REVIEW

Elizabeth C. Childs. *Vanishing Paradise: Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. Pp. 352. ISBN 978-0520271739. US$49.95 hardcover, Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Maps.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Mifflin, Massachusetts General Hospital

Vanishing Paradise is a multifaceted study of how Tahiti was perceived by Europeans and Americans in the nineteenth century and how those perceptions interacted with social conditions and natural surroundings to influence the creativity of three men who visited the island in 1891: French artist Paul Gauguin (1848–1903); American artist John La Farge (1835–1910); and American historian Henry Adams (1838–1918). The book considers Tahiti not only as a place but also as a concept occupying the Euro-American imagination. The island inspired a plethora of misleading publications and pictures fostering myths about a paradise on earth in the South Seas. Such misconceptions contributed to the development of what art historian Elizabeth Childs terms "place-ideas—pervasive conventions of thought, in Europe and America, about specific distant locations—conventions that mix geographical fact, ... historically sanctioned myth, and idiosyncratic elements of personal desire" (xiii). The "place-idea" of Tahiti in the late nineteenth century evoked expectations of sensual pleasure; freedom from moralistic constraints; unspoiled natural beauty; and an abundance of food, such as coconuts and breadfruit, freely available for anyone to pick.

Childs acknowledges the debt of her ongoing research about French Polynesia to the work of historian and ethnographer Greg Dening, which

"challenges scholars to write 'double histories' of cultural encounter [by] gathering historical data from 'both sides of the beach'" (xviii). The book explores what happened when expectations, influenced by European writings and images, met lived experience in cross-cultural encounters in Tahiti, and how such encounters shaped artistic and literary work. Chapter 1 summarizes the history of Tahiti and its contacts with Euro-Americans from the time of its "discovery" by European explorers in 1767 to its colonial annexation by France in 1880. Chapter 2, "From Garden of Eden to Dying Paradise," looks at the place-ideas relating to Tahiti that developed in Europe from the period of first contact up to and including the missionary era. Subsequent chapters explore the impressions of Gauguin, La Farge, and Adams, examining ways in which place-ideas about Tahiti resonated in their work after 1891. Although the book is not a study of colonialism per se, it does explore the social and political realities of French colonial domination, realities that combined with traditional Tahitian culture to afford opportunities and mold attitudes.

Early reports about Tahiti, which planted alluring misconceptions in the minds of readers in Europe and America, were promulgated by eighteenth-century explorers like Samuel Wallis, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, James Cook, and William Bligh. The notion that Tahiti was an earthly paradise especially suffused the works of French adventurer Pierre Loti (Julien Viaud, 1850–1923), who spent ten weeks there in 1872, searching for traces of his lost brother. His serialized novel, *Rarahu* (1880), reissued in book form as *Le mariage de Loti* (1882), was enormously influential. "In Oceania work is a thing unknown," he wrote, "The forests themselves produce everything necessary for nourishing these carefree people" (28). However, the white men who went to Tahiti in search of an idyllic existence found that fruit could be picked only by its rightful owners or by stealth (and arduous climbing) in unfrequented areas; and despite persistent stereotypes about "wanton" (33) Polynesian women who eagerly awaited the arrival of white men, casual sex in Tahiti was typically available to Euro-American visitors only through the services of prostitutes. Childs explains the probable origin of the myth as follows: "In 1767 Wallis gunned down hundreds of Tahitians [in Matavai Bay] with cannons because [his ship] the *Dolphin* had been attacked with stones. . . . Tahitian leaders [sought] to appease the . . . interlopers by forcing young girls and women to offer themselves to subsequent waves of white intruders as a passive overture" (42).

Paul Gauguin, an accomplished but frustrated artist who felt confined by the strictures of French society, attended a fair in Paris in 1889 that showcased international art and technology. Tahiti, part of the Établissements français d'Océanie since 1880, was featured prominently along with other

Polynesian points of interest. Gauguin weighed the advantages of possible sites for establishing a tropical studio and/or colony where he and like-minded artists could pursue their craft unencumbered by prudery or economic exigencies. He relocated to Tahiti for eight years (1891–93 and 1895–1901), where he earned meager wages doing office work for the French government, obtained fresh food from indigenous neighbors, and purchased tinned goods and French wine from a Chinese store in Papeete (28–29). He consorted with Tahitian girls (prostitutes and others) but fretted about whether his adolescent mistress, Teha'amana, seen in the painting *Spirit of the Dead Watching (Manao tupapau)*, gave herself willingly or was merely a girl subservient to her mother's wishes (37). Sensuality and mysticism were among the key elements of Gauguin's interest in the South Seas.

Perceptions of Tahiti in the 1890s were heavily influenced by colonial photography. Disappointed by the absence of the "authentic" (92) Tahiti of his imagination, Gauguin sought compensation in staged images. Shops in Papeete offered a wide spectrum of photographic representations of Tahitian culture produced by the town's professional photographers, such as Charles George Spitz, who owned a curio shop that catered to Westerners. The four primary genres of colonial photographs, produced for sale to tourists and for export to consumers in Europe and America, were scenes of business and colonial settlement; portraits of white colonists and Tahitians assimilated to Western fashions (and apparently also to Euro-American values); contemporary landscape and village scenes; and carefully posed ethnographic studies. The "ethnographic fictions" purporting to show premodern Tahiti were the images most attractive to Gauguin, "who used them as the basis [for] his many signature Polynesian scenes" (101). Photography seemed to supply an objective source of immutable ethnographic data recording the appearance and culture of Tahitians, "a surrogate world of 'authentic' visual experience in a Tahiti that had failed [Gauguin] in its heterogeneity and modernity" (94). Basing his Tahitian artistic efforts on such exotic, romanticized scenes ensured that his work would intrigue fellow artists, attract influential European dealers, and pique the interest of art consumers in the world from which he had come, thereby increasing the likelihood of sales. Eventually disillusioned by Tahiti, Gauguin departed to continue his quest for an elusive paradise, subsisting in the Marquesas for two years on an allowance from Parisian art dealer Ambroise Vollard before dying miserably in 1903.

Well known for his innovative stained glass installations in the United States, John La Farge's once prosperous business had by the 1880s declined

in competition with the firm of Louis Comfort Tiffany. He arrived in Tahiti steeped in the exoticism literature of writers like Loti, Herman Melville, and Robert Louis Stevenson and was well versed in the travel accounts penned by explorers. On the island, he searched for "discernible echoes" of the place-ideas he had absorbed from reading and "applied his artistic imagination ... to accentuate, to rebalance, and to fabricate the details, atmosphere, and effects" that he visualized (177–78). He traveled with a vintage edition of Captain Cook's journals and cited its illustrations as a factor in the shaping of his own ideas. "[M]y impressions of today become confused and connected with these old printed records," he wrote, "until I seem to be treading the very turf that the first discoverers walked on, and to be shaded by the very trees" (15).

Although he was intrigued by traditional ceremonies and beliefs, La Farge considered Pacific Islanders through an "infantilizing lens" that reduced them to "savages" (xvi), culturally equivalent to children. Like Gauguin, he regretted that he had arrived too late to find the Tahiti of his imagination. He acquired pictures taken by photographers like Spitz not just as an aide-memoire but also as "visual compensation, stagings of a world he had longed to see, ... mementoes of regret and unfulfilled desire, buffering his disillusionment" (204). He rendered Polynesian motifs in watercolor, altering the details or composition of the photographs he emulated to achieve the romantic and nostalgic effects that he wanted to portray. La Farge's experience reveals the effects of representational conventions and personal and class-based expectations on creativity, a combination that rejuvenated his foundering artistic inspiration.

La Farge continued to be preoccupied by Tahitian motifs in his art and writings after returning to America. His pictures opened a lucrative market for South Seas imagery in the United States. Nostalgic portrayals of Polynesian life were thematically linked to emerging pensiveness about the fate of displaced Native Americans, who were often wistfully depicted in romanticized landscape paintings and contrived, anachronistic photographs in the waning decades of the nineteenth century. Also, it corresponded with emerging public interest in the Pacific region, fueled by the imperialistic ambitions of businessmen, politicians, and military strategists, which were widely reported and discussed in the press. La Farge was able to transform his Tahitian experiences into a successful series of tours, lectures, and publications related to the South Seas.

Boston Brahmin professor Henry Adams disembarked in Tahiti hoping for a distracting change but preoccupied by guilt over the death of his wife, a popular society hostess and amateur photographer who had committed suicide by ingesting darkroom chemicals in 1885. In part, he was fleeing

the responsibilities entailed by humdrum and uninspiring commitments for research and writing; in part, he was looking for something to fill the void he felt in the wake of Clover's death. Imbued with a place-idea about Tahiti derived from literature, he dabbled in watercolors and (like his friend, La Farge, with whom he was traveling) collected locally produced photographs. But for Adams, scenic views and retrospective images, beautiful as they were, "failed to capture the soul of the South Seas" (157).

La Farge and Adams enjoyed relative comfort during their several months on the island as the privileged guests of a chiefly Tahitian family, the Brandon-Salmons of the Teva clan. They were ceremonially adopted by the family, which traced its ancestry back to Queen Oberea, famous in European accounts for welcoming Wallis to Tahiti in 1767. The family was proud of its new connection to a prominent American dynasty—Henry was the grandson and great-grandson, respectively, of two U.S. presidents. Adams initiated an unusual new historical project in May 1891, symbolic of his new "entanglement" (228). Assisted by local informants, he combined oral history with ethnographic research and drafted a detailed genealogy of the Teva clan. Tahitian clans were "obsessed" (219) with genealogy, but in a more particular context, families were required under the French colonial system to prove their genealogical connections to substantiate land claims.

Privately printed in a limited edition in 1893 as *The Memoirs of Marau Taaroa, Last Queen of Tahiti*, the book is generally considered to be first Euro-American history of the contact period written in collaboration with high-born Tahitians. It was revised and expanded in 1901. Originally, a "literary souvenir of his experience as indigenous tourist" (170), the *Memoirs* were subsequently studied by anthropologists as a text illustrating, cross-cultural encounter. The project reconnected Adams with scholarly endeavors and distracted him from his personal grief by engaging him "in the history of his new exotic family after the loss of so many of his own family members . . ." (229). Adams "devised a subjective identity for himself as a Tahitian" (134).

Surprisingly, Adams was utterly enthralled by Tahiti's violent history of human sacrifice—his letters home contained lurid descriptions of such scenes as he reconstructed them in his mind. He facetiously imagined himself a Tahitian chief, demanding orgies of violence, conjuring up bloody spectacles as an outlet, perhaps, for suppressed personal anxieties about the violent death that had disrupted his own sense of well-being and purpose (153). After returning to America, Adams, who had inherited wealth, honored a number of requests from his South Seas associates for money or loan guarantees. Among the gifts he received in return was a collection of ethnographic objects, including traditional Tahitian hats, war paddles, and

artifacts related to human sacrifice. He eventually donated the collection to the Smithsonian Institution, where they can be seen and interpreted as an indication of how a "modern chiefly family" chose to represent traditional Tahitian culture to educated and influential Westerners (232).

Various writings by Adams about Tahiti carefully sidestep the role of the United States in westernizing Tahiti by its complicity in missionary campaigns designed to undermine traditional culture. Also, they overlook the damaging effects of importing alcohol and firearms, the introduction of foreign diseases, and the growth of international commerce on less than fair terms. However, one way or another, "ethnic tourism" (133) on Tahiti did much to purge Adams of the exhaustion and grief that had weighed so heavily on him prior to his exotic travels. The trip was a "productive sabbatical" (170) for him as a historian and writer.

Many Euro-American artists, writers, and commentators in the late-nineteenth century felt that the West had lost something important that might be recovered through exposure to the unspoiled natural and cultural purity of primitive places. But by 1900, travelers in search of such experiences in the South Seas typically believed themselves too late, considering Tahitian culture (for example) no more than "a faint echo of an irretrievable past" (53). Such perceptions, colored by "imperialist nostalgia" (140), furnished a convenient rationale for the on-going colonial and missionary presence in the Pacific. Childs emphasizes, however, that Tahiti at the brink of the twentieth century had not vanished but was rather a hybrid colonial culture that functioned efficiently under changed circumstances. The "pastiches and echoes" of precontact and early colonial cultures became the "manners, customs, and practices" (234) by which postcolonial islanders defined themselves, first as a colony and later as a modern territory of France.

Vanishing Paradise shows how myths can frame experiences and alter perceptions. The myths of paradise circulating in Euro-American cities influenced the production of art just as the art itself reinforced and perpetuated myths. However, the encounters of traveling artists and writers in Tahiti also were shaped by specific personal factors such as economic security, education, class consciousness, emotions, and capacity for self-reflection. Gauguin, La Farge, and Adams could not have produced the work inspired by Tahiti without going there, but "nothing about Tahiti . . . determined the precise outcome. . . . Tahiti [was] a mirror of the self . . . long after they completed their travels" (xxiii). All three registered in their artistic or literary output a subjective response to the South Pacific.

Sixteen color plates and 122 black-and-white illustrations from museums and private collections around the world complement the text, which is well

supported by extensive endnotes and a useful glossary of Tahitian terms. *Vanishing Paradise* may strike some readers as repetitious or excessively loaded with academic terminology. Nevertheless, it is an impressive tour de force of research and analysis, replete with interesting facts about Tahitian history and culture and intriguing perspectives about the intersections between that culture and the visitors who were transformed by their encounter. It is likely to be of substantial interest to artists, art historians, ethnohistorians, and students of psychology.