

Polynesian paradises: Explorations in the Hollywood Island Drama

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The Erotics of Travel

Joseph Mankiewicz's 1959 film *Suddenly, Last Summer*, based on the Tennessee Williams play, depicts two journeys to exotic locales. The first is described when Violet Venable tells Dr. Cukrowicz about the trip she took to the Galapagos Islands with her son, Sebastian: "He [Sebastian] read me Melville's description of the Encantadas, the Galapagos Islands ... and said that we had to go there." The mother and son, upon arriving on the island's shores, discover that there is much more to "the enchanting Encantadas" than Melville had represented. Violet states: "But on the Encantadas we saw something that Melville hadn't written about ... [We witnessed] the hatching of the great sea-turtles and their race to the sea" to escape the flesh-eating birds. "The birds hovered and swooped to attack," Violet continues, "they were diving down on the hatched sea-turtles, turning them over to attack their soft undersides, tearing the undersides open and rending and eating their flesh." Violet is horrified by this primal scene and nearly faints as she conveys the story.

This journey to the "terrible Encantadas," as Violet calls them, foreshadows Sebastian's death. Every summer Sebastian travels to an exotic Southern location in order to engage in sexual affairs with young men; during "last summer's" trip to Cabeza de Lobo, however, Sebastian is overcome by a group of "primitive" young men who chase him through

the city streets, begging him for money and bread. When the chase is over, Sebastian is found dead, "devoured" by the "flock of featherless little black sparrows." In the words of his cousin, Catherine, Sebastian's body was found naked and deformed, for the young men had "devoured parts of him ... [and] torn bits of him away and stuffed them into their gobbling fierce little empty black mouths."

Mankiewicz's treatment of Americans in foreign countries incorporates numerous travel discourses that are central to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American travel narratives. For instance, he invokes the tropes of liberation from American "civilisation," the journeys comprise searches for exotic spaces, primitive lands are met with a mixture of awe and anxiety, identities are engulfed (literally consumed) by the citizens of a foreign place. Most important, though, is Mankiewicz's use of eroticism and sexual emancipation in the context of travel. Sebastian's pursuit of sexual opportunities in southern countries frame travel as a source of erotic freedom; foreign spaces function as stages where he can enact his sexual fantasies. But the pursuit of sexual emancipation comes at a price: Sebastian's confrontation with the young men inspires a vibration of dread which arises out of a fear of the unknown, a fear of the Other, which is reinforced by the cannibalistic images of Sebastian's death.

Although totalising views of American travel narratives remain problematic, Mankiewicz's use of Melville's travel sketches collected in *The Encantadas or Enchanted Isles*¹ gestures toward an American tradition that infuses the rhetoric of travel with eroticism. In fact, the intersecting motifs of travel with interracial same-sex desire and anxiety reverberate throughout American literature. As early as 1923, D. H. Lawrence, in his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, asserted that "the mythos of immaculate male love" in the American literary canon was intimately tied to representations of escape, liberation and travel.² And Leslie Fiedler suggests that the themes of displacement, interracial love and the symbolic marriage of men are so common in American literature that they must be taken together and analysed as such.³ The cross-cultural male

1. This collection of ten travel sketches, chronicling Melville's journey to the Galapagos Islands, was first published in 1854.

2. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1961), 151-2.

3. Leslie Fiedler, *What Was Literature? Class, Culture and Mass Society*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 152.

couple travelling through the American wilderness (Huck and Jim) or on the high seas (Ishmael and Queequeg) is, for Fiedler, a recurring trope which works to disavow the restrictions of a repressed and conservative culture that has alienated itself from the so-called natural primitivism of man. Furthermore, Constance Penley notes that stories about American travel – whether they be in the form of text, cinema or television – frequently pose "questions of sexual difference and sexual relations, which [are] repeatedly addresse[d] alongside other kinds of differences."⁴

I would argue further that interracial sexuality – not just homosexuality – is a common feature of American narratives of travel. For instance, as D. H. Lawrence said, Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) probes "sex relationship[s] ... with[in] the great circuit of men and women."⁵ In fact, what Lawrence admires in Dana's text is his portrayal of the "Ailtane," a "Kanaka practice" which combines heterosexual relationships with passionate bonds between men.⁶ My intention here is not to situate American travel discourses within a heterosexual frame; rather, I would say that literature of travel (and dislocation) includes a contact zone between cultures (whether it be in the wilderness, on the high seas or visiting a foreign nation) which is presented in erotic terms, an eroticism that is at times homosexual and at other times heterosexual. The erotics of travel, that is, cannot be molded into a universal image; erotic modes of representation, like depictions of sexual desire, are often fluid, not fixed. But before pushing further into the wilderness that constitutes the erotics of travel, the terrain of travel discourse and its relation to film must be mapped out and surveyed.

Travel Discourse and Film

The similarities between the various historically diverse genres in representations of travel constitute what one might call "travel discourse," discourses which can be brought together, compared and contrasted, so as to

4. Constance Penley, *NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America*, (London: Verso, 1997), 103.

5. Lawrence, 124.

6. Lawrence, 124.

enlighten our readings of the rhetorical allegiances between power and sexuality.⁷ The term "discourse" here is employed to refer to the representational strategies of travel and the tropes of eroticism and imperialism. While the roots of American travel discourse grew out of nineteenth-century narratives by such writers as Henry Dana, Herman Melville, Mark Twain and Charles Warren Stoddard,⁸ the American cinema, particularly Hollywood, turned to travel discourse in order to explore the intersections of race and eroticism, particularly as an alluring commodity and as a colonising gesture. Moreover, travel in American film, as in conventional travel discourse, does not destabilise a fixed notion of culture, but works to heighten a sense of national belonging. That is, the characters who travel in American movies are often more self-consciously national than those who stay at home, in that travel calls attention to differences in race, gender and sexuality. These discourses associated with foreign spaces are also perceived as menacing and threatening, reminding audiences of their distinguished place within the American nation.

The obvious connection between travel and film is that both are caught up in the fabric of looking: the traveller and the audience are provided with peeps into other spaces, other worlds. American films about literal travel thus offer an appropriate site within which to examine cross-cultural relations. E. Ann Kaplan makes this allegiance between travel discourse and cinema even more clear in her statement that

Film itself travels, is a particular kind of space, and offers narratives about spatial relations. The film site allows speculation on how changes in looking relations may mitigate racism as well as sexism and homophobia: Who is allowed or forbidden to look? What constraints does western culture set up around the look? How do looking relations exacerbate race relations?⁹

The cinematic questions that Kaplan poses may also be applied to the more general category of travel discourse, for issues of racism, sexism and homophobia are just as central to the gaze of the traveller as they are

7. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 80.

8. See Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840); Melville's *Typee* (1847), *Omoo* (1848 and *Mardi* (1849); Twain's *Following the Equator* (1897); and, Stoddard's *South-Sea Idyls* (1892) and *The Island of Tranquil Delights* (1904).

9. E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 6.

to the cinematic spectator. Here, as Kaplan goes on to note, imperialism takes center stage; the gaze of the traveller (like the cinema's spectator) is rarely passive. Rather, the traveller's gaze frequently participates in the imperial gesture of looking out and possessing the foreign terrain. Nowhere are these cross-cultural (and imperialist) questions more prominent than in Hollywood's depictions of American characters who travel to the U.S. colonies of the South Pacific.¹⁰

American Imperialism

Because the Mexican War cleared Spain out of California, the port of San Francisco became available to Americans as a base from which to expand trade and establish republicanism in the South Pacific.¹¹ The United States thus became a significant power in the South Seas. Acquisition of the Hawaiian Islands (in 1898) was the result of forces similar to those which brought the United States colonial responsibilities in Samoa, over which it established a protectorate in 1878. As early as 1820 American missionaries had established themselves on a number of Hawaii's islands, and their descendants resulted in a sizable American population in the area. Political instability and fluctuations in the sugar trade caused U.S. President McKinley to push Hawaiian annexation in 1897.¹² Acquisition of the Hawaiian Islands, he claimed, would stop Hawaii from falling into foreign control, as well as provide opportunities for commercial and naval expansion. These arguments were reinforced in the minds of many citizens by the belief that it was the Manifest Destiny of the United States to control the South Pacific.

In the early 1930s Hollywood movies set out to explore the imagined exotic paradises of these American colonies. King Vidor's 1932 film, *Bird of Paradise*, for instance, is typical in depicting the American attrac-

10. American travel discourses—particularly those put forth by Melville, Twain and Stoddard—can be traced back to nineteenth-century American imperial expansion.

11. Esmond Wright, *The American Dream: From Reconstruction to Reagan*, (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 129.

12. Douglas L. Oliver, *The Pacific Islands* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 101.

tion to Polynesian culture, and more specifically to Polynesian women. Joel McCrea plays an American adventurer (Johnny Baker) who travels to the South Pacific and has a love affair with a beautiful Pacific islander woman (Luana), played by Dolores del Rio, who became virtually the symbol of the exotic tropical – and foreign – beauty in the 1930s and 40s. The film opens with the American sailors watching the islanders' boats travelling to meet the American ship as the men on board joke boyishly about the dark beauty of the Polynesian women.¹³ With the American men in the foreground and the natives far into the frame rowing out in their canoes, the white sailors search the ship for gifts that will entice the presumed infantile and ignorant islanders. As the Americans throw these gifts (clocks, hats, pipes) overboard, the natives dive into the water to retrieve the objects. During this scene, the camera focusses on a beautiful Polynesian woman, Luana, who turns out to be a sexy, young Polynesian princess. As the narrative thrusts forward, the Princess rescues the American hero, Johnny, from a vicious shark. On recovering, Johnny falls in love with her, and the camera lingers on her sensational features, thus informing spectators that they should anticipate an interracial, intercultural love affair.

As well as providing audiences with this sensual love affair, *Bird of Paradise*, like other American films about travelling to the South Pacific, reveals narrative strategies that attempt to make sense of this exotic locale in sexualised terms. For example, throughout the film we are given close-ups of a map, a gesture which attempts to deflate potential anxiety brought on by the island's mystery (and to remind the audience that it is a safely foreign territory). The map also works to signal the penetrable nature of a terrain that is clearly mapped out for the American traveller. The sexual currency of this metaphor is continued through the image of the foreign landscape of the "virgin" island – an island that the American traveller can master and control. The island's physical terrain is thus seen as a female body that comes to be penetrated, just as Johnny seduces and dominates the beautiful Luana.

13 The Polynesian Natives swimming out to meet the American ship is a central trope in many narratives about the South Pacific. As well as occurring in Melville's *Typee* (1846), this scene is repeated in David Porter's *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean* (1815), Charles Stewart's *A Visit to the South Seas* (1831), William Ellis's *Polynesian Researches* (1833) and John Erskine's *Journal of a Cruise Among the Islands of the South Pacific* (1855). It is also one of the opening sequences in Marnau's 1931 film, *Tabu*.

However, the film's narrative labours to undermine Johnny's original fascination with the island paradise, for the exotic and erotic images soon transform into menacing threats.¹⁴ The shark attack, for example, signifies the danger of being consumed (physically and culturally) by this foreign society. Threats of foreignness are, in fact, highlighted when Johnny hears the Princess chattering away to the other natives. Her talk is nonsense to him and the audience recognises that her Otherness is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, her exotic and sexual presence is attractive and exciting to Johnny; on the other hand, though, her incomprehensibility makes him uneasy and anxious; if Johnny develops an intense and complicated relationship with this Polynesian Princess, the narrative implies, he could lose his privileged identity as the American traveller. A fear of "going native" subsequently destabilises his subject position and, given that the Polynesian men of this island are depicted as feminine, he runs the risk of losing control of his masculine presence.¹⁵

The Freudian theory of fetishism can shed some light on the themes of eroticism, knowledge and anxiety as they relate to Americans in the South Seas. In his 1927 essay on the fetish, Freud maintains that a fetish always reveals itself upon analysis to be linked to a loss of manhood.¹⁶ (Freud, in fact, uses the term "fetishism" to evoke a consequence of castration anxiety in which the fetish object acts as a sign that it substitutes for the thing thought to be missing.) Freud's theory enables us to understand the American traveler's anxiety about going native in the face of the gendering of Polynesian men. That is, *Bird of Paradise* participates in the threads that bind eroticism to imperial control through an assertion of mastery over the primitive body which is linked to the female body. In other words, the Polynesian men of the film are feminized – equated with the castrated body – to force them into a position of inferiority. Johnny can therefore only conceive of "going native" as a process of effeminization

14. For an interesting analysis of this see Joanne Hershfield, "Race and Romance in *Bird of Paradise*," *Cineina Journal*, 37.3 (Spring 1998): 3-15.

15. Marianna Torgovnick points out that the feminisation of the primitive Other in Western travel texts is a common strategy of imperial discourse. In her readings of travel texts by Andre Gide and Joseph Conrad, Torgovnick asserts that "the primitive is coded metaphorically as feminine, collective and ecstatic, and civilization is coded as masculine and individualistic" See Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy*, (New York: Knopf, 1997), 14.

16. Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism." *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Vol. 21, (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 153.

and castration. Within the Freudian model, then, his feelings of castration engender a displacement of desire onto Polynesian culture (in the symbolic form of the Polynesian Princess).

South Pacific

Hollywood's development of the South Seas drama – or melodrama – continued throughout the 1930s and 40s. In 1931, for instance, *Aloha Oe* (1915) was remade as *Aloha*, a film that treated cultural conflict and miscegenation through an American character who is disowned by his family after he is seduced by an erotic and primitive Polynesian woman. Images of the South Pacific as a place of seduction and sexual liberation are furthered in the Hollywood films based on Somerset Maugham's short story "Rain" (1921). *Sadie Thompson* (1928) with Gloria Swanson and Lionel Barrymore, *Rain* (1932), with Joan Crawford and Walter Huston, and *Miss Sadie Thompson* (1953), with Rita Hayworth and Jose Ferrer, all depict an American prostitute's flight from American justice, only to find sanctuary on a Pacific island. All three versions have Sadie participating in erotic dances, and engaging in sexual relationships (much to the chagrin of the local missionary) with the Marines on the island. The success of *Sadie Thompson* and *Rain* inspired the making of *The Hurricane* in 1937. This film, starring Dorothy Lamour and Jon Hall, also has Americans fleeing from legal problems in America; they, too, find freedom on an idyllic South Pacific island. *Hurricane* made Lamour a "tropic icon," and the success of the film prompted studios to cast her in other Pacific films such as *Tropic Holiday* (1938), *Typhoon* (1940), *Aloma of the South Seas* (1941) and others.

The success of these films undoubtedly inspired James Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific* (1947), a collection of stories that was reworked into the 1949 play *South Pacific* and the subsequent film version directed by Joshua Logan in 1958.¹⁷ The play and the film piece together various scenes and characters from Michener's *Tales*, and *South*

17. This movie is based on James Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific*. New York: Macmillan, 1949.

Pacific focuses on the relationship between an American woman, Nellie Forbush, and a French character, Emile de Becque. This pair of exotic foreign lovers – symbolically representing the merger of the earlier colonizer, the French aristocrat, with the more recent American "influence" in the South Seas – complements the cross-cultural romance that develops between Cable, the American soldier, and Liat, a Polynesian native. Within the context of 1950s U.S.A., Emile is an exotic foreign fantasy figure, but he is much less foreign (or threatening) than the Polynesian natives. Just as the Charles Strickland character in Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* moves through Paris on his liberating journey to Tahiti, France becomes an intermediary space in the exotic imagination. That is, for Nellie, Emile de Becque is free from Anglo-Saxon inhibitions, but he is not too exotic. A relationship with him does not pose the threat of "going native."

The happy Nellie-Emile liaison lies in sharp contrast to the Cable-Liat union. For it is here that we see the fear of losing oneself by "going native." Set in the exotic South Seas during the Second World War, *South Pacific* depicts the handsome American Lt. Joseph Cable as he journeys off his military base to the "forbidden" romantic island of Bali Ha'i; here, he immediately falls in love with Liat, a beautiful young Polynesian woman. Because the American military classifies Bali Ha'i as "off limits," Cable must return to the base, but he keeps returning to visit Liat and courts her with promises of marriage. Their joyous future together is ruptured, though, when Liat's mother suggests that the happy couple conceive a child. Cable's response is to flee; he runs to his boat and returns to his life on the military base. Joseph Cable simply desires (to use Herman Melville's words) an exciting "peep at Polynesian life;"¹⁸ he wants a fleeting romantic liaison, not a life-time commitment.

A typical, untroubled Orientalist fantasy, *South Pacific* speaks to an American tradition of imperial control and sexual adventures on South Pacific islands – a tradition (with established generic conventions and tropes) that was already in place in 1846 when Herman Melville published his first novel, *Typee* (1848).

Like *Typee*, Logan's film depicts interracial romantic entanglements between Americans and Polynesians, while simultaneously imposing

18. Melville described *Typee* as a "peep at Polynesian life." See Herman Melville, *Typee*, (New York: Penguin, 1972), 31.

narrative limits. That is, *South Pacific* may be read as a film that accepts interracial desire and sexuality but ultimately rejects the crossing of blood lines through procreation. Thus, while sexual relations between whites and Polynesians are sanctioned, racial interbreeding is strictly prohibited. Logan's film, then, imposes the same representational limits as nineteenth-century travel texts such as *Typee*: the fertile landscapes, the pre-industrial peacefulness and the polymorphous sexuality projected onto Polynesian culture are meant to be enjoyed as long as the American traveller does not go too far.

This narrative rendering of the South Sea islands as a mythic American playground – particularly as they are presented in the eroticism of *Bird of Paradise* and *South Pacific* – has generated what Neil Rennie refers to as "far-fetched facts." In this context, Western culture imposes its values on the Polynesian islands while persuading itself that it wants to throw off the trappings of "civilisation."¹⁹ This complex relationship between imperial ideology and an idealised "natural" space can be found in numerous sexualised narratives that present a Western subject embracing and penetrating the symbolic Otherness of Polynesian culture. These narratives assume different forms within American travel discourse. As Gregory Woods points out, one such narrative depicts an American man who journeys to a "golden island inhabited by sexually accessible women, an island where he can experience a "natural heterosexuality" that is accompanied by uncomplicated divisions of conventional gender roles.²⁰ In other South Sea narratives, American men travel to an island in order to form a close bond with the landscape and the elements, while relating homosocially and homoerotically with the Polynesians; inherent to these narratives is a renegotiation of masculinity before returning to a homeland that is defined by its whiteness and heterosexuality. Whatever form these narratives may take, the theme of sexual liberation among cultures that are defined as "natural" and "primitive" become defining qualities.

The revealing of mystery is, in fact, an important theme which runs throughout *South Pacific*. The "off-limits" island of Bali Ha'i, for instance, serves as both a threatening land of mystery and an alluring

19. Neil Rennie, *Far-Fetched Facts: The Literature of Travel and the Idea of the South Seas*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 182.

20. Gregory Woods, "Fantasy Islands: Popular Topographies of Marooned Masculinity," *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 126.

place that the American soldiers must experience in order to uncover its secrets. If, as Laura Mulvey suggests, fetishism and curiosity are not "irreconcilably polarised" but exist, rather, in a "dialectical relation" to each other, the American characters' fetishised attraction to Bali Ha'i may be conceived as a "desire to know."²¹ Mulvey states that a fetishised space can hold a desire to know rather than an urge to see or possess the fetishised object as in the Freudian model. Curiosity, then, appears as a desire to uncover the secret of every figuration that the forbidden space represents; thus, because the American military frames Bali Ha'i as a forbidden area, Bullis and the other soldiers experience a desire to uncover its secrets. But Mulvey seems to ignore that the desire to know is itself a colonising gesture.

A similar narrative unfolds in *Tabu*, the 1931 film by F. W. Murnau and Robert Flaherty. Here, a Polynesian romance is cut short when the woman, Reri, is pronounced "Tabu." This declaration means that she is "sacred" and thus "if any man casts the eye of desire" upon her he will be killed. Reri's position – a position that places her "off-limits" – only stimulates the desire of her lover, and the couple flees the island. More interesting, though, is that this story is conveyed by a white colonist as he documents the narrative in his journal. He tells us he is learning much about the people of the South Seas, and that he will not leave until he has uncovered its secrets. Like the desire to possess that which is forbidden, the white colonist's curiosity – his desire to know – gestures toward "the masculinist desire of mastering a new land."²² As Peter Raby points out, the process of revealing knowledge about strange cultures, combined with mapping unknown terrains, is the product of an imperial longing to conceptualise and control foreign lands. "If the world ... is charted," Raby states, "the empire can control it," and the knowledge gained from American travellers "must be placed in the hands of the instrument of power."²³

Discourses of travel are therefore at times intertwined with discourses of imperialism. Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and*

21. Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996), 59.

22. Ella Shohat, "Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema," *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*, eds. Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlan, (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1997), 27.

23. Peter Raby, *Bright Paradise: Victorian Scientific Travellers*, (London: Pimlico Book, 1996), 5.

Transculturation (1992) has been an essential guide to exploring travel writing's repetitions and inscriptions of particular event-sequences and their complicity in the discursive structures of other colonial texts. She notes that travel texts share colonial discourses and rhetorical structures that gesture toward potential colonial exploitation: the land is naturalised, and described as fertile and lacking indigenous peoples.²⁴ South Pacific participates in many of these nineteenth-century travel discourses which Pratt discusses: the Polynesians are presented in terms of idealised beauty; they are erotic and sexually accessible to the Western traveller; the American traveller is simultaneously attracted and repulsed by the Othered beauty of the natives; and the main character flees when he fears being initiated into Polynesian culture. South Pacific thus repeats the representational strategies of paranoia, feminisation, expressions of intense desire, objects of sexual fetishism, eroticism and exoticism which are central to traditional travel discourse.

But, as Michel Foucault points out, discourses are not monolithic: they frequently include tensions and contradictions which must be taken together to fully understand the functions of particular discursive structures. Therefore, travel discourses in film (and elsewhere) are often troubled by gaps and inconsistencies which destabilise the unified modes of representation laid out by travellers. South *Pacific*, for example, works to disrupt conventional travel discourses and imperial impulses: the Polynesian islands are seen as sites where the American characters can engage freely in homosocial bonds, as well as experimenting with alternative gender performances. One such instance occurs during the Thanksgiving party scene when the hyper-masculine character, Bullis, performs a drag show (in traditional Polynesian attire) while the men in the audience attempt to slap his buttocks and fondle his false breasts as he sings and dances on stage. As Bullis entertains the troops, Nellie, the female lead played by Mitzi Gaynor, appears on stage dressed in a man's sailor uniform and gestures to Bullis as she sings a song which refers to Bullis as "her broad." Bullis, in response, serenades Nellie with a tune titled "My Honey Bun;" this song and dance concludes with the two characters locked in a passionate kiss. The brevity of this gender reversal and the

24. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 49.

exaggerated, farcical quality of the imitations save them from censorship at the hands of the Hollywood Production Code. Although this drag show presents no real sexual threat in that their genders are uncomplicatedly restored after the show, the very absurdity of the portrayals is a minor tribute to the comic spirit of anarchy. Cross-dressing, that is, even in a conservative film like *South Pacific*, can work toward "rebellion against social, military, or economic order."²⁵

This rupture of *South Pacific's* imperial narrative may be read as a mark of colonial ambivalence. In fact, Bullis's feminine guise partially allies him with the effeminate male natives; consequently, for the moment of his performance as a Polynesian woman, he "blurs the distinction between coloniser and colonised" and gestures toward a "colonial crisis of origins."²⁶ While this colonial ambivalence is not sustained throughout the film, Bullis's drag show serves as a moment of "epistemological splitting" whereby the narrative discloses the double-vision of colonial travel discourse. This scene, that is, exposes the artificial nature of gender subordination, a subordination that the American traveller maps onto the Native in order to force him or her into an inferior subject position. Such an exposure denotes the "rupture," the "disruption" and the "ambivalence" that infuses imperial rhetoric with flawed discourses which amount to its own "strategic failure."²⁷

Conclusion

Eroticism, then, is a central trope in American travel discourse that assumes various guises. Frequently, the American traveller describes the native Other as an "exotic" spectacle which is viewed as anomalous in relation to the Western norm. Under these circumstances the native is denied subjectivity and thus becomes a source of erotic fantasy by presenting the Other as sexually available for the American subject. American gazes which undermine subjectivity sometimes work to cast the

25. Rebecca Bell-Metereau, *Hollywood Androgyny*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), 41.

26. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 69.

27. Bhabha. 86.

Other into an inferior mold by framing the other as vulnerable to penetration and possession. At other times, erotic images are used by the American traveller to criticise imperial projects. Conceptions of this kind are exemplified in Melville's *Typee* and Vidor's *Bird of Paradise*, for they both draw attention to the stereotypes of the "erotic paradise" and the "noble savage" as examples of positive representations within colonial discourse. Such erotic images are then used to question Euro-American superiority and to critique imperial confrontation and infiltrations into the exotic cultures found in the South Pacific. But, even though they are at times marked by ambivalence, the "imperial eye" does not passively admire the erotic aspects of foreign cultures; rather, these gazes work to construct typologies that categorise cultures so as to differentiate between norm and Otherness.²⁸ In *Bird of Paradise*, for instance, Johnny is hunted by the islanders for breaking the taboo that forbids him to seduce Princess Luana. Such a threat counters the film's early images of a South Sea paradise; the natives, in the latter half of the movie, are seen as barbarous threats to the American travellers, thus implying that an escape from Western civilisation and American capitalism leads to terror and danger.

The barbarous nature of these Polynesian "savages" also works to conceptualise them as inferior animals and justifies the American imperial project of "civilising" the natives. The act of witnessing the natives in this fashion undermines the threats of the foreign space and justifies expansionist projects by assuming that the witness leads to objective knowledge of the foreign locale – enough knowledge to order and place that locale within a taxonomised system based on general observations that are filtered through the traveller's imperial lens. Thus, what binds all of these films and travel discourses together are their thematic and rhetorical interventions in the interface between sexuality, eroticism and American imperialism. Whether it be Murnau's presentation of a homosocial Tahitian paradise or *South Pacific's* descriptions of the island as a sexualised military zone, the foreign lands and its citizens are depicted with an erotic currency that goes hand in hand with the motifs of imperial expansion and colonial control.