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Elizabeth C. Childs, *Vanishing Paradise: Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2013. xxiii + 329 pp. Figures, notes, glossary, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-520-27173-9.

Review by Linda Goddard, University of St Andrews.

It is significant that Elizabeth Childs's *Vanishing Paradise* both is, and is not, about Paul Gauguin, the French Symbolist painter who lived for nearly ten years in Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands, and who has generated a considerable literature lauding and denouncing in equal measure his status as the "founding father of modernist primitivism."<sup>[1]</sup> Despite its obvious draw, his name does not appear in the book's title, and Childs makes clear from the outset that "before this is a book about any particular artist or writer ... it is a cultural and historical monograph about Tahiti" (p. xiii). In her study of European and American representations of colonial-era Tahiti and their mythical underpinnings (centred on the period 1880-1901), Gauguin shares the stage with Henry Adams, writer, historian and descendent of two American presidents, and his traveling companion, the American painter John La Farge. The happy coincidence that all three arrived in 1891, although without crossing paths (the Americans spent four months there, and departed just before Gauguin's landing) provides an opportunity to demonstrate the pervasiveness--across divergent styles and formats--of imperialist assumptions about this supposedly fading paradise.

As the most famous propagator of such topoi, however, Gauguin unsurprisingly looms large: he is the subject of two chapters, which precede the single ones dedicated to La Farge and Adams, and the main focus, in the preface, of Childs's careful negotiation of the existing critical literature on her three protagonists. Therefore, if *Vanishing Paradise* is primarily, as its author intends, a cultural study of the image of Tahiti in the Euro-American imagination, it is also an important addition to the ever-growing literature on Gauguin. Avoiding the typical monographic focus, Childs shifts the emphasis to ask, not what our knowledge of late nineteenth-century Tahiti can contribute to our understanding of the art of Paul Gauguin, but rather what his production--alongside La Farge's watercolours and Adams's oral history of a Tahitian aristocratic family--can tell us about the representation of Tahiti in this period. The result is to transfer our attention from the creative powers of a prominent artist towards the layers of mythical texts and images that conditioned his experiences and output, as much as they did those of lesser-known artist-travellers.

It has been decades now since the pioneering work of Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Griselda Pollock took the artistic pioneer familiar from the early modernist hagiographies, and recast him as imperialist and tourist, purveyor of racist and sexist stereotypes and peddler of a false vision of Polynesia based on an amalgamation of sources often unconnected to his ostensible subject.<sup>[2]</sup> We have also encountered him, in Stephen Eisenman's nuancing of these portrayals, as an ambivalent colonist who experimented with gender ambiguity and anti-colonial activism--although some have seen bad faith rather than genuine subversion in these stances.<sup>[3]</sup> So it comes as some surprise to register that the visual output of this demythologized Gauguin has not, until now, been considered at length in relation to the nexus of images and texts that constituted the discourse of *tahitisme*, from the late eighteenth-century European voyages of exploration to the colonial era in which the artist lived.<sup>[4]</sup> Positioning Gauguin in relation to this body of material is a vital task because it makes clear that the fantasies of racial and sexual difference implied by his depiction of exotic nudes are not reducible to his personal arrogance or perversion; they belong to the visual economy of colonialism as it circulated in World's Fair displays, prints, guidebooks and photographs, bolstering the

economic and political interests of competing imperial powers (England and France, until the latter established a protectorate in 1842).

True to her declared focus on Tahiti itself, the first two chapters trace the history of its contact with Europe, leaving the case studies of individual artist-writers to later chapters. This structure effectively conveys the way in which they, too, encountered a body of preconceived notions about the island before they set foot on its shores. The first chapter, "Histories of an Island and an Idea," demonstrates how the historical record and the myth became intertwined from the outset as French and English navigators (the voyages of Samuel Wallis in 1767, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville in 1768 and James Cook in 1769) recorded their experiences in highly selective and subjective terms. Childs interweaves the history of pre-contact and colonial Tahiti with the legends that emerged as a result of cross-cultural encounters so seamlessly that Tahiti as real geographical location seems to shift in and out of our grasp, just as it did for its famous foreign visitors, each of whom was conscious of, indeed attracted by, the intertextual web of travel narratives and romantic fiction that "Tahiti" conjured up for them—as Adams put it, "Herman Melville and Captain Cook head and heels with the French opera and Pierre Loti" (p. 139).

In the second chapter, "Garden of Eden to Dying Paradise," Childs outlines five key myths that grew from these earlier explorer accounts to shape Tahiti as "place-idea" in the nineteenth century: its natural beauty; the gentle naivety of the Tahitian character; the sexual availability of the women, whose accessibility acts as metaphor for that of the land; the belief in supernatural forces; and the savage violence of legendary practices such as human sacrifice, cannibalism and infanticide. With a solid grounding in anthropological theory and Pacific studies, she shows how these fantasies recurred in western visual culture in Salon paintings, wallpaper designs, photographs and postcards, disguising a reality of colonial violence, indigenous resistance, and uneasy adaptation to a hybrid society. Perceptions about the Tahitian character, for instance, served colonial interests, so that savage or childlike tendencies evinced the need for a "civilizing" presence, while apparently contradictory inclinations to genial hospitality served to suggest (here Childs cites historian Matt K. Matsuda) a willing embrace of French command, while concealing the truth of Maohi protest. [5]

A final strand of exoticist thought shared by the protagonists in this study, and particularly prominent in the decades following France's official colonisation of Tahiti, is the image of the island as a "vanishing paradise" and a concomitant rhetorical desire to recover the traces of a dying culture by recording them in text and image. This attitude, which Renato Resaldo called "imperialist nostalgia," involves expressing regret for the very "authenticity" that colonizers were in fact complicit in destroying. [6] It shifts the blame for the demise of traditional customs onto the indigenous society's imagined lack of will and denies Oceanic culture the capacity for change by evoking a static and timeless past of which westerners are the "privileged last witnesses" and implied preservers (p. 53). Common to each individual under investigation here is a sense of this rescue mission: for Gauguin, in his book *Noa Noa*, it is manifested by concern over whether he will "manage to recover any trace of that past, so remote and so mysterious," and for La Farge, by the urge to acquire "some definite record just before the last veil closes over a past already dim enough" (p. 172). [7]

Childs shows how each man projects an aura of melancholy and languor onto his depictions of Tahitians that in fact derives from his own physical and mental state as a traveller in search of spiritual rejuvenation. As visitors, their leisure activity (with the partial exception of Gauguin, who did sometimes enter into paid employment) enabled them to ignore local work routines and so to find confirmed the enervating environment already familiar to them from such exoticist fables as Pierre Loti's *Le Mariage de Loti* (1880), in which the heroine fades away in despair at the departure of her European lover. In their visual output at least, the three men are connected as much by what they omitted from their renditions of Oceanic life as by their shared themes and sources: they minimized topographical specificity in favour of generic (or, in Gauguin's case, highly eclectic) signifiers of the "exotic," and rejected signs of modernisation and European presence so as to maintain the impression of a timeless but fading idyll, conveyed by Gauguin's brooding figures and La Farge's sunset tones.

Ironically, as Childs demonstrates, the visual template for this world devoid of modernity was produced within a modern colonial framework. Prints derived from the illustrations of Cook's voyages, and the work of colonial photographers, supplied the compositions for landscapes and figure scenes as much as first-hand observation. In her two chapters on Gauguin, "Polynesia in Paris" and "The Colonial Lens," Childs identifies the displays of the Pavilion of the Colonies at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889 and the repertoire of stock vistas and poses typical of photographers like Charles Spitz, who had a studio in Papeete, as the grounds for the homogenizing and derivative view of the Tropics in Euro-American art. A visitor to the Exposition and a purchaser of colonial photography, Gauguin—like his American colleagues—employed "the mythologizing images of a mass visual culture generated in the colonial world to efface the evidence of the artist's own contemporaneity in that place" (p. 132).

Scholars have previously addressed the 1889 World Fair as a display of imperial pride, at which the exhibition of artefacts and indigenous peoples from France's colonies presented viewers with a spectacle of otherness that was nonetheless accessible and unthreatening. However, Childs presents fresh material here on Tahiti's presence at the Fair. She analyses photographs and articles documenting a display of artefacts and photography from "Tahiti et l'océanie orientale," showing how they signalled to the potential immigrant a desirable blend of romantic tradition and modern convenience. Photographs of the Tahitian landscape and lifestyle so appealing that they were pocketed by visitors were exhibited close to traditional Marquesan arms on sale for tourists, decorative arts from Tahiti's Chinese community, a display on colonial education and other objects from diverse Polynesian and other colonial island cultures. The result was a picture of generalized exoticism and contemporary amenities that inspired not so much the precise location but the general attitude for what Gauguin envisioned as his "studio of the tropics."

Photography as a mediator of cross-cultural encounter is a thread that connects the three case studies, and Childs's investigation of its presence in colonial Papeete makes her book a valuable resource for historians of photography. For both Gauguin and La Farge—the subject of chapter six, "John La Farge and the sensuousness of regret"—the photographs of Spitz, Henri Lemasson and others provided more than simply models or aides-mémoire. As a seemingly objective mode of documentation, they served to authenticate the traveller's experience and to freeze it in time in a manner that evoked the mythical timelessness of the exotic itself. Often omitting signs of modernity, they combined the elusive flavour of Tahiti's archaic past with seemingly palpable evidence of its continuity into the present. Thus for La Farge, well versed in the literature of exoticism, photographs not only informed many of his watercolours (particularly those completed after his return home) but also provided "visual compensation" for the storied idyll that failed to fully materialise in a hybridized contemporary setting (p. 204).

His bathing beauties in tropical settings adopt poses derived from the classical goddesses of western tradition such as Venus on the waves. In one fortuitous example, he and Gauguin were independently inspired by the same photograph, distributed by Spitz, of a Samoan woman drinking from a waterfall. Although both copied the basic composition closely, the former rendered it as a pale Ingresque nude in a lush setting and the latter as an androgynous, stocky-limbed figure communing with mysterious spirits in the vegetation. One of many cases where colonial photographs, although seemingly taken from nature, were themselves based on painterly conventions, this example demonstrates the "circulation of visual typologies" that structured representations of Tahiti (p. 205). It also, crucially, positions the photographs not as hidden sources that expose the falsity of the painters' vision, but as parallel, equally constructed elements of colonial visual culture.

Wealthy and well connected, Adams and La Farge moved in different circles to those of Gauguin, and chapter five, "Henry Adams, indolence, and ethnic tourism in Tahiti," details Adams's contact with an elite Tahitian family, whose genealogy he published following extensive communication with its matriarch. Arii Taimai of the Teva clan, who married the English banker Alexander Salmon, and whose daughter was Queen Marau, wife of King Pomare V, and her extended family, "became for Adams the living embodiment of the vanishing Tahitian past," despite their hybridity (p. 168). Writing their memoirs in the adopted voice of their female chief gave a constructive focus to

Adams's polymathic but directionless activity during his South Seas journey. It also gave him a sense of belonging, which was cemented when he received from them an adoptive Tahitian identity in a traditional name exchange ceremony. But this friendship also served the Salmon / Tevas, whose story is picked up in the final chapter, "Against Vanishing." In an instance of "indigenous agency at work in colonial society" (p. 225), they used their connection with a member of the American political aristocracy to further their own social position and land claims. As her book shows, Childs's three subjects did not produce definitive representations of the Other from an authoritative distance, but tentatively sought to negotiate their position in relation to indigenous and colonial communities. Endlessly striving to recover the textbook version of Tahiti, they themselves have become part of its legacy of intercultural contact.

The imperialist stereotypes of oceanic culture that *Vanishing Paradise* addresses may already be familiar, but Childs greatly enriches our sense of their currency in nineteenth-century European and American art and literature. She shifts the focus of Gauguin studies from avant-garde interests in Paris to the hybrid influences of colonial Tahiti. In examining Gauguin alongside two very different, American artist-writers, she succeeds in taking him off the pedestal on which even his critics had unwittingly placed him as chief inventor and purveyor of primitivist clichés. Her achievement is to show how firmly embedded Adams, La Farge, and Gauguin were in the visual and literary frameworks of colonialism, without ever parodying their work or minimising its complexity.

#### NOTES

- [1] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native," *Art in America* (July 1989), 119–128; 161; p. 120.
- [2] Solomon-Godeau, 1989, and Griselda Pollock, *Avant-garde Gambits 1888–1893: Gender and the Color of Art History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993).
- [3] Stephen F. Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997). See the incisive set of reviews by Elizabeth C. Childs, Margaret Jolly, and Teresia Teaiwa, and Eisenman's response, in the "Book Review Forum" on *Gauguin's Skirt* in *Pacific Studies* 23, no.1/2 (2000): 75–128.
- [4] The term is Jean-François Staszak's, in *Géographies de Gauguin* (Rosny-sous-Bois: Editions Béal, 2003), p. 103, cited in Childs (p. xxiii).
- [5] Matt K. Matsuda, *Empire of Love: Histories of France and the Pacific* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- [6] Renato Resaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 107–122, cited in Childs (p. 52).
- [7] Nicholas Wadley, ed., *Noa Noa: Gauguin's Tahiti*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985), p. 13.

Linda Goddard  
University of St Andrews  
[ljg21@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:ljg21@st-andrews.ac.uk)

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