exist in a time before industrialization. While the theme of cultural and racial superiority no longer is as prominent, one still can sense the transience of the visits to the Pacific islands and the difficulties that climate change are placing on the Pacific.

When modern travelers visit the Pacific islands, they usually only stay for a short vacation. As such, visits to these islands are even more transient than the experience of Pierre Loti and Paul Gauguin. While native culture has not been eliminated, many islands are now populated by a combination of East Asian, Pacific Islander, and Western cultures.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the South Pacific became an enormously popular tourist destination. Thanks to the developments of airlines, commercial cruise ships, and other advances in transportation, Hawaii became more accessible to Americans. Indeed, Hawaii became a massive tourist destination after it was adopted as the United States's 50<sup>th</sup> state in the second half of the century. The return of American soldiers after World War II was one contribution that led to deeper interest in Hawaii, as well as the rest of the South Pacific.



Between World War II and the ascendance of Hawaii to statehood, an immense amount of cultural material was produced about the South Pacific in the 1950s and 1960s. A number of James Michener novels were published in the 1940s and 1950s, including one story which became the Broadway musical, *South Pacific*. Moreover, there was a large number of films published in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as well. One important film was *The Mutiny of the Bounty*, featuring Marlon Brando.

With new cultural works about the Pacific, Polynesian women became re-sexualized. Indeed, post cards, advertisements, commercials, and other works marketed to tourists emphasized the beauty of native Hawaiian women with their grass skirts. The re-sexualization of Pacific Islander women feeds back into old ideas that were held about them in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to the re-sexualization of the women in the Pacific, Pacific Islander cultures became commercialized. With this commercialization, tourists did not see Pacific Islander culture as it truly was. Instead, Pacific Islander culture was represented as tourists wanted to see it.

Some organizations are attempting to counteract these changes, like the Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii with an experience that *seems* authentic to tourists<sup>49</sup>. Of course, the Polynesian Cultural Center is not the only organization attempting to showcase traditional Pacific Islander culture. Certainly, thousands of people each year experience a luau or hula dance.

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<sup>49</sup> <http://www.polynesia.com/>

Despite efforts to counteract the changes in representation of the Pacific islands during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the islands are still incredibly commercialized. Besides Hawaii, tourists can take trips to Tahiti, Samoa, Tonga, or any number of other islands. While many travelers are still interested in Pacific Islander culture, the importance of the islands comes more from their environment than from the people who inhabit them. Pacific tourism today is typically based around the beaches and parks, rather than any form of cultural immersion. As such, the climate is of critical importance.

The climate of today's Pacific islands is no different than the climate Europeans experienced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, the environment is becoming an increasingly hostile force in the Pacific. The effects of global climate change have caused sea waters to rise. The island country of Kiribati, for example, is forecasted to be the first country to succumb to rising sea levels. Thousands of Pacific islanders living on coral atolls and small islands will be displaced as well. As we move into the Pacific century, it is necessary to pay close attention to environmental issues and the environmental history of the region of the world. After all, the Pacific islands may cease to exist if sea levels continue to rise.

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