

“HMS Dolphin: The Story of the Ship that Lost Its Integrity”

For the sailors the availability of sex for payment was simply regarded as playing at, as Robertson puts it, “the old trade.” They did so with such enthusiasm that it threatened the integrity of the ship as iron and nails were drawn from it –Sailors and Traders, pg. 65, 2009

Tahiti exists, especially in the late 18th and 19th c, in the public imaginary as a space of endless physical pleasure and beauty, flowered, fruited-nymphs, robust, athletic demigods, and white-sandy beaches. Although only a small minority of people have visited, and fewer still return, *Tahiti*, as a space, exists as one of the rare spaces in the vast Pacific that the general population recognizes.

I want to understand the historical processes that created the Space of Tahiti, a space created without the input of Tahitians. I explore mythmaking, showing how misunderstandings in the ship Master’s journal entries lead to the paradisiacal mythologies of the Pacific, and how the Captain’s entries confirmed opinions that contributed to the sexual and sensual myths of the Pacific, myths later retold in pornographic novels of the late 18th c., notably in *Nocturnal Revels* (1779).

George Robertson, the Master of the *H.M.S. Dolphin*, sent to explore the Pacific under Captain Wallis in 1766, kept daily records as part of his naval duties, and his journals give the first account of what I call, The Myth of the Nail. As the ship’s Master, Robertson was a warranted officer assigned to the ship for the life of the ship, whether the ship was docked or at sea. Shipmasters were professional

seamen and navigators rather than military experts like naval Captains and Commanders. As Master, Robertson's principal duty was navigation, but his responsibilities included daily running accounts of the ship's position, the position of the sun, the welfare of the ship, logs of the provisions on the ship, and any provisions gained and lost through purchase or trade. The Master directly supervised the seamen and deckhands, and the Master's journals, in contrast with Captain Wallis's journals, provided a candid look into the lives of the sailors, transcribing daily activities of the sailors and even conversations.

Robertson's journal entries give a unique insight into the character, humor, and perspective of the common sailor, for it is the sailor, whose time spent with imaginings and stories between ports, that germinates the idea of the paradise of Tahiti; the common seaman whose stories travel from port to ear to port to ear; stories of nails, the value of nails, the ubiquity of nails, and the story of the ship, the *H.M.S. Dolphin*, whose hold, mast, and stern, fell apart from sailors ripping the nails out of the ships to trade Tahitian women for sex.

Robertson wrote often of nails. He paid special attention to the amount of nails exchanged for goods in order to keep track of the fluctuating value of the nail. During the initial act of trade between the English and Tahitians, a 3-inch nail, or twentypenny nail, could buy a twenty-pound pig: Robertson's meticulous recordkeeping of market prices included details about the trade of seemingly enterprising Tahitian women. Robertson, and his nails, begat a story of the Pacific that began the historical processes that created in the mind of Europeans the space of Tahiti and the paradise that Tahiti offers.

On July 9th, 1767, after two weeks at Tahiti and several Tahitian deaths at the hand of English guns later, Robertson, the traders, and the “Liberty men” (sailors who had been given leave, or liberty, to mend themselves on land), forced themselves ashore to gather wood and trade with the cautious Tahitians. Upon returning to the ship Robertson and the men were “accosted” by “three very fine young girls” who smiled and made a gesture that Robertson did not understand. Robertson asked the Liberty men what the gesture meant but “they both put on a very Grave look and tould me they did not understand her Signs.” Robertson insisted that the men explain the signal, but they equivocated saying the young women merely desired some nails. Robertson suspected the Liberty men were not telling him the whole truth and “but the young men begd to be excused, I therefor gave the Young Girls a nail each, and parted good friends” (185).

When Robertson returns to the ship he relates the story to the gunner and “[the gunner] tould me my young friends was not so very Ignorant as they pretended to be, he likeway tould me that the price of the old trade, is now fixt at a thirty penny nail each time” (185). The gunner, and in turn Robertson, used the term “old trade” derived from the saying “the world’s oldest profession” as a euphemism for prostitution. Robertson frames the trade as European amoral *sex trade*, the oldest trade, in fact, inserting the Tahitians into a European epistemological framework they did not belong, where both parties were assumed to be mutually knowledgeable about sex, trade, and the value of sex trade.

Notably, the gunner, the officer in charge of ammunition, was most concerned with how the “old trade” will affect the rest of the trade for the goods to

replenish the ship, saying “that the Liberty men dealt so largely in that way”—the men were trading nails with women so prodigiously—“that he was much afraid of losing his trade of Hogs Pigs fowls and fruit”. The gunner was afraid “that the natives would purchase all the nails and toys by means of the old trade, and of Course bring no other Goods to market, theirfor Advised me to endeavour to put a stop too it” (sic). Robertson claims he cannot take away shore leave as many of the men are sick and need to get well on shore, but the gunner retorts, with the humor characteristic of Robertson’s journals: “the Sickest of them traded [nails for sex] a little therefor could not be so very bade as they pretended”

Robertson’s humor appeals to the reading public. Perhaps the most humorous moment in Robertson’s journal appears when Robertson swears to the gunner to bring up the problem with the commanding officer. It appears, however, that the commanding officer “dealt more largely nor any of them, therefor was the greatest spoiler of the trade him selfe” (185). Shrugging, he advises the men to agree, at the very least, to “deal moderately for fear of losing fresh broth and other Good things.” No surprise then that after debating whether to keep the Liberty men onboard, the commanding officer (the best customer) decided that “keeping the Liberty men confind onbd the Ship; would ruin their health and Constitution for ... any thing that depresses the mind and spirits of men must Certainly hurt them.”

This particular birth of a myth appears directly after Robertson’s careful recording of market prices. He writes, the cost of “the old trade is rose about a hundred per cent,” (doubled) and Robertson would love nothing more than to know where the liberty men are getting their nails. He asks the Carpenter “to Examin his

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stock of nails, he tould me he hade and took Care to keep the people from theifing them” (206)

Soon enough the liberty men, whose stock of nails were now under close scrutiny from the carpenter, were prying out nails from the ship to indulge in the ever increasing price of the “old trade,” *or so the story goes*:

21st July 1767: We hade Moderate fine pleasant weather, with regular Sea and Land breezes, after dinner we sent the traders and Waterers Ashore, but when I was Ordering the liberty men into the boat the Carpenter came and *tould me every cleat in the ship was drawen, and all the Nails carried off. At the same time the Boatswain informed me that the most of the hammock nails was drawen, and two thirds of the men oblided to lie on the Deck for want of nails to hang their Hammocks.*

(Robertson). Thus begins the tale of a nail that begat a story.

Robertson provided the structure of the story, but the sailor, months alone at sea, birthed the myth. Not much happens in the story, or, just enough happens to make a myth: people with no common culture, language, epistemology, ontology, value system, or idea of paradise, traded for the things they believed the others needed. Tahitians needed hard materials, while the English were starved for attention. Far from the ship falling apart from want of nails to hold it together, or men mad with sexual desire prying nails out of the planks on the deck, the men had withdrawn their own hammock nails and were “obliged to lie on the decks for want of nails to hang their hammocks” (208). Nowhere in the manuscript does Robertson doubt the physical integrity of the ship. The loss of integrity happened in other physical ways. Robertson’s tale, like all European tales of the Pacific in the

eighteenth century, ignores most aspects of the Tahitian tale. The Tahitian characters are not real, nor full, nor round, and exists merely as a vehicle to explore European sexuality. The Tahitians did not belong in Robertson's story. (I go into much greater detail about the Tahitian viewpoint from the beach in my chapter, but this had to be cut out for the talk)

The first retelling of "the ship that had lost its integrity," came from the Captain of the *Dolphin*, Samuel Wallis. Both the Captain and First Lieutenant Clarke were gravely ill during the *Dolphin's* one-month stay at Matavai Bay, and spent most of the time recovering in their cabins. Second Lieutenant Furneaux was in command (his health also quickly deteriorated during his stay), and all of the information recorded in Captain Wallis's journal, published and disseminated to the reading public, was second-hand information, legally hearsay, relayed first from the sailors to the Gunner, the Gunner to the Master, the Master to the Commander, and finally, the Commander to the Captain. Wallis's entries reflect the nature of rumors: details of the story have changed, shortened, or lengthened, certain aspects made to stand out, others obscured:

"While our people were on shore, several young women were permitted to cross the river, who, though they were not averse to the granting of personal favours, knew the value of them too well not to stipulate for a consideration: the price, indeed, was not great, yet it was such as our men were not always able to pay, and under this temptation they stole nails and other iron from the ship. The nails that we brought for traffick, were not always in their reach, and therefore they drew several out of different parts of the vessel, particularly those that fastened the cleats to the ship's

side. This was productive of a double mischief; damage to the ship, and a considerable rise at market. (Voyages 459)

The original story, told by Robertson, spread out over days and pages, is summarily retold in one paragraph by the Captain's hand. Wallis's rendition highlights the myth of the promiscuity of Tahitian women, relative ease of sexuality, and shockingly cheap price of pleasure. Wallis seems to protect the innocent reader using the term "granting of personal favours" rather than the coarse "old trade," but in reality, these words were not Wallis's either. Adding another layer of mistranslation to the already obfuscated event, Wallis's original manuscript was heavily edited by John Hawkesworth, Jr., whose additions to Wallis's and Cook's journals ended tragically in his own demise. Hawkesworth alters the original use of Wallis's term "prostitution" to "granting of personal favours," a pure example of the nature of retelling stories where details alter to fit the occasion. Hawkesworth's interpretation and editing of the Captain's *Journals* show how difficult a story can be to control. In describing the women of Tahiti, the reader cannot be certain if the description is the original text of Samuel Wallis (who is recording hearsay originally), or colored by the personal ethics of John Hawkesworth, Jr.

The timeline in the 1760s shows how quickly Tahiti entered the global narrative: Wallis and the crew of the *Dolphin* left Tahiti in late July of 1767, and arrived back in England by way of the Cape of Good hope in May of 1768. Wallis landed just in time to pass on crucial information to Captain Cook, who left later that month in the *Endeavor*. The same time that Cook and the *Endeavor* left England bound for Tahiti, Bougainville reached Tahiti (in April of 1768), in the first French

attempt to circumnavigate the globe, (his depiction has been cut out of this talk for time purposes, but know that he named Tahiti, New Cytherea, after the birthplace of Aphrodite, adding another myth to the myth). Cook reached Tahiti in April of 1769. These three years brought an influx of European ships, contact, trade, disease, epidemiologies and epistemologies that would forever alter the island of Tahiti. Cook estimated 200,000 Tahitians lived in Tahiti in the late 1760s. By 1797, the Tahitian population had dwindled to 16,000.

Captain Cook was headed to the South Seas to witness the transit of Venus to calculate the distance of the Earth to the Sun. When Wallis returned on May 20th, 1768, with news of the existence of a paradise on earth, the Admiralty instructed Cook to establish good relations with the Tahitians, and build a celestial observation station to stargaze at Venus (Edwards 11). Cook also loaded up on nails.

With Wallis's account of the ship that lost its integrity, and Bougainville's description of Aphrodite's Island, Cook's addition to the ultimate myth of Tahiti proved not to be the nails at all. In the end, Cook's attempt to control the value of the nail, (or the narrative of the nail), did not matter, compared to what he wrote that would dominate the rest of the Tahitian Myth. On Sunday, May 14th, outside the tent set up for the observation of Venus, Cook writes an entry that would add to the nail and the story of the nail to complete the most lurid, lascivious, and repeated story of the Tahitian islands, "The Point Venus Scene." After Sunday services, Cook witnessed an *'ariori* ritual taking place at a place he calls Point Venus. John Hawkesworth, Jr.'s (remember, the editor) retelling of Cook's journal entry nailed

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the coffin of the myth. Here is Hawkesworth's version of the story, this version was reprinted in a pornographic novel in 1778:

Such were our Matins. Our Indians thought to perform vespers of a very different kind. A young man, six feet high, performed the Rites of Venus, with a little girl about eleven or twelve years of age, before several of our people, and a great number of the natives, without the least sense of its being indecent or improper, but, as appeared, in perfect conformity to the custom of the place. Among the spectators were several women of superior rank, particularly Oberea, who may properly be said to have assisted at the ceremony; for they gave instructions to the girl how to perform her part, which, young as she was, she did not seem much to stand in need of. (*Nocturnal Revels* 2:23)

As shocking as this is to contemporary readers, it was even more shocking to the eighteenth-century reader. Hawkesworth's added excuse "without the least sense if its being indecent or improper" evoked outcries across London--high-society women both devoured the *Voyages*, and forbade their daughters to read it. Virtuous readers called for Hawkesworth's termination, and Hawkesworth died of an opium overdose before Cook returned from his second voyage.

The myth was now ripe for retelling, had, an object, the nail, and the subject, Venus, and the verb: performing Tahitian Rites. *Nocturnal Revels*, a two-volume work about prostitution, described the many different houses of ill repute around London. One famous London Madame, Charlotte Hayes, advertised A Performance Inspired by Hawkesworth's Tahiti (CITE). After printing Hawkesworth's exact paragraph, Hayes finds inspiration in the Tahitian lovers:

“after the males had presented each of their mistresses with a Nail of at least twelve inches in length, in imitation of the presents received by the Ladies of Otaheite upon these occasions, giving the preference to a long Nail before any other compliment,-- they entered upon their devotions, and went through all the various evolutions... with the greatest dexterity, keeping the most regular time, to the no small gratification of the lascivious spectators, some of whom could scarce refrain till the end of the spectacle, before they were impetuous to perform a part in this Cyprian game, which lasted near two hours, and met with the highest applause from all present.” *Nocturnal Revels* is the clearest example of how the Tahitian myth entered into the collective imagination. Ten years after the Dolphin landed in Tahiti, the Tahitians now take part in orgiastic sex that is really only taking place in the brothels of London.

This chapter argues for the significance of *setting* in Pacific Literature. I argue that the significance of setting in Pacific Literature is two-pronged: the distance from the British Empire, and the tropical locale of islands. The tropical locale allowed an Elysium environment to explore an Edenic sexuality unhindered by the biopolitics of bourgeoisie ideals. And the incredible distance between England and Polynesia allowed for the time to produce the paradisiacal myth. English ships served as vehicles for the incubation of stories; cutters, galleons, barques and schooners manned by impressed sailors, spending months at sea with nothing to ruminate on but the memories of the Venus in Tahiti. The months, years, and miles between the moment of occurrence of the story of Venus on the beach, and the Venus stripping shirts from men and nails from ships, and the moment the audience

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read the printed word of the occurrence, generated time and distance enough to be
ripe for misrepresentation, hyperbole, mistranslation, and misinterpretation.

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