

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating “Race” at Tahiti: Polynesian and European Encounters

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Abstract

In this article I analyze stories about the negotiation of European racialization ideologies in the Society Islands (Tahiti and its Islands) in the late eighteenth century. My focus is the disjunctures between European understandings of their encounters at Tahiti, and what Pacific scholars have come to understand of Polynesian understandings of themselves and various foreigners in that early period. In doing so, I draw out the ways sexuality and gender mediated, enabled, and were also constituted through such racialization processes in their cultural and historical specificity. A key point of departure for this analysis is that the embodiment of race is a negotiated social process. The comparative historical case study I offer up here follows current scholarly moves in seeking out the insights to be gained by tracking racialization as a contingent process, as open rather than closed, as variegated rather than singular, and as imperfectly and only tenuously wrought through ideologies that may be profoundly unanticipated from the vantage point of modernist logics of essentialism and foundationalism. The resulting analysis aims to create space for critically revisiting the ways in which racial normativities and racialized embodiment operate, and how they work, and fail to work, to promote naturalized racist hierarchies of privilege and subordination.

Keywords: racialization; racism; colonialism; French Polynesia; embodiment; gender; sexuality; decolonization

I am not willing to get over histories that are not over.

———Sara Ahmed, “A Killjoy Manifesto,” *Principle 5* (2017: 262)

Introduction: Setting Sail

Tahiti has historically been the site of elaborate—one could easily argue excessive—foreign fantasy. A kind of Garden of Eden to the genesis of Europe’s “civilized” self, representations of Tahiti appear overgrown by European imperial fantasies. The iconic representation of the Islands takes the shape of a young Tahitian girl, *pareu*

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around her waist, *couronne à cou* of gardenia flowers suggestively lain over her bare breasts, her bronze skin glistening with coconut oil, beckoning to the white masculine voyeur with promises of an earthly garden of sexual delights. This is home to “the Pacific Muse” (O’Brien 2006), the women of Gauguin’s paintings, the liberated whores of Captains Cook through Bligh: young, precocious, ripe as the mangos and other first fruits they hold out to the imperial masculinist gaze. As such iconic imagery lays bare, Tahiti holds a privileged place in the annals of European myth-making about differences, one positioned amidst wildly moving discursive currents of sexuality and gender, savagery and civilization, nobility and decadence, and race. Perhaps the most interesting feature of these currents, however, is the profound ambivalence of the early European explorers and European intelligentsia about what, precisely, Polynesian difference was all about.

In this essay I offer up a set of stories about the negotiation of European racialization ideologies in the Society Islands (Tahiti and its Islands), the ways sexuality and gender mediated, enabled, and were also constituted through such racialization processes, and the centrality of the body for surfacing the cultural and historical specificity of these processes. A key point of departure for this analysis is that the embodiment of race is a negotiated social process. The comparative historical case study I offer up here follows the work of current scholars of race in seeking out the insights to be gained by tracking racialization as a contingent process, as open rather than closed, as variegated rather than singular, and as imperfectly and only tenuously wrought through ideologies that may be profoundly unanticipated from the vantage point of modernist logics of essentialism and foundationalism. The resulting analysis of race, I suggest, opens up space for critically revisiting the ways in which racial normativities and racialized embodiment operate, and how they work—and fail to work—to promote naturalized racist hierarchies of privilege and subordination.

This essay is part of a larger project investigating the tenuousness of race as it has come to shape Polynesian social relations in the Society Islands. Contemporary Islander society is quite remarkable—particularly in relation to other French colonies—for the ways in which Polynesians have been able to evade, side-step, and attenuate ideologies of racism and the processes of racialization that attend the ongoing practices of French colonial rule. “Race” is a social fact in this “overseas territory” of France, yet its forms are oftentimes ambiguous, its anchoring points in Polynesian social life amorphous and at times astonishingly fragile. In that larger project I track the varied historical as well as contemporary manifestations of Polynesian resistance, objection, reconstitution, and rejection of processes of racialization that have attended European contact, Christian missionization, and French colonialism.

In the present paper, my route through the early history of encounters follows the metaphor of navigation. In so doing, I take my cues from critical work in indigenous Oceanic epistemologies articulated through wayfinding, a collection of forms of knowledge and ways of being-in-relation that are now believed to have underpinned the Pacific Ocean exploration, settlement, and maintenance of relationships undertaken by Polynesians’ seafaring Austronesian ancestors. Wayfinding in Pacific Ocean societies references forms of indigenous knowledge that have had a renaissance among Oceanic peoples since the *Hōkūle’a* voyage from Hawai’i to Tahiti in 1976 (Finney 1994) proved, once and for all, that settlement of the Pacific by their Austronesian ancestors had been deliberate—with profound

ramifications for Polynesian pride and cultural revitalization. Wayfinding is an Oceanic ontology of crafting and nurturing relations, what Tengan (2020: 280) terms “a Native Pacific mode for being and binding relations” or *hoa*.¹ Such binding relations are foundational within “our sea of islands” in Epeli Hau’ofa’s (1999[1993]) now classic formulation, intended as an intervention into representations of Pacific Islands and Islanders as tiny, remote, isolated specs of island places separated by vast expanses of Pacific Ocean. In contrast, Hau’ofa’s reorientation centers the sea as connecting rather than separating and redefines seafaring Oceanic peoples through this very connectedness (and see Tcherkézoff 2022).

Building on Hau’ofa’s vision, recent Pacific scholars have articulated a decolonial Oceanic epistemology built in part through the voyaging concepts and techniques of their Austronesian ancestors, as these have been rediscovered and renewed in practice across the Pacific.² Anthropologist Vicente Diaz (2011: 24) recounts a particular “Carolinean seafaring chant [that describes] flora and fauna, stars, land and seamarks [that] constitute a veritable mnemonic map of the route from the Central Carolines to the Marianas.” In his exegesis of the seafaring concepts of *etak* and *pookof*, Diaz (2011: 25–26) provides a window into this indigenous mode of Oceanic knowledge production: *etak* is “a sea-level perspective ... for plotting the courses of islands in the celestial sky,” in which the navigator’s point of view is taken as fixed and the stars and islands are apprehended as moving, showing the way.³ It is complemented by *pookof*, part of a larger system of land-finding by way of “expanding islands” so they are known by “the inventory of creatures indigenous to a given island, as well as their travel habits and behavior” (ibid.: 27), the particular cloud formations over islands, and detecting interruptions in the patterns of ocean swells as they move around islands (Finney 1994: 88). At the heart of Oceanic voyaging have been the projects of kin-making and world-building, what we should see as “rituals of renewal” for political relationships, kinship relations, and cosmological relationships (including religious rites and celebrations) through long-distance settlement followed by regular and recurrent visiting and reconnection.

As Diaz has written, seafaring “modes and meanings of movement help us to question prevailing assumptions about ... cultural subjectivities and the boundedness of their areas of coverage or play” (2011: 25), including the boundaries around “race” itself. Such indigenous approaches also draw our attention to the specifically “historical processes of cultural and social contact and interconnectivity”

¹Tengan (2020: 280) draws out the layered significances of *hoa* as a noun for “companion, friend, comrade” and also as a verb, that “move[s] *hoa* from affiliation to action while encompassing both”: “to tie, bind, secure, rig; rigging, lashing.” He explains: “In Hawaiian voyaging traditions, the final ritual for launching a double-hulled sailing *wa’a* [vessel] entails a *hoa* (lashing) whose technique marks the *kapu* (sacred prohibitions) and *mana* (spiritual power and authority) of the vessel and the reliability of relationships among crew members responsible for the craft” (281).

²Those ancestral histories of travel, discovery, and trade date back four thousand years and crisscross the Pacific from aboriginal Taiwan south to island New Guinea and the Solomons, eastward to Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga, northward to Hawai’i, southeast to Rapa Nui and as far as South America, southwest to Tahiti and all the way to the southernmost islands of Aotearoa/New Zealand (Finney 1994: 16; Diaz 2011: 23).

³*Etak* translates as “‘moving islands’ and is the technique for calculating distance traveled, or position at sea by triangulating the speed of the islands of departure and destination with that of a third reference island ... accomplished by plotting these islands’ courses in the celestial sky.... [It is] a way of conceptualizing time/space in order to fix one’s place” (Diaz 2011: 25–26; see also Finney 1994: 69).

(ibid.: 21). In this regard, much of my interest lies in the disjunctures between early European understandings of their encounters at Tahiti and what Pacific scholars tenuously understand of Polynesian understandings of themselves and their foreigners in that period. These were complex “encounters [in which] pre-existing understandings, preconceptions from both sides of the encounter, were engaged, brought into confrontation and dialogue, mutual influence and ultimately mutual transformation” (Jolly and Tcherkézoff 2009: 1).

Assembling an archive specific to the task of querying race and racialization projects in the early contact period, I focus on stories of encounter drawn from the latter eighteenth-century initial period of contact in the Society Islands, roughly 1787–1800, ending just before the period when intensive missionization began around 1800. These are stories about sex and desire, adulation and fear, civilization and its discontents, savagery noble and ignoble, all dressed up and down in invocations of Greek gods and goddesses. These are stories about the uses Europeans would make of Polynesian chiefly society and Polynesian bodies, but they are also about the uses Polynesians would make of these foreigners, their material goods, and their powers. The sources I draw upon here—primary as well as secondary, original, and interpretive—will all be familiar to scholars in Pacific Studies. Rather than unearthing new sources, my project here is to recalibrate the retrospective significance of what is already known from the early contact period. Following Trouillot’s (1995: 28) injunction that “what history is matters less than how history works,” I draw out points of convergence, divergence, and radical incommensurability around “race” in these early engagements between Polynesians and Europeans. The moral of the stories framed by this essay is that in these are evident the profound contingencies and vulnerabilities of attempts to produce “race” as a social difference and mode of embodiment that could serve as scaffolding for hierarchies of privilege and subordination and European colonial relations of rule.

Situating Race, Difference, and the Body

In the wake of scholarly projects denaturalizing race, it has become more common than not to claim that race is always contingent. For apprehending these contingencies, Omi and Winant (1994; 2014) provide a rich theoretical apparatus developed out of the history of racialization processes in the United States. They challenge “the temptation to think of race as an *essence*, as something fixed, concrete, and objective” at the same time critiquing the excesses of social constructionist theories of race, what they term “the opposite temptation: to imagine race as a mere *illusion*, a purely ideological construct” (ibid.: 54, their emphases; 2014: 109). These authors and their scholarly compatriots explicate the historically contingent and changing nature of “race” while also emphasizing its relentless and systematic presence in histories of Euro-American cultural and imperial politics and institutions. Such accounts of racialization processes complement work on the contingencies of race that has emerged from a variety of other sites of scholarly knowledge production.⁴ In the Pacific, in particular, scholars have begun to give

⁴In the early years of critical race studies, for example, legal scholars dissatisfied with the confines of the juridically stabilizing renderings of “race” underpinning civil rights law critically interrogated how the law

much closer attention to the ways Oceania and its peoples figured centrally in the broader historical development of racist science and ideology, the Cook-ing of racial ideology during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Douglas and Ballard 2008; Ballard 2009; Tcherkézoff 2003; 2008). These link to recent works emphasizing how vital were European imaginings of Pacific differences in the shaping and hardening of racist ideologies in Europe and its colonies, and follow a strong critique of the “near-total absence of detailed work on the history of race in Oceania” (Douglas 2008: 3; but see Clark 2003).⁵ Together, these reflect a broader move among scholars of race not only to interrogate the central importance of sociohistorical context to the shifting meanings of race, but also to apprehend the enormous sociocultural work involved in producing race as a persuasive feature of social life and legitimator of relations of inequality.

Such interrogations also align the present project with central concerns of feminist critical race studies, in part because they help us to critique the “disaggregation of race and racialization from the politics of gender and sexuality” (Barker 2017: 11). While the nominal thrust of early work in feminist critical race studies was a critical intervention into white feminist racism, it generated a fundamental epistemological break with the naturalization of racial formations (Combahee River Collective 1983; Crenshaw 1995). As an analytical project, women of color feminisms sought to create more synthetic understandings of domination and inequality, and of what was needed to undermine them (hooks 1984; Ferguson 2005). Over the past thirty years, feminist critical race studies have come to privilege the interpolating dynamics and mutual constitution of race with gender, class, sexuality, generation, and other hierarchically organized, locally recognized social differences (Hill Collins 2008), including those more globally organized differences such as North/South and First World/Third World (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Mohanty 2003). Thus, what Donna Haraway (1991: 170) termed a “geometrics of difference” gives analytical priority to questions of how racialization is interpenetrated, mutually constituted with gender, sexuality, and other differences, and how these are woven into a nexus that naturalizes systemic inequalities.

Drawing on these multiple scholarly lines of inquiry, the project of this essay takes the story of race as its narrative focus in order to track the eddies and currents in how racialization works—and fails to work—historically. The questions animating this essay foreground the interpolated productions of social differences to ask how “race” becomes meaningful and persuasive as an embodied social difference in specific contexts and how “race” may (or may not) become centralized for arbitrating and authorizing relations of domination. It asks after the specific sites of rupture or disjunction that make visible the arbitrary relationship between “race” as a social

actively constitutes “the very power politics it purports to avoid and stand above,” focusing on the ways legal discourse and institutions have been “a constitutive element of race itself: in other words, how law *constructed* race” (Crenshaw et al. 1995: xxiv, xxv, original emphasis).

⁵The emphasis in historical scholarship on the history of race in Oceania has come to center around the racial and historically racist divisions between Melanesia, on one hand, and Polynesia and Micronesia, on the other. This crucial division of Oceanic peoples into “black” and savage Melanesians who were relentlessly denigrated in relation to the bronzer and “more civilized” Polynesians and Micronesians hardened during the nineteenth century, as detailed in Clark (2003) and by Tcherkézoff (2008), among others. My focus in this essay is on the era just prior to this, the latter half of the eighteenth century, during the period of initial contacts between Europeans and Polynesians.

difference and the relations of domination it is used to authorize. Race gains whatever persuasiveness it comes to hold through interplay between sociohistorical contexts: through the contexts and contests through which social formations develop; and through their institutional sedimentations in, for example, the organization of politics, civil society, religion, criminality, and the law. By attending to the ways hierarchy, power, and differences are pragmatically, experientially, and ideologically negotiated and authorized, this paper also aims to give analytic emphasis to social process, practice, and embodied action in the social history of race.

The Society Islands are a particularly provocative site for interrogating both the contingencies of race and the enormous sociocultural work that goes into making race persuasive. As briefly mentioned before, this is in part because among these Polynesians race has not come to have the kind of salience it bears in most other European colonies, and especially other French colonies. Framed by the ideology of *la mission civilisatrice* (“the civilizing mission”), most French colonial projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries not only apprehended colonial subjects as different and inferior, but also aimed to assimilate colonized peoples to Francophone values and commitments.⁶ The French civilizing process directly targeted the “(re)formation of subjectivity” itself (Bullard 2000: 6). The result was Fanon’s “black skin, white masks” (1967), a conflicted subjectification sited in ceaseless movement between Francophone identification and aspiration and a perpetually Othered racialized subordination, as so painfully detailed in works by Césaire (1972[1955]) and Glissant (1989).⁷ Yet in the Society Islands, French colonial racism has had profoundly uneven effects. In the outer Society Islands and away from Papeete and its surrounding metropolitan districts on Tahiti island, one could easily argue racism is negligible and irrelevant in the daily lives of the vast majority of Islanders. But, then again, confronted with metropolitan French in cosmopolitan Papeete and in territorial institutions across the Islands—education and schooling; administrative mayoral centers for recording births, deaths, and marriages; land

⁶In her monograph investigating the histories of savagery and civilization, Bullard (2000) offers a compelling analysis of how French colonialism in New Caledonia sought to civilize both “natural savages” (the indigenous Kanak) and “political savages,” the latter being the failed revolutionaries of the Paris Commune who were exiled to French penal colonies in New Caledonia. Bullard emphasizes that “Creating a savage population was the first major project of the civilizing process in New Caledonia; only once the Kanak had been ‘savaged’ could they embark on the process of moralization” (2000: 29). The civilizing process, then, was also a moralizing process, and both aimed at the “(re)formation of subjectivity” (ibid.: 6). As that suggests, and as Fanon (1967) and other postcolonial scholars like Césaire (1972[1955]) and Glissant (1989) have so deftly and poignantly analyzed, French colonial processes had deeply complicated entailments for indigenous and colonized subjectification.

⁷Perhaps the most exemplary case has been that of Martinique in the French Antilles, where racial ideologies of difference in the context of French colonial relations of inequality were used to build elaborate taxonomic racial hierarchies. In that almost encyclopedic nuancing of racial categories and differences, skin color, hair texture, the shapes of noses and lips, along with other physiological distinctions came to be minutely distinguished and endowed with a level of hierarchical significance that founded their central role in virtually all Martiniquais social hierarchies and colonial subjectivities. Writing of the French Antilles more broadly, Burton (1995: 11), perhaps too benignly, describes this as “a perceptible ‘white bias’ [that] continues to operate in French West Indians’ somatic and sexual preferences.” He explains, “To be light-skinned still confers definite social and sexual advantages in Martinique (especially) and Guadeloupe, and, despite the rise of a substantial black middle class since 1946, a high degree of correlation still obtains between class and colour” (ibid.: 11). See also Giraud 1995; Miles 1986: 6, 198–202; and Glissant (1989).

tenure claims and disputes; and of course, the legacy of the 190 nuclear bomb tests France detonated in this territory—it could also be argued that racism serves as or at the very foundation of ongoing French colonialism.

Racialized productions of difference and hierarchy are, of course, variable as well as contingent.⁸ As Stoler (1989: 137) has so well taught us, “The quality and intensity of racism vary enormously in different colonial contexts and at different historical moments in any particular colonial encounter.” Racialized productions of difference and hierarchy are ridden with “the tensions, incongruities, and fractures within or between shifting rival discourses on human similarity or difference” and “enmeshed in the interplay of unstable discourses, and particular European experiences of encounters with non-European people, places and things” (Douglas 2008: 4). In the Society Islands, the eighteenth-century initial encounters between Europeans and Polynesians comprise an historical period when we can begin to grasp and analyze the complex negotiations between local understandings of difference and hierarchy as these engaged with a variety of European-authored theories of difference between hierarchically organized categories of persons.

Navigating Techniques: Savagery and Civilization

Tahiti’s privileged siting as the object of elaborate and excessive foreign fantasy began its discursive memorialization with the publication in Europe of travel narratives penned by the first British and French ship captains, Wallis and Bougainville, respectively, and some of their crewmembers who anchored at Tahiti’s harbors in 1767 and 1768. It was Louis Antoine de Bougainville’s (1772) sensational published account of his voyage to Tahiti that sited the island as paradise regained—in Bougainville’s terms, “*la nouvelle Cythère*.” In that early period, Tahiti was perhaps made most famous by the journals, drawings, and paintings of the European botanists and other scientists, artists, and travelers who accompanied Captain James Cook on his numerous voyages of “scientific” discovery to Tahiti which began in 1769. These narrative and visual representations of Polynesians were fairly immediately recirculated and embellished in the utopic and dystopic fantasies of European intellectuals: they became fodder for a popular genre of literary and philosophical works which pivoted on a contrast between noble savagery and decadent European civilization. In France, Diderot’s “Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville” (1956[1773/1774]) has been held up as one of the most

⁸Segal (1991), for example, offers an insightful comparative historical case study of racialization processes in the West Indies and colonial Virginia, organized around the question of how the historical construction of racial and national distinction “has been, and continues to be, intertwined” (1991: 7; 1992). Emphasizing pragmatic differences in local productions and interpolations of racial, class, and national identifications, his analysis distinguishes the different mechanisms, outcomes, and implications for racial domination of these racial formation processes. His analysis also reveals West Indian societies developing “an elaborate vocabulary for differentiating so-called ‘coloured’ persons,” which emphasized the “‘mixing’ of enduringly distinguished races” (ibid.: 8). Segal finds that in the West Indies such racially taxonomizing distinctions “were deployed to prevent a unified opposition to white domination,” whereas in the Atlantic coast colonies such “mixing” was representationally and pragmatically erased, in favor of a “dichotomous [black/white] racial system” that produced and consolidated white racial purity as the instrument of domination (ibid.: 9). Such a politics of blood quantum, equating cultural identity with a quantifiable amount of indigenous “blood,” has also been deployed against Polynesians in Hawai’i (Kauanui 2008).

successful literary expressions in this genre, contrasting Polynesian noble savagery with French civilization through descriptions of Tahitians as “happy,” “innocent,” and “mild,” in contrast to “civilized people” who are “corrupt,” “vile,” and “wretched” (Todorov 1993: 276; Smith 1985: 85). In Todorov’s analysis of exoticism in French thought, this amounts to a cannibalizing project: French intellectuals’ representations of Polynesian social life were primarily meaningful as productions of a radical Otherness used as fuel and fodder for meditations on their dissatisfactions with their own society. Bernard Smith (1985: 85) makes an analogous point for English intellectuals’ representations, highlighting “the use of Tahitian life to criticize the shortcomings of English society.” In both cases, the motivating position is that “savagery regenerates, civilization corrupts” (Bullard 2000: 15).

Of course, the European-authored image of the noble savage had a history that long predated European encounters with Society Islanders. Rousseau and Porter (1990: 9) attribute to the Greeks the first articulation of “the myth of the innocent primitive ... lacking wants and, hence, lacking vices.” In the context of the Enlightenment, Bernard Smith (1985: 86) explains that the late eighteenth-century idea of the “noble savage” was “grounded in the belief that primitive man [*sic*] lived in harmony with natural laws that were universal, coherent, harmonious, and complete, and were, moreover, understood instantaneously by man [*sic*] through the agency of his reason.” With the era of European voyages of “discovery” and the intellectual projects of the Enlightenment, then, the discourse of noble savagery (and its alter, ignoble savagery or degraded humanity) intensified, as voyagers and European intellectuals sought to make their own kind of sense of differences between themselves and the peoples they encountered.

Polynesians quickly became an archetypal node in the discursive web of European representations of noble savagery, with mixed and complex implications for the politics of encounter and, later, imperial relations of rule. While the specific ideas of the Polynesian exotic varied by promulgator (scientists, sailors, and later missionaries), some common themes emerge across the early representations. For the present analysis, one of the most striking is the ambivalence Europeans expressed about the particular kind of Otherness Polynesians represented for them. On one hand, Polynesians were signified as the aristocrats of the Pacific perhaps akin to classical Greek culture (Smith 1985: 42). In the Society Islands, European travelers encountered a deeply stratified and highly organized social system: people were sorted into numerous ranks, from the *manahune* or commoners who labored, to the *ari’i hau* or highest ranked chiefly persons who ruled. And they were sorted into whole classes of specialists: boat-makers, cloth-makers, land managers, and priests, among others. At the top of the ranked system, the combination of *mana* (sacred power) and genealogy (in which high-ranking *ari’i* rulers traced their descent to the gods themselves) formally authorized the prerogatives of *ari’i* rank. Initially, many Europeans interpreted Polynesian society by assimilating it to aristocratic models that had reigned in Europe, identifying Polynesian rulers as “Queens” and “Kings” rather than *ari’i hau*, and by seeing resemblance between, for example, the sacred *mana* that legitimated *ari’i* rule and the divine right of kings in Europe (Oliver 1974).

In a broader context, this was also the period of European history when voyages of “discovery” fueled and were interpreted as confirming the secular Enlightenment theory of the diversity of human people, the putative chronological transitions over time from savagery to barbarism to civilization, in which different societies were to be located at different stages of civilizational development. This is what Glassman

(2021: 78) frames as “stadial historicism”: Europe of course was at the pinnacle, and the peoples Europeans were contacting and colonizing represented earlier moments in the long march of progress toward that pinnacle (Stocking 1982).⁹ Thus, the interpretation of Polynesians as aristocrats of the Pacific rested on readings of their society and polity that European visitors assimilated to the more familiar or recognizable: through this, Polynesians were signified as both exotic and civilized. Indeed, in some of the earliest accounts, one finds suggestions that Polynesians and Europeans might share a common ancestry because of these similarities. That ambiguity and its twisted logic of “possession” is the central focus of Maile Arvin’s (2019) brilliantly original analysis of how Kanaka Maoli (Hawaiian) Polynesians were both raced as Other and classified as white, through a complex set of dis/identifications that sought to mediate white settler colonialism as a “natural” process—an indigenization of settlers’ rights—at the same time that it Othered Polynesians as never quite white enough to rule themselves.

On the other hand, and as that suggests, Polynesians were represented as deeply entrenched in the savage side of the savage/civilized distinction in part through representations of “abhorrent social practices such as cannibalism, infanticide, and tattooing” (Edmond 1997: 9). This also comes through, for example, in Captain Cook’s and others’ horrified accounts of rituals of human sacrifice, in which *ari’i* rulers periodically offered their subordinates to deities with whom they wanted to curry favor. It also comes through in pejorative accounts of Polynesian cosmological beliefs and their pantheon of deities. Framing Polynesian religious life as idolatry, possibly even devil-worship, these European voyagers and, later, missionaries, construed it as evidence of Polynesian heathen savagery. Savagery was also the voyagers’ evaluation grown out of their incomprehension of Polynesians’ expectations that social relations be forged through gift-giving: this resulted in chroniclers’ pitched frustration and constant narrative of complaints about the problem of Polynesian “theft.” And a discourse on savagery snakes its way through European accounts of the rich expressive culture of Polynesians, focusing in particular on the *arioi* society which was enormously popular among Polynesians in the eighteenth century.

Dedicated to the Polynesian god of war, ‘Oro, the *arioi* society was a stratified religious association that celebrated the vitality and vigor of youthfulness in the context of ceremonies of worship for ‘Oro and related dance and theatrical performances. For example, performances emphasizing the warrior identity of its

⁹Debates over the humanity of native peoples of the Americas, for example, were staged by the Catholic Church in order to arbitrate Portuguese, Spanish, and, subsequently, other European powers’ claims on the New World. In 1455 the Pope had given Portugal “the right to reduce to servitude all ‘infidel’ people” (Graves 2001: 27), and it was under that authority that Portugal claimed the Americas. Over the next century, however, Spain and other European powers also laid claim to more and more parts of the New World and, by 1580, England was challenging the papal bulls that authorized colonialism via conversion with the alternative principle that effective occupation be the determinant of legitimate colonial rule. As a result of the competition between religious and secular interests in the New World, the humanity of Indian peoples came under debate. “The initial discussion,” Graves explains, “concerned whether the Indians in the New World were humans or rather beasts intermediate between humans and animals. Beasts could and should be put to profitable labor, whereas humans might be brought into the fold of Christianity” (ibid.: 28). Ultimately, the Church decided that Native Americans were indeed human. However, over the course of the debate an alternative solution to the infidel servitude of these specific Native peoples was offered: the importation of slave labor from Africa.

young men members would distinguish them “for their prowess, valour, and activity in battle” (Oliver 1974: 930). During the early contact period as much as one-fifth of the population held membership in the ‘*arioi* society (ibid.: 1106, 913), in part because, as virtually all voyager accounts from that period emphasize, it provided socially significant status and privileges (ibid.: 930; see also Salmond 2009: 315–16). ‘*Arioi* members traveled around Tahiti and its neighboring islands putting on dance and theatrical entertainments that were often highly politicized—including the “uninhibited lampooning” of *ari’i* as well as the ridiculing of priests (Oliver 1974: 923–24)—“in exchange for lavish hospitality” and gifts, as well as privileges and status (ibid.: 614). While the society had elaborate membership criteria that articulated a stratified hierarchy among its members, a criterion on which foreigners often focused was a requirement that ‘*arioi* members be childless: that members were forced out of the society if they had a child seems to have encouraged the practice of infanticide among ‘*arioi* members (although infanticide may also have been accepted among Polynesians more broadly).¹⁰ Infanticide among the ‘*arioi* and its purported acceptance among Polynesians generally came to be a discursive node for iconifying Polynesian savagery—along with European evaluations of ‘*arioi* revelry, their tendency to sleep all day and engage in “unspeakable acts” at night, the bawdiness of the skits they performed, and their explicitly erotic dance performances, which seem to have included or culminated in public sex on at least some occasions (Henry 1928: 240; Oliver 1974: 923–25; Smith 1985: 44).

Sexing Savagery: An Archive of Sexual Difference

And then there was the sex. From the earliest European travel narratives to Gauguin’s paintings in the late 1800s, to contemporary tourist advertisements, Tahiti and the Society Islands have been saturated in images of what Margaret Jolly (1997) unpacks under the sign of “the erotic exotic,” and “notorious throughout Europe in the popular mind as a land of free-love” (Smith 1985: 47). These “erotic exotic” images center around the figure of the young Polynesian woman, gardenia flower behind her ear, welcoming smile on her face, and, in the words of J. R. Forster, who accompanied Captain Cook on his second voyage, “a beautifully proportioned shape, an irresistible smile, and eyes full of sweetness and sparkling with fire” (1778: 421). This inviting, alluring Polynesian woman was to be found along with other “nymphs,” in the words of J. R. Forster’s son, “swimming nimbly all around the sloop, such as nature had formed them” (G. Forster 1968 [1777]: 161). Coming on board ship, according to even the more reserved Captain Cook, “the Women were so very liberal with their favours” (Beaglehole 1955: 99). For Polynesians, bodies and sexual pleasure were not yet sites of shame. Some European narrators thus construed Polynesian sexuality as

¹⁰Kirch and Sahlins (1992, I: 201), for example, argue that among Hawaiians infanticide was normalized as one “among a whole panoply of customary practices that inhibited childbearing and rearing,” including abortion, celibacy, and contraception, all of which were “built into the traditional social structure.” Noting that in many Hawaiian and missionary accounts, infanticide is not distinguished from abortion (ibid.: 202 n12), they cite Hawaiian historian David Malo to explain such reproductive strategies in relation to parents’ lack of access to property and the system of chiefly powers: together, these generated a reproductive structure of “simple replacement” (ibid.: 201). Thus, “the movement and pleasure of the young people [including the avoidance of childbirth and childrearing] were a freedom of the dispossessed, the positive complement of political limitations on familial growth and access to livelihood” (ibid.: 202).

“free,” but it would be more accurately described as celebrated and sacralized. Indeed, Salmond (2009: 54, 64) emphasizes that young women’s “lascivious antics” were most likely mistaken to be erotic enticement by Europeans. As she explains: “In ancient Polynesia ... acts of genital exposure opened a pathway to Te Po, the realm of the ancestor gods, channeling their power. In times of peace, the ‘*arioi* might expose themselves to invoke the generative force of the ancestors, enhancing the fertility of plants, animals, and people; while in times of war, the power of female gods could be directed against enemy warriors, attacking their *mana*” (ibid.: 54; see also Hanson 1982; Tcherkézoff 2009).

Reviewing accounts of sexuality in Pacific literature, Lisa Kahaleole Hall and J. Kehaulani Kauanui explain, “From Aotearoa (New Zealand) to the Hawaiian Islands [Polynesian peoples] have shared a cosmology in which sexuality is an integral force of life—indeed the ‘cause’ of the life of the universe” (1994: 76). Sahlins’ description of early Hawaiian social cosmology furthers the point: “The universe is a genealogy, which is to say a total cosmological project of sexual reproduction” (1985: 13). Anne Salmond explains further: “In Tahiti, when the world began, the creator god Ta’aroa had mated with a series of female goddesses, creating new forms of life. During each epoch that followed, male and female powers came together and created new kinds of beings. *Sex was the sacred force that drove the cosmos*, ensuring the continuity and well-being of descent lines and providing people with key resources—pigs, chickens, breadfruit, fish, plantains, coconuts, and so on” (Salmond 2009: 456, my emphasis).

Europeans once again had ambivalent responses to the sexuality of Polynesians.¹¹ As O’Brien points out, “sexuality was linked to the sacred realm and was a facet of indigenous culture, not its sum, as the stereotype would have it” (2006: 267). What came to be known as the “sex trade” took on mythic proportions in the stories these voyagers circulated back in France and Britain. (That women seeking out sexual relations with men was treated as so exotic, however, perhaps tells us more about the gendered organization of sexuality in Europe than its organization among Polynesians.) Most often it was read as prostitution, in part because Polynesian women did not give themselves so “freely.” Sex may have been celebrated but it was also a medium of exchange, and the women had demands. The exchange of sex for European goods—particularly nails—caused Captain Wallis, the first British ship captain to anchor at Tahiti, first to ban the visits of Polynesian women to his ship and, subsequently, to ban his crewmembers’ shore leave altogether: to meet the women’s demands, his men had been pulling up the nails holding the ship together, to such an extent that the ship risked collapse (Sahlins 1981: 41).

Thus, while many narrators waxed eloquent about the beauty of Polynesian women and the joys of sexual freedom in their congress with them, French and British moralizing also signified Polynesians’ “free” celebration of sexuality as barbaric, lambasting them “as sexually licentious and indolent reprobates” (Keown 2005: 43; Edmond 1997: 99). One focus of such moralizing moves concerned the various “unspeakable acts” that chroniclers ubiquitously reference yet far too often refuse to detail. One such set of acts focused on *māhū* and the homoerotic sexual acts

¹¹Porter (1990) develops a substantive account of differences between narratives of key voyagers who landed at Tahiti in the early period of encounters as part of his analysis of how the exotic came to define the erotic in Enlightenment thought; see also Salmond (2009) and Wallace (2003) on the Pacific; for analysis that reaches beyond the Pacific, see Clark (2008).

that commonly took place between Polynesian *ari'i* and the *māhū* in their entourages (Oliver 1974). Other examples of “unspeakable acts” come from Captain Bligh’s unamused description of an *arioi* skit put on by three young men:

They suddenly took off what clothing they had about their hips and appeared quite naked ... for the whole business now became the power and capability of distorting the penis and testicles, making at the same time wanton and lascivious motions. The person who was ready to begin had his penis swelled and distorted out into an erection.... The second brought his stones to the head of his penis ... stretching them at the same time very violently until they were near a foot in length.... The third person was more horrible than the other two, for with both hands seizing the extremity of the scrotum, he pulled out with such force that the penis went in totally out of sight and the scrotum became shockingly distended. In this manner they danced about the ring for a few minutes when I desired them to desist and the Heivah ended. It however afforded much laughter among the spectators (Bligh 1937, II: 35, cited in Mitchell 1992: 21–22).

Another set of deeply misunderstood sexual practices focused around the ritualized and often sacralized offering of fairly young women or girls (always childless, perhaps virgin) usually of high rank, to European voyagers who, in such rites, were treated as emissaries or representatives of the gods. In many of these rituals, as Tcherkézoff (2009) has argued, Polynesian *ari'i* sought to access the *mana* of the foreigners at the same time that they promoted reconciliation or bonding between themselves and the foreigners: children born of these relationships would both bind the lineages together and embody higher rank and *mana*.

Misunderstanding all such meanings, one of the more common voyager stories used to support a reading of barbarism sited the *ari'i* (chiefs) as the agents behind the women’s “amorous invitations” and as basically ordering women (who were assumed to have no say in the matter) to have sex with sailors; the chiefs were also presumed to be the actual recipients of the goods the women received from sailors. In such stories, the women’s husbands are framed either as conspiring with the chiefs, cast as pimps themselves, or else pitied as powerless to intervene in such chiefly directives. Indeed, Hall and Kauanui write that across most Polynesian societies, “the explorers decided the women were whores and the men weak in their lack of control over ‘their’ women” (1994: 78). Such stories service a particular moral rationalization for colonization shaped through the discourse on savagery and civilization, with “racism underwriting ... modern discourses of [primitivism]” (Wallace 2003: 122). In this story native women are made to stand as the index of progress and, through that, to lend moral legitimacy to imperial projects that claim as part of their agenda the improvement of indigenous women’s status. In Gayatri Spivak’s classic formulation, this was about “white men saving brown women from brown men” (1988: 297). By the nineteenth century, such imperial gendered moral imperatives gained particular force in relation to theories of social evolution, which claimed that the move upward from savagery to barbarism to civilization was indexed by the treatment of women.

As the foregoing accounts make evident, during the early period of encounters, a constellation of gender and sexual meanings was elaborated in and through Polynesian bodies to articulate a semiotic set of contrasts between civilization and

savagery. The meanings of civilization and savagery at that time were shaded by theories of racial difference, such that the placement of societies at different stages of civilization could be read off of and correlated to differences between “races.” I turn in the next section to examine more closely eighteenth-century European racial ideology and the pragmatics of how that ideology was negotiated in the Society Islands.

Embodying Race: Prevailing Winds and Waves

European voyagers’ ambivalence about where Polynesian society was to be placed on the hierarchical scale from savagery to civilization was founded not only in their mixed evaluations of Polynesian social and political life—were Polynesians “aristocrats,” or were they “savages” not unlike the other peoples of the many regions to which Europeans were laying colonial claim? It was also founded in the theories of racial difference that Europeans brought to their cross-cultural exchanges and imperial projects. In that early period, there was of course some question as to whether different “races” were even part of the same family of humanity, as measured against the standard of Europe: “the unity of races” was one pole in this debate, while polygenist theories of race as species difference among populations stood at the other end. In some important sense, then, the sign of race became the arbiter not only of civilized status, but of human standing.¹² In relation to that, I want here at least to note that the ways Europeans ascribed racial difference to Polynesians took shape in dialogue with the racial meanings they ascribed to the other Pacific peoples with whom many of these same voyagers were coming into contact, and conflict—and most notably Melanesians. The name Melanesia, bestowed in the early nineteenth century by European voyagers on the island societies in and around what later became known as New Guinea, literally means “the black islands.” That name is revealing not only of the racialization of Melanesian peoples on analogy with peoples of African descent—who, in the eighteenth century, were still being shipped en masse around the world as slaves—but also of the particularly virulent racism of European representations of Melanesian primitivism and savagery: “the very region of Melanesia [came] to stand for darkness, danger, evil, and cannibalism” (Jolly 1997: 108; see also Tcherkézoff 2003: 183; 2008; Thomas 1997).

In his analysis of racism and exoticism in French thought, Tzvetan Todorov lays out propositions that constitute the classic version of “racialist doctrine” (1993: 91) beginning in the eighteenth century. Races are defined as human groupings possessing common physical characteristics such that the difference between any two races is a species one, akin to that between, in Todorov’s example, horses and donkeys. It also proposes a continuity between physical type and character: not only do individuals within a race look alike, but “physical and moral characteristics are interdependent” (ibid.: 92). Moreover, that correlation is often depicted as causal: in racist doctrine, “physical differences *determine* cultural differences” (ibid.: 92, his emphasis). Attending this is, third, a thesis of “collective psychology” which holds that individual behavior is primarily determined by racial group membership

¹²In addressing this question, all manner of things came to be grouped under the sign of “race” difference and relevant to the debate about what it was voyagers were finding, how they should think about it, and what they should or could do with these Others: language, temperament, morality, religion, labor practice, work ethic, sexuality, polity, as well as skin color, hair texture, and the like. See Glassman 2021; and also note 9, above.

(*ibid.*: 93). Thus does the doctrine correlate species difference between groups to a universal “hierarchy of values” (*ibid.*): some races are superior to others. The ranking of races also takes place on the grounds of physical qualities that are treated as the obvious empirical bases of “intellectual and moral qualities” (*ibid.*: 93–94). Finally, Todorov emphasizes that while the preceding propositions are formulated as “factual observations,” they lead to a final, concluding program of action: “the need to embark upon a political course that brings the world into harmony” such as “the subordination of inferior races or even their elimination” (*ibid.*: 94).

Ambiguity about the extent to which Polynesians constituted a different “race” from Europeans, and the location Polynesians were to be given in the stages of civilization—Todorov’s “hierarchy of values” (*ibid.*: 93)—was founded in large part on Europeans’ varying evaluations of Polynesians’ ranked yet idolatrous society. But ambiguity also permeates Europeans’ equivocation about whether and to what extent their physiological signs of “race” difference could be found among Polynesians; that is, the ambiguity of even the physiological signs of “race” which Europeans “saw.” Following Paul Gilroy (1987), I hold that while race must be conceptualized in non-essentialist terms, the cultural and historical politics of interpreting, and creating, phenotypes are oftentimes central in processes of racialization:

[B]iology cannot be wholly dismissed as a factor in the formation and reproduction of ‘race.’ It is better to confine phenotypes to a relatively autonomous realm of biological determinations which can ascribe a variety of social effects. Accepting that skin ‘colour,’ however meaningless we know it to be, has a strictly limited material basis in biology, opens up the possibility of engaging with theories of signification which can highlight the elasticity and the emptiness of ‘racial’ signifiers as well as the ideological work which has to be done in order turn them into signifiers in the first place (*ibid.*: 38–39).

I understand Gilroy’s position not only as rejecting the claim that physical differences define race but, in light of that rejection, as encouraging questions about how, precisely, “race” is endowed with morphological features and “turn [ed] into signifiers in the first place” (*ibid.*: 39). He thus directs our analytical attention to the processes through which particular physical characteristics are sculpted into embodied significance and privileged as criteria for racial categorizations.

With that in mind, I turn next to examine how voyager narratives negotiated the terrain of signifying phenotypic difference in the Society Islands. These negotiations were never far from, and were often explicitly related to, figuring out the specific kind of difference Polynesians were to represent for them. Captain Cook, for example, described Polynesians in the following terms:

They are of various colors, those of the inferior sort who are obliged to be much exposed to the sun and air are of a very dark brown, the Superiors again who spend most of their time in thier [*sic*] Houses or under shelter are not browner than people who are born or reside in the West Indias [*sic*] nay some of the women are almost as fair as Europeans. Their hair is almost universally black thick and strong.... They have all fine white teeth and for the most part short flat noses and thick lips, yet their features are agreeable [*sic*] and their gait graceful... (in Beaglehole 1955: 123–24).

James Wilson, Captain of the *Duff*, which in 1797 brought the first Protestant missionaries from the London Missionary Society to the Society Islands:

The natural colour of the inhabitants is olive, inclining to copper. Some are very dark, as the fishermen, who are most exposed to the sun and sea; but the women, who carefully clothe themselves, and avoid the sun-beams, are but a shade or two darker than an [*sic*] European brunette. Their eyes are black and sparkling; their teeth white and even; their skin soft and delicate.... [T]hey possess eminent feminine graces; their faces are never darkened with a scowl, or covered with a cloud of sullenness or suspicion (1799: 327).

Lastly, a description by one of the crew members (Anderson) on Cook's 1784 voyage, which compares Society Islanders to the people of "the Friendly Islands," that is, Tongans:

Nothing could make a stronger impression, at first sight, on our arrival here [at Tahiti], than the remarkable contrast between the robust make and dark colour of the people of Tongataboo [Tonga], and a sort of delicacy and whiteness, which distinguish the inhabitants of Otaheite.... Their women [Tahitians] ... struck us as superior in every respect; and as possessing all those delicate characteristics, which distinguish them from the other sex in many countries... (Cook 1784: 146–47, quoted in Oliver 1974: 41–42).

Among the striking features of these narrative excerpts is the remarkable equivocation about the signs of race held to be evidenced by and founded in distinctions in skin color. Ambiguity about where Polynesians were to be located on the hierarchy of civilizations refracted through the kind of ambiguity found in the narratives about the racial status of Polynesians, a point to which I return below. These narrative excerpts also begin to clarify the ways other social differences—gender and sexuality in the excerpts above—were brought into the negotiations over racial embodiments, mediating Europeans' generation and ascription of racial signifiers to Polynesians.

For example, perhaps the most interesting feature of these and other voyager narratives is the narrators' placing of Polynesians so proximately to Europeans. That they focused on Polynesian women in elaborating such proximities draws our attention, again, to the ways racialization took shape in gendered terms. The paintings from Cook's voyages are even more telling of such gendered racializing productions, as Margaret Jolly (1997) has beautifully analyzed. Signs of racialized exoticism decorate portrait paintings, for example, through the inclusion of such items as a partially hidden tattoo, a flower behind the ear, or tikis looming above. As for the subjects of the portraits, Polynesian women were usually drawn or painted in ways that display their bodies to the viewer's gaze, and that often draws that gaze to their bared breasts.¹³

¹³Jolly (1997: 104), among others, has argued there is "a very close connection" in these visual representations from Cook's voyages and subsequent ones, between colonial power and the (partially) revealed female Polynesian body. Teaiwa (1994) develops an even starker analysis of the imperial bifurcating dynamics of colonial invisibility, on the one hand, and the hyper-visibility of the colonized body, on the other.

Drawings and paintings of Polynesian men, however, more often present their bodies as clothed and emphasize a muscular build (*ibid.*: 102). Commonly portrayed in scenes of collective labor and larger social activities, Polynesian men may be seen participating in ritual sacrifice, for example, or navigating an outrigger canoe. Such visual emphasis on muscularity and action are also deeply implicated in the production of racialized gender iconographies that articulate specific links between race, masculinity, and labor, and that have a deep history in representations of men of color more broadly. These borrow from the naturalized associations of manual labor with subordinate class position, as well as that of manual labor with slavery, implicitly evoking and legitimizing European hierarchical relations of rule, be they based in class hierarchies or the racist imperialism and extractive capitalism of colonialism.

Hierarchical relations were not, of course, an exclusively European way of organizing social and political life. Polynesian society too was highly stratified, as indicated in the earlier discussion of how Europeans interpreted Polynesian *ari'i* on the model of European aristocrats. Among Polynesians, hierarchical relations of rule were produced and authorized as a system of rank which pivoted on the concept of *mana* (spiritual potency) and the practices of genealogical reckoning, which traced not only descent but the generation and reproduction of *mana* through male and female ancestors. In relation to this, of particular interest for the present analysis are some of the performative features of the rank system, as these can help us to analyze the embodied pragmatics of producing hierarchy and difference. Among Polynesians, performances of rank were related to the flexibility of the rank system in which, for example, genealogies were regularly manipulated as grounds for staking claims to political power and increasing the status and power of one's kin group.¹⁴ The system of rank, as well as specific claims to high rank, gained its force, persuasiveness, and meanings in large part through the ways rank was displayed—and displays of rank were, importantly, embodied performances. With this, I return to the voyager narratives of differences in skin color among Polynesians, in order to interrogate the resonances and disjunctures between European and Polynesian productions of skin color as a sign of difference, and how this shaped the persuasiveness of skin color as an anchor for racialization ideologies.

The Entanglements of Encounter

Skin color constituted a potential anchor for European racial ideologies and the development of racial hierarchies in the Society Islands in that lightened skin was explicitly elaborated by Polynesians as a meaningful social difference. For Polynesians, lightened skin signified aesthetic beauty and sexual desirability, operating both as a sign of higher rank and as an embodied performance of hierarchical distinction. The Society Islanders' practice of *ha'apori*, for example, meant, "to make fat and delicate, by eating and keeping out of the sun" (London Missionary Society [LMS] dictionary, cited in Oliver 1974: 159).¹⁵ Through *ha'apori*, certain Polynesians, but particularly women of high rank and youth, spent extended

¹⁴Among Hawaiians, for example, the extent to which genealogies were sites of and for strategic claim-making, sculpted and manipulated by individuals, led Sahlins to characterize the Hawaiian lineage system as one organized through "ascent" rather than "descent" (1985: 20).

¹⁵Salmond uses the cognate term *ha'apori'a*, which, like *ha'apori*, included both fattening and whitening "to create a plump, pale 'aroi or chief" (2009: 110).

periods “more or less immobile, shielded from sunlight, and gorging themselves with fattening foods” (Oliver 1974: 159; Salmond 2009: 98). Actual skin bleaching involved “whiten[ing] their skin with the juice of the *papa*” (Foltz 1835: 543, cited in Oliver 1974: 537 n.5). Fattening and skin lightening were regularized practices associated with the maturation process and closely tied to ideals of sexual attractiveness: it was during their teenage years that many boys and girls undertook periods of *ha’apori*, because “plumpness of body (and lightness of complexion) were aesthetically valued, and in the young, at least, sexually relished” (Oliver 1974: 435, 437).

Fattened bodies and lightened or even bleached skin were also among a corpus of embodied distinctions cultivated as central signs in the Polynesian corporeal or body politics of rank, including finely plaited hair, manner of dress, and long fingernails, among others.¹⁶ As part of the social skin of rank differences, fatness and lightness of skin signified through a contrast between the *manahune* or commoner Polynesians and the *ari’i*, those of high-rank. Commoner Polynesians labored for themselves and for the *ari’i* of their districts to whom they owed not only regular gifts of food and cloth, but also labor for building temples, maintaining fishponds and taro fields, and the like. Commoner Polynesians labored outside in the sun fishing, harvesting, and building, and through such labors they became tanned and muscular. In contrast, people of high rank labored far less, if at all. Indeed, the corporeal performance of high rank was organized around an aesthetic of stillness and repose: in the Society Islands, high-ranking *ari’i* reclined on mats in the shade, eating the fruits of commoners’ labor, the largesse of their subordinates literally embodied in the largeness of *ari’i* bodies.

As the foregoing suggests, such embodied displays of rank in the Society Islands articulated a gendered symbolic economy of distinction, and one that has been found in other Polynesian societies as well. Young high-ranking virgin girls were the focus of a body politics of rank difference, the object of fattening and skin lightening practices in Samoa (Mead 1961[1928]; Shore 1982), for example, as well as in Pukapuka (Hecht 1977: 198). In the gendered symbolic economy of skin color in the Society Islands, however, masculinity—both ranked and unranked—may have been more flexibly bound to lightened skin than was ranked womanhood: by the early 1800s, for example, the Reverend Ellis (1829, II: 18-19) wrote that, “darkness of [skin] color [in men] ... was generally considered an indication of strength.” A Protestant missionary who lived in the Society Islands in the 1820s, Reverend Ellis was also one of several chroniclers who noted, “A fair [white] complexion was not an object of admiration or desire [among Polynesians]. They never considered the fairest European countenance seen among them, handsomer than their own.... They

¹⁶On skin bleaching. Oliver (1974: 537 n.5) writes, “According to a visitor to Tahiti in 1832, many native women at that time ‘whiten their skin with the juice of the *papa*, an indigenous plant, and avoid the sun to improve [*sic*] their complexions’ (Foltz 1835: 543)... I cannot discover whether any native plants were used for skin bleaching in pre-European times.” Salmond (2009: 98) also discusses how in pre-contact Tahitian society, “light skins were considered a mark of high status and beauty,” writing that, “in the Society Islands, chiefly people and *arioro* wore sunshades, oiled their bodies with *mono’i* (scented [coconut] oil) and tried to stay out of the sun, making their skin white.” On long fingernails, Oliver (1974: 157) cites George Forster’s comment that long fingernails were a mark of high rank “since only such persons, as had no occasion to work, could suffer them to grow to that length” (G. Forster 1968 [1777], II: 283).

formerly supposed the white colour of the European's skin to be the effect of illness, and hence beheld it with pity" (ibid.).

In the larger context of Society Islands social organization and relations of *ari'i* rule, then, we find a complex set of embodiments around lightened—but not whitened—skin color. In this signifying complex, both aesthetic beauty and distinctions of rank were articulated through embodied practices and interwoven with gendered difference as well as with differences of generation and sexuality, as with the emphasis on youthful beauty practices to enhance sexual attractiveness. These articulated specific models for the embodied performances of high-ranking womanhood, sexually attractive youthfulness, and strong masculinity. While these models relied on some of the "same" referents as European racial ideologies, they were part of an entirely different symbolic and political economy. I suggest that, in part because they relied on the "same" referents, they enabled Polynesian counter-readings and challenges to European racial ideology.

Polynesian understandings of personhood, for example, posed challenges to the viability of racialist ideologies. In part because Polynesian theories of the person have configured individuals in sociocentric rather than egocentric terms, they involve an understanding of personhood that has worked against the racialist proposition Todorov explicates—that behaviors, dispositions, or character are essential features of persons that can be read off any immutable outward sign, including "race." For Polynesians, the person is not a bounded, self-defining manifestation of singular or consistent character or behaviors; nor is the person the author and manager of self-discipline and desire (Kirkpatrick 1985). Rather, the person is best understood as a multi-faceted gem, a metaphor offered by Bradd Shore (1982) in his ethnography of Samoan social life: the defining feature of the gem is its external features, its constitution through the brilliance of its sides, rather than whatever lies inside. The project of socialization and the practices of moral personhood for Polynesians have been organized around dexterity in displaying the appropriate side in the appropriate social context: whatever is inside the gem is both unavailable for socialization and irrelevant to it. This was in part why Protestant missionaries from the LMS found it so challenging to try to convert Polynesians: people behaved laudably in church, appearing most devout and taking with all seriousness missionary teachings about the evils of idleness, the importance of living a moral life, the immorality of sexual relations outside of marriage, and the like. Upon leaving church, however, the practices of Christian behavior were commonly left at the church door: different contexts, different requirements, different behaviors (Newbury 1980: 67–68).

When LMS missionaries began proselytizing in the Society Islands at the turn of the nineteenth century, however, their extension of the savage/civilized contrast proved a more secure anchoring for making sense of relations of rule than did racial ideologies. This was also, of course, a site of negotiation, and while I can only sketch that here, its eventual persuasiveness was in part the product of the way the missionaries went about conversion in the Society Islands. The practice of religion and the politics of rule had been intertwined by Polynesians long before missionization—when *mana* and genealogical links to the deities authorized *ari'i* rule. The Protestant missionaries turned to this close connection between the political and the cosmological as soon as their failures to convert Polynesians led them to realize that the path to mass conversion had to be walked by the high-ranked *ari'i* before the rest of the people would follow. Thus in 1803 did they begin to cultivate the

conversion of Pomare II, then the *ari'i* ruler of Tahiti and Moorea islands. A few years later, Pomare II became the first major *ari'i* to throw over the old Polynesian *atua*—those deities who had proved powerless to stop the decimation of the population by European diseases or to resolve the constant warfare between *ari'i* on Tahiti at that time—in favor of the new Christian *atua* or god who was clearly responsible for the Europeans' considerable power, technology, and wealth.¹⁷

Within a few years of Pomare II's conversion, in 1815, mass conversions took place on Tahiti and Moorea and by the 1830s the entire archipelago of the Society Islands was nominally Christian. Throughout this process, the missionaries took vital roles in the politics of rule: they closely advised the *ari'i*, to such an extent that one such missionary (the Reverend Davies, in 1824) was appointed regent to rule in the name of Pomare II's infant son, Pomare III, after the father's death. And they became "arbiters of correct behavior" (ibid.: 48) codifying moral as well as administrative precepts in an 1819 set of laws that defined penalties for "theft, desertion, adultery, murder, bigamy, rebellion, and sedition" (ibid.: 51).¹⁸ By anchoring their missionizing in the relations of rule familiar to Polynesians, missionaries harnessed the authority of rank to their missionizing project, gaining converts who attended their churches, if not converts who actually practiced their preachings.¹⁹

Most relevant to the present analysis, missionization extended the meanings of civilization and savagery into another arena: they pinned the contrast between savagery and civilization onto a contrast between pre-contact Polynesian idolatry and post-contact Polynesian Christianity. This move, crucially, located civilizing as a process and civilized as a status available to all: Polynesians enter civilization when they come to see the "correctly" Christian way of living. Savagery, in this scheme, becomes the older, idolatrous way of living. The two poles are thus produced as moments in a process, and not, as racialist theories would have it, as immutable states of being. Civilization is rendered accessible to all, rather than something from which Polynesians might be exiled by nature. In support of this, the close association and

¹⁷The introduction of European diseases, and to a lesser extent deaths from the elevated frequency of warfare between *ari'i* of different districts on Tahiti and Moorea in the late eighteenth century, radically changed the demographic picture on, in particular, Tahiti and Moorea islands. Around the time of Wallis's and Cook's voyages, conservative estimates of the combined population of the two islands put the figure around thirty-five thousand people; by 1800, the total Polynesian population on the two islands was more in the range of nine to ten thousand (Newbury 1980: 32).

¹⁸While beyond the scope of the present essay, exploration of the ways the *Ture no Tahiti* 1819 code of laws served as another site for negotiating practices and ideologies of difference—particularly gender, sexual, "racial," and rank differences—will extend the present analysis in the larger project of which this essay is a part; see Merry (2000) for a compelling pursuit of such questions for colonial Hawai'i. See Kauanui (2008) for related analysis of the politics of blood quantum laws as they were weaponized against Hawaiians through a logic equating cultural identity with a quantifiable amount of indigenous "blood."

¹⁹Even Pomare II did not meet missionary expectations on this count: the first major *ari'i* to convert to the new religion, Pomare II made his first application for baptism in 1812 after almost a decade of training by the missionaries. It was this Pomare's revolutionary and public throwing off of the old Polynesian gods (who, he held, had proved too weak in the face of European disease and increased warfare between *ari'i* on Tahiti) in favor of the new god (who was clearly more powerful than the old) that led to mass conversions on Tahiti and Moorea in 1815. Yet Pomare II was not actually allowed to undergo baptism until 1819, five years after his initial request, as missionaries awaited evidence of what they termed his "sincerity": outside of the explicitly devotional context, Pomare II did not practice what the missionaries preached as good Christian behavior. Instead, he was notorious for his "drinking bouts and his homosexual entourage of male domestics" (Newbury 1980: 39).

alliances between missionaries and *ari'i* rulers helped not only to sustain the legitimacy of Polynesian politics of rule and the system of rank during missionization; the missionaries' close association with the *ari'i* was also taken to validate Polynesians and their political and social system: Polynesian society may have required a change of gods, but Polynesians themselves, given the missionaries' deep involvement with them, were clearly worthy of being brought into the Christian light.

Conclusions: Navigating Race

The resonances and disjunctures between Polynesian and European signifying frameworks during the early period of encounters comprise a rich and porous period in the historical process of racialization in the Society Islands. I have suggested these can be used to demonstrate the productivity of asking how racial ideologies are embodied and what that reveals about the variable and contingent persuasiveness of race—and thus too for the possibilities for challenging racisms. In the resonances and disjunctures between the uses of skin color as a sign of hierarchical racial difference for Europeans and the uses of skin color as a sign of beauty and hierarchical rank difference in the Society Islands, lies an example of the value of specifying and exploring the sociocultural contexts within which projects of racialization take shape. Such explorations can reveal the contents and effects of “race” as a concept that is locally negotiated and variably persuasive. The ways European racial signifiers negotiated and interwove with embodied Polynesian distinctions of gender, sexuality, generation, and *ari'i* rank, in particular, generated ruptures in the production of a synthetic racial ideology in the Society Islands. The racing of gender by Europeans, for example, located Polynesian women and men in different relationships to status and privilege, at the same time that Polynesian readings of skin color as a malleable feature of sexual desirability and rank difference (itself also malleable) challenged the racialist siting of skin color as an immutable sign in a fixed hierarchy. In a Polynesian social context where hierarchical distinctions must be actionable, where hierarchical position must be claimed and authorized through performance and efficacy, essentialist and fixed hierarchies were unlikely to be found compelling.

My claim here is that racial ideologies involve a kind of anchoring; that they must be weighted down. I offer the metaphors of navigating and anchoring for thinking about racialization processes in part because of the extensive histories of voyaging among Polynesians' ancestors, but also because the object of analysis here is ideologies of difference, value, and hierarchy that were brought on European ships to Polynesian shores. When European racial ideologies tried to weigh anchor in the Society Islands they foundered. Europeans were initially ambivalent about whether and to what extent Polynesians comprised a different “race”; the naturalized legitimacy (for Polynesians) of their ranked political system and the recognition given to it by even the earliest European voyagers; Polynesians' and Europeans' divergent schemes for assigning and reading the “signs” of race difference as these were cross-cut by gender, sexuality, generation, and rank. Together with other dynamics, these negotiations challenged the persuasiveness of race as a seabed authority for imperial relations of rule, and opened up currents from which racialization, along with imperialism and colonization, could be contested. Polynesians' manipulations of lightened skin as part of an embodied practice articulating the local aesthetics of beauty, desire, and sexual attractiveness, for

example, posed challenges to the racist proposition that skin color encodes essentialized, immutable characteristics or differences. Indeed, that Polynesians differentiated between lightness and whiteness enabled a counter-discourse to Europeans' claims of white racial superiority. Such complexities raise other compelling research questions interrogating, for example, "the failure of European racial ideologies to become embedded" and the possibility that racialization may require more institutional force—which, in the Society Islands only came much later, in the twentieth century, with colonial administration. Does this perhaps then also suggest that in addition to interrogating the "how" of racialization, scholars must also consider its "when"?²⁰

This is not, however, an argument for Polynesian exceptionalism. Rather, my goal has been to take particular stories about negotiating "race" in the Society Islands as the occasion to further develop the theoretical possibilities for studying the social histories of racialization processes and their embodiments in their complex interrelations with other social differences. Instead of apprehending race as fixed, solid, immovable, or essential, the present line of exploration encourages us to seek out ruptures, contingencies, and disjunctures, to map the eddies and currents where ideas are moving at cross-purposes. Navigating these processes gives emphasis to dynamics and fluidity, as opposed to foundationalisms or essentialisms; it highlights the alchemy of racialization processes and how varied social differences may be concatenated into productions of "race." As the various constituent elements—social differences and their articulations with hierarchies—move in the dynamics of social life, bumping and jostling in the pragmatics of social action, even the constituent elements may be changed in the process. Polynesian womanhood, for example, never looked quite the same after the Europeans' arrival.

Navigation, then, is a metaphor that can open alternative analytical pathways for apprehending the problematics and contingencies of racialization as a negotiated social and historical project. In recent years, social science scholarship on race, and feminist critical race studies specifically, have inaugurated a shift from analyzing the "what" of "race" to analyzing the "how" of racialization. As critical race studies scholar Jayne Chong-Soon Lee (1995: 443) framed the problematic, "race is defined not by its inherent content, but by the social relations that construct it." Emphasizing the dangers of focusing on the content of "race" rather than on its effects Lee, among others, has called for interrogations of the effects of race as part of acknowledging and analyzing the "heterogeneous terrains of the racial landscape" (ibid.: 444). This shift, then, is founded in installing much more fluidity of analytics and politics. Thus the "navigating" approach aims to further such interrogations by specifying these more fluid, flexible, and contingent lines of exploration: emphasizing the pragmatics of racialization processes; aiming to grasp through those pragmatics the interweaving of diverse social differences with the shaping of racial ideologies in particular times and places, as well as to the shaping of social institutions and processes which alternately overdetermine and undermine particular productions of "race."

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