

Peter Hulme, “Dominica and Tahiti: Tropical Islands Compared” in *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire*, ed Felix Driver and Luciana Martins, Chicago University Press, 2005), pp. 77-90.

“That very special reek / *tristes, tristes tropiques*”¹

The aim of this paper is to compare the ways in which the peoples and landscapes of Dominica and Tahiti have been described by outsiders. As tropical islands Dominica and Tahiti have some general similarities: they are roughly the same size, both are mountainous, they have roughly the same population, Dominica is about the same distance north of the equator as Tahiti is south. However, my starting point is that Dominica and Tahiti, and their histories, are so obviously different in so many respects that the challenge is to find more meaningful ways of bringing them together, ways which might illuminate the nature of “tropical views and visions”. In trying to bring the islands together, the paper pays particular attention to the ways in which they *have been* brought together over the last two and half centuries, the ways in which frames of reference have been created in which Tahiti and Dominica both have a particular place, and often a special place, the principal frame being that of the imaginative construction we have come to think of as tropicality.²

1

There are, of course, many differences between the two islands and their histories. Dominica first came to European attention in 1493 when Columbus sailed past it and gave it that name – its inhabitants had called it Waitukubuli; it was nearly 300 years later before Europe became aware of Tahiti, which – after a struggle – kept its indigenous name. As far as Europeans were first concerned Dominica was home to a savage tribe of man-eating Indians, the Caribs, while Tahiti was populated by hospitable natives who were equally free with their food and their sexual favours. As the Caribbean became better known in the early sixteenth century, and then the Pacific in the late eighteenth, both Dominica and Tahiti formed one pole of a set of persistent dualisms, contrasted with other islands and their peoples in terms of degrees of savagery: Dominica as the home of the cannibalistic Caribs was contrasted with Hispaniola on which were found the

supposedly peaceful and welcoming Arawaks, while Tahiti as the home of the peaceful and welcoming Polynesians was contrasted with New Caledonia and Fiji on which were found the man-eating Melanesians. In broad terms, therefore, a distinction was made in both cases between two groups – Arawak and Carib in the Caribbean, Polynesian and Melanesian in the Pacific. Arawaks and Polynesians were seen as being organised into relatively advanced, hierarchical societies; as responding relatively positively to Europeans, and, in physical appearance, being closer to Europeans. Caribs and Melanesians supposedly had a less advanced, more egalitarian social system, were usually hostile to Europeans, and were seen as physically less attractive. In addition, they often indulged in practices which marked them as archetypally savage, especially cannibalism.

Although Dominica and Tahiti therefore seem to occupy different time-frames and different poles of the established dualisms, there are general analogies between the ways in which the ethnic and cultural regions of the Caribbean and the Pacific were approached after contact, the ways in which those divisions became the basis for anthropological and historical work during the twentieth century, and the ways in which the divisions were undermined in the final quarter of the twentieth century – even though they arguably continue to exert enormous influence, perhaps more so in the Caribbean than in the Pacific.

But even the apparent differences in time-frame are misleading in a number of respects. For a start, strong resistance by the indigenous Carib community limited European contact with Dominica until the seventeenth century, with major settlement only following much later, by which time the European view of the native population had begun to change. So the late eighteenth century was really the first occasion when *British* attention was actually directed at Dominica, the same moment that Tahiti hove into view. Both Dominica and Tahiti therefore played their parts in what has come to be considered as the first world war – the long and bitter conflict between Britain and France which followed the major American realignments of the Treaty of Paris in 1763. Dominica was a pawn in that particular game, passing into British hands. After 1763 both Britain and France immediately turned their attention to the Pacific, and both landed expeditions on Tahiti within months of each other in the late 1760s, led by Samuel Wallis for Britain and

by Louis de Bougainville for France. During these years contacts between Polynesian and Caribbean islands were certainly plentiful, exemplified by Captain William Bligh's successful breadfruit expedition in the *Providence* in the early 1790s. But many sailors, both French and English, who landed on Tahiti would have had previous experience of Dominica. Bligh and Fletcher Christian, for example, had been in the West Indies twice on the *Britannia* in the years before the *Bounty*. In reverse, Bougainville's naval career came to an effective end at the Battle of the Saints (the Battle of Dominica as the French call it) in 1782. In general terms, then, the late eighteenth century saw the establishment of a physical frame of reference which served to bring Tahiti and Dominica closer together. An intellectual frame would follow.

2

The dominant notes in early Spanish accounts of the Caribbean had been on the beauty of the climate and the landscape, on the paucity of indigenous culture, and on the bodies of the natives – well-formed and handsome, and in colour neither black nor white but, according to Columbus, the colour of the Canarian islanders, usually described as olive or copper.³ There is an Edenic note in these early descriptions, conveyed by the use of terminology drawn from classical accounts of the Golden Age: “They lyve without any certayne dwelling places,” wrote Peter Martyr about the native Caribbeans, “and without tyllage or culturying of the grounde, as wee reade of them whiche in olde tyme lyved in the golden age”.⁴ Climate was key here, since it supposedly stimulated the natural bounty of the soil and obviated the need for labour. In turn the absence of labour enabled the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands “to live at libertie, in play and pastime”.⁵

But the ethnographic splitting between different groups soon appeared, in fact within Columbus's own journal. Some ideological dualisms are contrastive between self and other; this one, however, was triadic: in other words it depended upon the supposedly neutral position of the European observer with respect to a supposedly observed division within the indigenous population, although the establishment of that division enabled a series of antagonisms and identifications which facilitated European entry into the politics of the Caribbean world.⁶

In broad terms, the European entry into the Pacific operated in the same way. The earliest descriptions of Tahiti, those by Commerson, by Bougainville, and in the anonymous *Relation de la découverte*, repeated the classical Golden Age vocabulary, confirming the Pacific islands as true islands of the west, Hesperidean in their climate and attributes. Commerson's early account of Tahiti struck exactly the same note as Peter Martyr's of the Caribbean: a place "where men live without vices, without prejudices, without want, without dissent... nourished by the fruits of the soil which is fertile without cultivation".⁷ As the anonymous English poem, *Otaheite*, of 1774 has it: "No annual Toil the foodful Plants demand, / But unrenow'd to rising Ages stand".⁸ Or as George Hamilton from the *Pandora* put it in 1791: "And what poetic fiction has painted of Eden, or Arcadia, is here realized, where the earth without tillage produces both food and cloathing".⁹

But the first classic statements of Pacific dualism are already found in the early accounts, first in Charles de Brosses's *Histoire des navigations aux terres australes* (1756) and then in Johann Reinhold Forster's "Remarks on the Human Species in the South-Sea Isles". Forster notes that "two great varieties of people" could be observed in the South Seas: "the one more fair, well-limbed, athletic, of a fine size, and a kind benevolent temper; the other blacker, the hair just beginning to become crisp, the body more slender and low, and their temper, if possible more brisk, though somewhat mistrustful".¹⁰

In both Caribbean and Pacific cases, then, the ethnographic division is based on what might be called temperament or character: one group is innately peaceful, the other innately war-like. In both cases supposedly essential traits are "as much moral as physical", with the first being read off from the second: what Nicholas Thomas calls a "happy correspondence" between the advancement of different peoples and their perceived sense of appropriate behaviour towards foreigners.¹¹ Although offered as ethnographic descriptions, these divisions in fact represent differential indigenous responses to European presence, and frequently they act as self-fulfilling from the describer's perspective. As such, they say more about European discursive practices than they do about the indigenous cultures of the Caribbean and the Pacific. In both cases discursive developments seem to have taken remarkably similar courses. Particular islands emerged as problem cases. Dominica was supposedly the archetypal Carib island

but, given that the colonial description involved a narrative of Carib hostility and conquest and rape by Carib men, all second-generation Caribs must have been half-Arawak, and indeed the Caribs spoke a language which proved to be Arawakan. Correspondingly, Tahiti was sometimes seen itself as having two races, which led Dumont d'Urville, the French explorer, to concoct a conquest narrative in which Melanesians were conquered by Polynesians, but with their interbred remnants enduring in certain lower classes in parts of Polynesia.¹² The two conquest narratives needed to 'explain' anomalies were mirror images of each other, but both served only to perpetuate and exacerbate those anomalies, and ultimately to undermine the dualisms they had been supposed to help maintain.

In some obvious ways the Caribbean (and America more generally) provided a vocabulary which was used to describe the indigenous population of the Pacific. The term 'Indian' continued its extremely slow circumnavigation of the globe; and the broad division between black and yellow/red peoples observed from an invisible neutrality was clearly available for the Pacific. However, the ideological imperative behind the 'observation' of tropical ethnographic dualisms put pressure on the climatic elements of tropicality. Basically (see fig. 1), Europe inherited the classical idea of an ideal temperate zone located between the frigid and the torrid zones in which savagery could be explained through oppression by cold and heat respectively, the Scythians and Ethiopians offering the usual examples. Civilisation was associated only with the temperate zone.¹³ In the sixteenth century Bodin has similar divisions, with the temperate zone located between 30 and 60 degrees north, the most temperate zone between 40 and 50 degrees, a very French definition which excludes all of Britain apart from a few miles of Cornish coast.¹⁴ For a classical geographer like Claudius Ptolemy the mid colour of three would have been associated with the temperate clime, because white was the colour of the frigid Scythians. This was not a satisfactory link for northern Europeans, particularly the British, but also the Dutch, the Prussians, and the Swedes – all of whom were located north of 50 degrees, and who, towards the end of the eighteenth century, began to redefine whiteness as the implicit standard. So to the extent to which skin-colour formed an element within the ethnographic dualism – which it did from the start in the Pacific – then the explanation of the existence of two colours within one zone needed to come from migration.

3

As far as the Caribbean is concerned, historical circumstances had changed a good deal by the end of the eighteenth century, most obviously through the genocide of the indigenous population and the transportation to the region of several million Africans. By the last decade of the eighteenth century the region was in complete turmoil: Dominica was in the midst of a maroon war and, even more threateningly for British interests, St Vincent – the other island with a significant Carib presence – was seeing an alliance between Carib insurgents and French revolutionaries. In various different ways, these changes resulted in the strengthening of the original dualisms but it also saw, through the Africanisation of the Caribs, a strengthening of the Caribbean / Pacific analogy in ways which served to bring Tahiti and Dominica closer together.

The argument through migration actually finds its clearest form a little later, in the middle of the nineteenth century, when Carib origins were discussed in one of the institutional forums where the discipline of anthropology found its eventual shape, the London Ethnological Society, in a lecture which rewrote the history of the early Caribbean to suggest that Columbus encountered “a widely-diffused tribe of dark colour and peculiar ferocity... designated Caribs or Cannibals”, who were too intractable to submit to any intercourse with the Spaniards. Darkness of skin colour, ferocity, intractability – by the 1840s the associations were inescapable, and an African origin was posited for the Caribs.¹⁵

This Africanisation of the Caribs may well have been influenced by the more explicit colour dimension to the Pacific dualism: Hawkesworth had referred to the Melanesians as “negroes” in his redaction of Cook’s first Pacific voyage; Forster had referred to them as “blacker” than Polynesians. Wars against the Caribs in St Vincent during the 1770s had certainly darkened them in British eyes, especially as they were by now well-mixed with escaped African slaves, according to the British story. Eventually – though not until the heyday of migration theory in 1949 – someone suggested the irresistible conclusion that the Caribs actually descended from itinerant Melanesians and the Arawaks from Polynesians, thus ‘explaining’ the remarkable analogy between European classifications of the indigenous cultures of the two regions.¹⁶

But if migration theory eventually worked to keep Caribs and Tahitians apart as opposite poles of that ethnographic dualism, one black, the other yellow, another late eighteenth-century theory had found a new framework in which similarities and differences could be given equal weight. The third edition of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's *De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa* was published in 1795, at the very moment of the outbreak of the war in St Vincent which would lead to the final military defeat of the Caribs. For Blumenbach there were five principal varieties of the human species: the middle, or Caucasian, variety; two extremes, Mongolian and Ethiopic; and two intermediate varieties, the Malay and the American (fig. 2). Five skulls took pride of place in the engravings illustrating this treatise, one for each variety: the American (second from the left) was represented by the skull of a Carib chief from St Vincent and the Malay (second from the right) by a Tahitian skull.¹⁷ For reasons which will shortly become apparent, Blumenbach may have preferred a Carib skull from Dominica, but the island was in turmoil in the early 1790s, and St Vincent had the great benefit of being the home of one of Joseph Banks's agents, Alexander Anderson, who ran the botanical garden which would eventually receive Bligh's breadfruit. Indeed, if it had not been for the mutiny, the *Bounty* would have unloaded the breadfruit and taken back to Europe the skull which Anderson had dug up at dead of night from a Carib burial site, and which Banks eventually sent on to Blumenbach.¹⁸ The Tahitian skull was also a gift from Banks, brought back to England by Bligh on the *Providence*.¹⁹ Blumenbach's essentialist approach assumed that within human variation there has to be an original template, which he predictably thought was the Caucasian, with 'white' therefore the original human skin colour, represented by what he called "the pure white skin of the German lady".²⁰ Variation depended partly on climate, so the 'distant' Asian and African had travelled furthest from the Caucasian origin, towards frigid Mongolia and torrid Africa respectively, whereas the two intermediate kinds, represented by the Carib and the Tahitian belonged to the northern and southern tropics respectively.²¹ So tropicality now also began to have a racial dimension which separated it off from the blackness of Africa. Caribbean and Pacific natives started to become – as they have remained – 'brown' peoples, but this brownness was no longer the ideal mid-point between too cold and too hot, too white and too black, as it had been for the Greeks: it now marked a mid-point in the falling away from an ideal whiteness. This was the crucial turning point in the development of the racial ideology which forms the backcloth to all late imperial writing.

But it was what had happened on St Vincent which ultimately served to bring together Tahiti and Dominica – and their indigenous populations. Already by the second half of the seventeenth century the remaining Carib population on Dominica had been too small to pose any significant military threat to European colonists, and the very earliest Columbian tropes were beginning to reappear. For example, at the beginning of the second volume of his *Histoire générale des Antilles*, written in 1667, Jean Baptiste Du Tertre – a French missionary in the Caribbean – set out to overturn two related falsehoods, one about the uninhabitability of the torrid zone, the other about the barbarity of its savage inhabitants. Just as the torrid zone is not “an awful wilderness”, but rather “the purest, healthiest, & most temperate of all the atmospheres” (giving an interesting twist to the distinction between climatic zones by describing the tropical zone as more temperate than the temperate zone itself), so, similarly, according to Du Tertre, can the savage inhabitants of the tropics be described as not “barbarous, cruel, inhuman, without reason, [and] deformed”, but rather “the most content, the happiest, the least depraved, the most sociable, the least deformed, and the least troubled by illness, of all the nations in the world”.²² It is Du Tertre who Rousseau references for his several mentions of the Caribs in his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. So – at least within French ethnography and political philosophy – the Caribs had already been partially rehabilitated, and may even, via Rousseau’s reading of Du Tertre, have had an influence on the early French accounts of Tahitians, especially on Commerson’s.

The major issue on St Vincent, however, involved the question of the ‘Black Caribs’, as they were called, a new ethnic group identified – or perhaps invented – by the British. These Black Caribs had joined French revolutionary forces to fight against the British in the 1770s and again in the 1790s.²³ The British argument was that these hybrid Black Caribs – part Carib, part African – were *really* Africans masquerading as Caribs, having stolen some Carib women. So the old dualism survived – or was reinvented, but now the Yellow Caribs as they were newly called, a remnant left on Dominica, were allowed to assume the rôle of the good savage while the Black Caribs, seen as to all intents and purposes Africans, occupied the negative rôle. At this moment the indigenous inhabitants of Dominica and Tahiti finally came into alignment, and they did so because they both

finally offered the most advantageous position ever open to indigenous peoples within colonial discourse: they were not black.

The key text here is Bryan Edwards's *The History... of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, first published in 1793, which was crucial for its realignment of British understanding of the Caribbean in the light of the ongoing French Revolution and the unfolding of events in St Domingue. It is in Edwards's book that the Yellow Caribs can take on their new rôle as the Tahitians of the Caribbean, a move Edwards accomplishes by means of frequent references to Hawkesworth. This is just one example:

Having... mentioned the natives of the South-sea Islands, I cannot but advert to the wonderful similarity observable in many respects, between our ill-fated West Indians and that placid people. The same frank and affectionate temper, the same chearful simplicity, gentleness and candour; – a behaviour, devoid of meanness and treachery, of cruelty and revenge, are apparent in the character of both: – and although placed as so great a distance from each other, and divided by the intervention of the American Continent, we may trace a resemblance even in many of their customs and institutions... Placed alike in a happy medium, between savage life, properly so called, and the refinements of polished society, they are found equally exempt from the sordid corporeal distresses and sanguinary passions of the former state, and the artificial necessities, the restraints and solitudes of the latter.²⁴

As with Blumenbach, the triadic relationship is now stadial, with the Tahitians and Caribs sharing a position intermediate between savage life “properly so-called” and the civilised life of Europeans.

4

Although the persistence of this ethnographic dualism has bedeviled historical analysis of both Caribbean and Pacific cultures, one particular element within the discourse of tropicality is so pervasive that it pays no attention to dualisms: the trope of the spontaneous productivity of nature underlies European perceptions of indigenous indolence and absence of culture. This trope almost always draws its terminology from

classical writing, as earlier quotations have suggested, but it turns the perception of the Golden Age against its inhabitants, who are ultimately seen as undeserving of its benefits. One of the founding comments about tropicity was made by Queen Isabella of Castile when told by Columbus that Caribbean trees have shallow roots on account of the high rainfall which makes the land so productive: “this land,” Isabella said, “where the trees are not firmly rooted, must produce men of little truthfulness and less constancy”.²⁵ And soon these ungrounded inhabitants were being described as intrinsically idle, drifting aimlessly over the surface of their lands – especially of course when Europeans wanted to make them labour.

Between the European discoveries of the Caribbean and the Pacific lies the development of a universalising political philosophy which, in distinguishing between civilisation and savagery, or sometimes even between the rational and the non-rational, also operates a distinction between the temperate and the tropical. John Locke gave the most powerful articulation of a labour theory of value which doubled as a test for distinguishing between the truly human and the less truly human, between those who had a right to own the earth and those who had forfeited that right by ignoring the law of nature which insisted that land should be ‘improved’. In order to explain how indigenous peoples had fed themselves while not demonstrating full rationality, Locke had recourse to the Ovidian concept of the “spontaneous hand of nature”, which had endowed the largely tropical lands of the Americas with a fertility which enabled its inhabitants to ‘labour’ only by picking what nature had spontaneously provided for them. As George Sandys’ contemporary translation put it: “The yet-free Earth did of her own accord / (Vntorne with ploughs) all sorts of fruit afford”; “of her own accord”, translating Ovid’s “sponte sua”, giving Locke his “spontaneous”. The argument from spontaneity is necessary to explain how the ‘not fully rational’ can manage to eat: it is this trope that excludes native American agriculture from consideration, and even from recognition. In excluding native agriculture, it excludes native labour: the spontaneous hand of nature underlies native indolence.²⁶

This trope of spontaneous nature, perhaps already inflected by Locke’s labour theory of humanity, dominates early accounts of Tahiti. “Not,” Joseph Banks admits, “that the trees grow here spontaneously but if a man should in the course of his life time plant 10

such trees, which if well done might take the labour of an hour or thereabouts, he would as completely fulfill his duty to his own as well as future generations as we natives of less temperate climates can do by toiling in the cold of winter to sow and in the heat of summer to reap the annual produce of our soil.” Banks repeats Du Tertre’s rhetorical willingness temporarily to relinquish the European association with temperance: for these purposes Europe is less temperate than Tahiti. But what turns the trope is the choice of classical tag: “O fortunati nimium sua si bona norint may most truly be applied to these people; benevolent nature has not only supplied them with necessaries but with abundance of superfluities”. Any tropical natives hearing a quotation from the *Georgics* know that they are about to be accused of not working hard enough: “Could they but know their blessedness” as the Latin tag has it. “The great facility,” Banks continues, “with which these people have always procured the necessaries of life may very reasonably be thought to have originally sunk them into a kind of indolence which has as it were benumbed their inventions.”²⁷

Although the ethnographic dualism haunts the historical anthropology of both the Caribbean and the Pacific and to that extent their contemporary imagery, it is the trope of spontaneous nature which has passed seamlessly into the present. Only recently has scholarly attention been given to the sophisticated development of Caribbean tropical crops such as cassava and beans and maize in the centuries, indeed millennia, before European arrival; and in Tahiti too, Dana Lepofsky’s work has begun to uncover the extent of indigenous Tahitian cultivation, often – again repeating a Caribbean pattern – in arboricultural zones which Europeans did not even recognise as cultivated gardens.²⁸ The misrecognition of native labour as spontaneous bounty is the hallmark of contemporary tropical tourism and its associated writing, which will provide one final example of Tahiti and Dominica being brought into the same frame.

5

Paul Fussell begins his book, *Abroad*, about literary travelling in the 1920s and 1930s by discussing the way oranges came in 1916 to symbolise a world away from the trenches of the Great War, one of the occasions when tropicality could come into its own, as temperance failed to live up to its name.²⁹ A generation of British writers who experienced that war subsequently made a career out of travelling and writing, often in

the tropics, or at least in places warmer than the fields of Flanders: Osbert Sitwell, D.H. Lawrence, Gerald Brenan, Robert Byron, Norman Douglas, Peter Fleming, Evelyn Waugh.

Waugh's elder brother, Alec, was the most assiduous of these travellers, taking advantage of the development of the ocean liners which allowed him in 1926 to go round the world for less than he would have paid to rent a London flat. His own retrospective account of these years stresses the perceived instability of the fabric of Western existence, a generational loss of faith which made it easy to wonder, he says, "whether the Polynesians had not built on more sound foundations. They lived by all accounts", he continues, "without wars and jealousies, without class distinctions, careless of their possessions, lovers of the sun. Surely it was worth going there to see?".³⁰ The "dark ladies" of Polynesia were an added attraction, a welcome antidote to the more independently-minded metropolitan young women of the 1920s. What an earlier generation had seen as the degenerative features of tropical life were now, with disease supposedly taken out of the equation, embraced as its positives: inertia, alcohol, and sex. As Waugh himself says, he proceeded to search for his plots and characters "between Capricorn and Cancer": he became a specifically tropical writer.³¹

Waugh had his archetypal Tahitian experience: a brief passionate love affair with a Tahitian girl which he wrote up in fictional form as the affair of an acquaintance, before later admitting it as his own. But in literary terms the island had been written out, Waugh felt: there were no more stories to tell. "The South Seas... have been so written about and painted," he says. "Long before you get to them you know precisely what you are to find. There have been Maugham and Loti and Stevenson and Brooke... And there has been Gauguin".³²

En route for Tahiti on a French liner Waugh had stopped briefly at Martinique. A year later, now actively looking for a subject, he thought of going to Martinique in order to write a comparison of the two French islands, which in fact he did in a 1930 book originally called *Coloured Countries*, but issued in the USA as *Hot Countries*. At the end of the story of his Tahitian romance, Waugh had his protagonist reflect on the irony that his determination to settle in Tahiti had been foiled by the spirit of Tahiti itself, embodied

by his Tahitian lover: “It was by her own loveliness, her own sweetness, her own gentleness, that Tahiti had been betrayed... The fatal gift of beauty”.³³ By contrast “I found in the Caribbean the fresh material I needed”, he wrote. “I was excited by the dramatic history of the area, I was moved by its beauty, I was fascinated by the West Indians themselves. They were so friendly, so willing, so fierce and so intractable... Here were the stories I was looking for.”³⁴ So here the old contrast is partly restored, now figured as a difference between the gentleness of Tahiti and the intractability of the West Indies, but with the latter proving more amenable to a writer in search of material – although Lynd Ward’s stunning engravings for *Hot Countries* tend to undermine Waugh’s contrast by conjuring up a singular tropical vision of bananas and palm trees and sexuality (figs. 3 and 4). Waugh became a regular visitor to the Caribbean and one of the most important interpreters of its history and politics during the 25 years before independence: his novel, *Island in the Sun* (1955) and the film made from it starring Harry Belafonte, is one of the best examples of the genre of late-imperial tropical fiction.

But Waugh also undermined his own contrast. The island that most fascinated him was, predictably, Dominica. “Of all the West Indian islands that I had visited”, he wrote in 1948, “it was the one that I had liked the least; at the same time it was the one I was most anxious to see again... Dominica... has been called ‘The Tahiti of the Caribbean’.”³⁵ Dominica clearly troubled Waugh, but he could not keep away from the place. He sensed defeatism beneath its desperate gaiety, but came to find an alluring charm in that very acceptance of defeat. He described it as perfect in the grandeur of its mountains, yet cursed with what he called – adopting the same phrase from Byron that he had used to define Tahiti – “the fatal gift” of beauty, the title he gave to his final novel, written in his 70s and set on Dominica.³⁶

The fatal gift is a resonant phrase, recalling both the association of happiness with death in the old mythologies of the Western isles³⁷ and the fatal gift of syphilis which Europeans brought to Tahiti – death introduced into paradise, as Diderot had intimated in his *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* (1772). The destruction resulting from European presence is transferred to the islands themselves, which then come to be seen as metonyms for their respective regions. Waugh’s late-imperial contribution is to offer the phrase as a self-description of the European remnant that survives there, often victims of

paranoia and alcoholism, the last white creoles, who may have a desperate and rather touching commitment to the island of their dreams. Raymond Peronne, the central character of Waugh's *The Fatal Gift*, ends that novel in 1970 – at a time when Dominica was in political turmoil – believing himself physically prevented from leaving the island because of a spell cast by an obeah woman jealous that he has deprived her of her lover – the sixteen-year old girl whose affections they have shared: a classically tropical story. The white man is imprisoned after the British administration leaves, just as on the real island black Dominicans were gearing up to take the final step to full independence, the point at which their story draws apart from that of Tahiti.

Notes

¹ Derek Walcott, 'Midsummer' [1984], in his *Collected Poems 1948-1984*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986, p. 480.

² See David Arnold, 'Inventing Tropicality', in his *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture and European Expansion*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, pp. 141-68, and Nancy Leys Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature*, London: Reaktion Books, 2001.

³ Christopher Columbus, *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America: 1492-93*, ed. and trans. Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelley, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989, p. 67.

⁴ Peter Martyr, *De novo Orbe, or The Historie of the west Indies*. trans. Richard Eden and Michael Lok, London, 1612, 140^v. This fertility had been a feature of the Fortunate Islands, usually identified as the Canaries: "Its fields have no need of the farmer's plow... Its soil bears everthing as if it were grass, by spontaneous production" (Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, quoted in George Boas, *Essays on Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages* [1948], New York: Octagon Books, 1978, p. 169).

⁵ Peter Martyr, 51^r.

⁶ See Peter Hulme, 'Making sense of the native Caribbean', *New West Indian Guide*, 67, nos. 3 & 4, 1993: 189-220.

⁷ Quoted in Philippe Despoix, 'Naming and Exchange in the Exploration of the Pacific: On European Representations of Polynesian Culture in Late XVIII Century', in John Rieder and Larry E. Smith, *Multiculturalism and Representation: Selected Essays*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1996, pp. 3-24 at p. 4. See also *News from New Cythera: A Report of Bougainville's Voyage, 1766-1769*, ed. L. Davis Hammond, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970.

⁸ Quoted in Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, 2nd ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 48.

⁹ George Hamilton, 'A Voyage Round the World', in *Voyage of H.M.S. 'Pandora'...*, ed. Basil Thomson, London: Francis Edwards, 1915, pp. 91-172, at p. 108. In his *Génie du Christianisme*, Chateaubriand also wrote of how Tahitians found "le lait et le pain suspendus aux branches des arbres" (quoted in Smith, *European Vision*, p. 153).

¹⁰ J. R. Forster, *Observations made on a voyage round the world*, London: Robinson, 1778, p. 228.

¹¹ Nicholas Thomas, 'The Force of Ethnology: Origins and Significance of the Melanesia/Polynesia Division', *Current Anthropology*, 30 (1989): 27-41, at 31. See also Vanessa Agnew, 'Pacific Island Encounters and the German Invention of Race', in Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith, ed., *Islands in History and Representation*, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 81-94.

¹² See Bronwen Douglas, 'Science and the Art of Representing "Savages": Reading "Race" in Text and Image in South Seas Voyage Literature', *History and Anthropology*, 11, 2-3 (1999): 157-201, at 180.

¹³ The idea that the world has three physical environments goes back to Claudius Ptolemy and beyond him to Hippocrates and Aristotle. Ptolemy has three regions (northern, southern, intermediate), with black Ethiopians to the south and white Scythians to the north. Ethiopians are 'savage' because "their homes are continually oppressed by the heat", Scythians "because their dwelling places are continually cold". Those in between, Ptolemy describes as "medium in colouring, of moderate stature, in nature equable, live close together, and are civilized in their habits" (Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, pp. 84, 112).

¹⁴ Glacken, *Traces*, pp. 437-8.

¹⁵ James Kennedy, 'On the Probable Origin of the American Indians, with Particular Reference to the Caribs', in *Ethnological Essays*, London: Arthur Hall, Virtue & Co., 1855. pp. 1-42.

¹⁶ Harold Sterling Gladwin, *Men Out of Asia*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1949, pp. 250-1.

¹⁷ Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *Anthropological Treatises*, trans. and ed. Thomas Bendyshe, London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1865, p. 156.

¹⁸ See Paul Turnbull, 'Enlightenment Anthropology and the Ancestral Remains of Australian Aboriginal People', in *Voyages and Beaches: Pacific Encounters, 1769-1840*, ed. Alex Calder, Jonathan Lamb, and Bridget Orr, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999, pp. 202-25.

¹⁹ Blumenbach, *Anthropological Treatises*, p. 162.

²⁰ Blumenbach, *Anthropological Treatises*, p. 107.

²¹ See Milford Wolpoff and Rachel Caspari, *Race and Human Evolution: A Fatal Attraction*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1997, pp. 62-3.

²² Jean Baptiste Du Tertre, *Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les François* [1667], in *Wild Majesty: Encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the Present Day*, ed. Peter Hulme and Neil L. Whitehead, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 129.

²³ See *Wild Majesty*, chapters 14-19; Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797*, London: Methuen, 1986, pp. 225-63; and Peter Hulme, 'Black, Yellow, and White on St Vincent: Moreau de Jonnès's Carib ethnography', in *The Global Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity A. Nussbaum, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, pp. 182-194.

²⁴ Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* [1793], 2 vols. in 1, New York: Arno Press, 1972, I, pp. 77-78. Extensive comparison follows (pp. 78-81).

²⁵ The story is retold in Antonello Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750-1900* [1955], trans. Jeremy Moyle, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973, p. 40.

²⁶ See Peter Hulme, 'The Spontaneous Hand of Nature: Savagery, Colonialism, and the Enlightenment', in *The Enlightenment and Its Shadows*, ed. Peter Hulme and Ludmilla Jordanova, London: Routledge, 1990, pp. 16-34.

²⁷ Joseph Banks, *Manners & Customs of S. Sea Islands* [1769], http://coombs.anu.edu.au/~cookproj/archive/gen_rem_tahiti/bt009.html (with Banks' idiosyncratic spelling). The trope is present in Pierre Loti (and beyond): "In Oceania toil is a thing unknown. The forests spontaneously produce all that is needed for the support of these unforeseeing races; the fruit of the bread-tree, and wild bananas grow for all the world to pluck, and suffice for their need. The years glide over the Tahitians in utter idleness and perpetual dreaming, and these grown-up children could never conceive that in our grand Europe there should be so many people wearing out their lives in earning their daily bread" (*The Marriage of Loti* [1880], trans. Wright and Eleanor Frierson, Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1976, p. 40).

²⁸ See William Denevan, *Cultivated Landscapes of Native Amazonia and the Andes* (Oxford: OUP, 2001) and Dana Lepofsky, 'Gardens of Eden? An Ethnocentric Reconstruction of Maohi (Tahitian) Cultivation', *Ethnohistory*, 46(1) (1999): 1-29.

²⁹ Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars*, Oxford: OUP, 1980, pp. 3-8.

³⁰ Alec Waugh, *The Early Years of Alec Waugh*, London: Cassell, 1962, p. 214.

³¹ Waugh, *The Early Years*, p. xiii.

³² Alec Waugh, *Hot Countries*, New York: The Literary Guild, 1930, p. 19.

³³ Waugh, *Hot Countries*, p. 73.

³⁴ Waugh, *The Early Years*, p. 291.

³⁵ Alec Waugh, *The Sugar Islands*, London: Cassell, 1958, pp. 281, 284.

³⁶ Alec Waugh, *The Fatal Gift*, London: W.H. Allen & Co. Ltd, 1973. The phrase comes from Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto IV, 42-43, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, vol. II, pp. 138-9, but Byron is translating the phrase "dono infelice di bellezza" from a sonnet by the seventeenth-century Italian writer, Vincenzo da Filicaia. On the Italian connection to these issues of tropicality, see Peter Hulme, 'The Fatal Gift: storie di fine impero', in *Le maschere letterare l'impero britannico*, ed. Daniela Corona and Elio di Piazza, Palermo, forthcoming 2004.

³⁷ According to Loren Baritz, happiness and death "formed the dialectic of the west" ('The Idea of the West', *American Historical Review*, 66 (1960-1): 620). David Arnold similarly notes the deep ambivalence at the heart of the idea of tropicality ('Inventing Tropicality', p. 142).