Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Tahitian Jouissance

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Abstract: This article traces the peculiar conjunction of property and sexuality that precipitates the fall from a prior, undifferentiated state of nature into a civilized state of enforced renunciation and social constraint in eighteenth-century representations of Tahiti. Juxtaposing the navigation journals from Bougainville's voyage around the world, Rousseau's account of the state of nature in the Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité, and Diderot's riff on the island in his Supplément au voyage de Bougainville, the article examines the ways property claims in persons—both in women and in the children they bear—organize the very nature of sexual desire. At the heart of the nexus of sexuality and property in these accounts lies the double sense that the word jouissance, like its English counterpart “enjoyment,” possesses: as both right of property use and sexual pleasure.

Key words: Diderot, eighteenth-century representations of Tahiti, jouissance, Rousseau, Supplément au voyage de Bougainville, theories of desire

Ne sait-on pas que les statues et les tableaux n’offensent les yeux que quand un mélange de vêtements rend les nudités obscènes? Le pouvoir immédiat des sens est faible et borné: c’est par l’entremise de l’imagination qu’ils font leurs plus grands ravages; c’est elle qui prend soin d’irriter les désirs, en prêtant à leurs objets encore plus d’attraits que ne leur en donna la nature; c’est elle qui découvre à l’œil avec scandale ce qu’il ne voit pas seulement comme nu, mais comme devant être habillé. (Rousseau, Lettre 279)

The progressive concealment of the body that goes along with civilization keeps sexual curiosity awake. This curiosity seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts. It can, however, be diverted (“sublimated”) in the direction of art, if its interest can be shifted away from the genitals on to the shape of the body as a whole. (Freud 7: 156).
When Louis-Antoine de Bougainville and his crew completed their circumnavigation of the globe in 1769, they returned with news of the discovery of a prelapsarian tropical paradise in which everyone lived in ease and equality without labor. The South Sea island of Tahiti, they reported, was a utopia, a “Nouvelle Cythère,” an Eden, in which women freely offered themselves to all comers and in which pleasure could be had, unfettered by guilt. Eighteenth-century readers avidly consumed accounts of the island, producing a vogue for Tahitian narratives throughout the 1770s and 1780s in France and England alike. Simultaneously fantasy and foil, Tahiti held out the promise of sexual freedom (an “outside” to an already-repressed Europe) and functioned as the image of a natural sexuality not yet deformed by European institutions. Visions of the Tahitians as the prototype for the man of nature did not, however, survive closer relations with the islanders. As more nuanced reports trickled back—including revelations of human sacrifice, a rigid class structure, internecine warfare, infanticide, and prostitution—the tenuous myth of prelapsarian purity collapsed. The utopian version of Tahiti was supplanted by bleaker visions of its liberties. By the late 1770s, the disclosure of the devastation wrought by the Europeans (venereal disease, competition, warfare) had undermined any illusions about the “civilizing influence” of the West.

Eighteenth-century accounts of Tahitian sexuality are preoccupied both with the promise of plenitude or immediate possession and the forms of social and sexual reserve that impede—and potentially intensify—the sexual enjoyment of European travelers. If, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau argues in the epigraph to this article, the partly draped body that “ought to be clothed” unleashes the mischievous powers of the imagination by holding something back, it is because barriers of clothing, of modesty, or of property create a delirious gap between and within the observing subject and the represented object, transforming the nature of sexuality by creating interdictions on the possession of the desired object. My article traces the peculiar conjunction of property and sexuality that precipitates the fall from a prior, undifferentiated state of nature into a civilized state of enforced renunciation and social constraint in three eighteenth-century representations of the world French writers discovered—or sought to discover—in Tahiti: the navigation journals from Bougainville’s voyage around the world, Rousseau’s account of the state of nature in the *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité*, and Diderot’s riff on the island in his *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*. At the heart of this nexus of sexuality and property lies the double sense that the word *jouissance*, like its English counterpart “enjoyment,” possesses: both as right of property use and as sexual pleasure. The accounts of Tahiti expose how one kind of *jouissance* creates and constrains the other.

Narratives of Tahiti capitalize on a Rousseauian dream of a domain theoretically untainted by economic interests, in which all acts may be performed in public, all property is shared, and all souls may be laid bare. Yet, as I explore in the opening section of my article, the self-consciousness of Bougainville’s sailors leads not to bacchanalian revelry but to scenes of sexual impotence and nervous
self-examination. The sailors occupy the fallen world of civilization described in Rousseau’s *Discours*, in which the emergence of property has reorganized social and sexual relations. It is, as I argue in the middle section of the article, the dictates of property—the “ceci est à moi” of the *Discours*—that produce the fallen, even perverse, sexuality of Rousseau’s civilized man. Once the immediacy of sexual possession is balked by claims of ownership over women, the spontaneity of the state of nature changes into a fallen world in which perversion and self-awareness are two sides of the same coin. By erecting barriers to immediate satisfaction, the withholding of women generates both the torturous excesses of the imagination and the consciousness of a self-disciplining subject; it fosters both sentimental pleasures and sexual perversions. It is, as I argue in closing, not so much the taking of women as property as the sailors’ appropriation of particular women—the claim to exclusive possession—that leads to dissension and shame in the Tahiti of Diderot’s *Supplément*. In exposing the ways property claims in persons—both in women and in the children they bear—organize the very nature of sexual desire, Diderot flirts with the possibility that the delights of sexual plenitude may be superseded by the pleasures of proprietary possession.

For Bougainville, Rousseau, and Diderot alike, the unchecked plenitude of Tahiti poses questions about the ways the arrogation of another—proprietary jouissance—irrevocably alters the nature of sexual jouissance or enjoyment. Inasmuch as reserve—manifested in property, in modesty, in clothing—generates a model of sexuality in which desire cannot be sated because its object cannot be fully possessed, it unleashes the imagination to contemplate the delights of the hidden, the elusive, the withheld. Even as clothing both conceals and reveals the body that Rousseau in the above epigraph describes not as “nu” but as “devant être habillé,” the constraints imposed on civilized sexuality simultaneously restrict possession and generate a scandalous surplus in the form of imaginary pleasures that supersede the delights of present possession. It is for this reason, as the members of Bougainville’s crew discover, that the kinds of pleasures to be procured in Tahiti cannot be disj seams from the constraints of civilized morality.

THE VOYEUR IN THE PANOPTICON

Accounts of Tahiti waver between joyous proclamations that the island exists in an unfallen state of nature and disillusioned acknowledgments that such a state is only a romanticized projection. The attempt to strip away the artificial outer crust of civilization merely reveals another projected and fictional layer. If, as Foucault reminds us, “what is involved is the production of sexuality rather than the repression of sex” (*History* 1: 114), then there is no natural sexuality to be discovered underneath the super-encrustations of civilization. The fantasy of an essential humanity to be unveiled mocks those who read Tahiti into nature—or nature into Tahiti. (Shocked by accounts of the New Zealanders’ brutality and perfidy, Rousseau would reportedly ask, “Is it possible that the good Children of Nature can really be so wicked?”) The savage, as Bougainville’s crew comes to recognize, is no more authentic or natural than the civilized man.
Nor do the sailors’ accounts fully uphold European readers’ fantasies about the delights of free love. Pitched into a world of seeming freedom, the French sailor discovers his own insufficiency and repression, as the body is trumped by the ideas to which the mind is culturally bound. The soaring descriptions of Tahitian sexual bounty collapse into tales of abortive seduction and crippling impotence in the navigation journals from the expedition. The description of one such scene by Charles-Pierre Félix Fesche, volunteer seaman on *La Boudeuse*, is worth quoting at length. The Tahitian woman, he writes,

s’étendit sur la natte, [. . .] lui faisant entendre qu’elle se donnait à lui et écarta ces deux obstacles qui empêchent l’entrée de ce temple où tant d’hommes sacrifient tous les jours. L’appel était bien engageant et l’athlète qui la caressait connaissait trop bien l’art de l’escrime pour ne la pas prendre sur le temps si la présence de 50 Indiens qui l’environnaient n’était, par un effet de nos préjugés, mis un frein à ses désirs violents, mais quelque ardeur qui vous anime, il est bien difficile de surmonter tout d’un coup les idées avec lesquelles on a été nourri. La corruption de nos moeurs nous a fait trouver du mal dans une action dans laquelle ces gens avec raison ne trouvent que du bien. Il n’y a que celui qui fait ou qui croit faire mal qui craigne la lumière. Nous nous cachons pour faire une œuvre aussi naturelle, ils le font en public et souvent. Plusieurs français, moins susceptibles de délicatesse, le même jour, ont trouvé plus de facilité à lever les préjugés.

Unable to divorce the ostensibly beneficent regard of the Tahitian witnesses from the censuring gaze of a Western judge, the stricken sailor cannot suspend his civilized sense of morality (and hence of culpability). Sexual desire is trumped by “les idées avec lesquelles on a été nourri,” as “l’effet de nos préjugés” checks “ardeur qui vous anime.” Whether or not the Frenchman “connaissait bien l’art de l’escrime,” knowledge proves to be a double-edged sword, as his awareness of fifty spectators to what is, by Western mores, a private act, leads to shame and impotence. Only those who are able to “lever les préjugés,” Fesche tells us, are restored to the unencumbered enjoyment of sex (2: 82).

Notably, Fesche traces the sailor’s hesitation to “la corruption de nos moeurs,” rather than to the corruption of the Tahitians. It is the French who attribute evil to “une œuvre naturelle.” The solution proposed by the civilized man is not to eliminate the sense of wrong doing, but to hide: “nous brûlons,” Fesche writes, but we are prevented from acting by “la décence, ce monstre qui combat si souvent les volontés des hommes, vient s’opposer à nos désirs vêhéments et qui nous fait invoquer vainement le dieu qui préside au plaisir afin qu’il nous rende invisible un instant ou qu’il fascine seulement pour un instant les yeux de tous les assistants” (2: 80). Like Adam and Eve, the French in Tahiti hunt for a fig leaf to avoid exposure to prying eyes, but the culpabilizing gaze they cower away from is their own. The French do not see themselves through the eyes of the natives; instead, the French look at themselves through a kind of double vision that allows them to perceive their own sundered being. Whereas “le bon Taïtien,” as the expedition’s naturalist Commerson tells us, “jouit sans cesse ou du sentiment de ses propres plaisirs ou du spectacle de ceux des autres” (199),
the visual and sexual pleasure of the French sailors is marred by their awareness of another’s gaze—even one that carries no censure. For the French visitors to Tahiti, the voyeuristic and the panoptic collide.

Presumably there is no such thing as voyeurism for the Tahitians, since the interdictions that render the witnessing of illicit pleasures alluring do not exist. Among the Tahitians, what is “good” (pleasurable) for individuals is also “good” (productive) for the whole: no surveillance or coercion is necessary to direct their desires toward or away from particular objects. They follow what Commerson calls “les douces impulsions d’un instinct toujours sûr,” evading any second-guessing in the form of “défiance” or “remords” (198–99). Because sex is depicted as both a public and a religious duty—“l’acte de créer son semblable est un acte de religion” (198), Commerson declares—it can be exposed to the eyes of the rest of the world without shame. It is because they are unafraid of being seen that the Tahitians are innocent; it is because they are innocent that they are unafraid of being seen. Personal pleasure and public utility fuse in this tropical paradise. Sex is a public festival in Tahiti because it contributes to the prosperity of the nation. “Si de sages peuples faisait des fruits public pour la semence de la terre,” the Prince of Nassau observes, “pourquoi la reproduction de la plus belle espèce des choses créés ne sera tel [sic] pas aussi une fête public?” Why not, indeed? What is it that transforms sexuality from this joyous expression of unchecked natural impulses? Given that the Tahitian woman is purportedly always ready and willing, why does the French man hesitate? The transformation of sex from a natural, spontaneous act to a vexed, self-aware deed must be understood in relation to the emergence of private property; the arrogation of individual women withdraws them from general circulation, producing the imperatives for sexual restraint. In a reading of Rousseau’s account of the state of nature in his *Discours*, my next section explores how property claims in women transform the very nature of sexual desire by creating barriers between the subject and possession of the desired object, stoking desires by deferring satisfaction.

**SEXUALITY AND ROUSSEAU’S STATE OF NATURE**

Qu’en sçais-tu[?] As-tu vu des sauvages faire l’amour? (Voltaire’s marginalia in Rousseau’s *Discours*)

Composed almost twenty years before Bougainville and his crew embarked on their voyage around the world, Rousseau’s *Discours* nevertheless holds sway over French accounts of Tahiti. In the navigation journals of Bougainville’s crew, Tahiti gives embodied form and geographic location to Rousseau’s historical fiction. Sheltered from the corrupting influence of civilization, the South Seas islanders are a kind of degree-zero human; the voyage serves as a kind of philosophical test-drive of the “state of nature,” with the Tahitian serving as the “before” and “after” in a civilized extreme makeover. Aotourou, the Tahitian brought to Paris by Bougainville, is invited to showcase the transformation of the man of nature into civilized man in numerous French accounts. Encountered en route from Tahiti
to France, he is, in the words of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, “franc, gai, un peu libertin”; homeward bound, Aotourou is found to be “réservé, poli, et maniéré” (81). His encounter with civilization is the subject of literary musings as he is made the mouthpiece of Nicolas Bricaire de la Dixmerie’s “man of nature” in a riposte explicitly addressed to Rousseau. (Almost as frequent are resentful allusions to Rousseau’s dismissive words on sailors in the Discours; clearly, the ship’s company did not appreciate being told that they made unworthy anthropologists [Discours 3: 213–14]. Bougainville’s navigation journal draws on Rousseau’s notorious urinary maladies to avenge the dignity of sailors. When observing that the Patagonians “pissent accroupis,” he asks, “serait-ce la façon de pisser la plus naturelle? Si cela était, Jean-Jacques Rousseau qui pisse très mal à notre manière, aurait dû adopter celle-là. Il nous renvoie tant à l’homme sauvage.”

Although the writers draw freely on Rousseau, the kind of free love that eighteenth-century writers described as prevailing in Tahiti—the state said to most closely approximate nature—is not identical to sexual relations in Rousseau’s theoretical state of nature. Indeed, the sociability of Tahiti forms a stark contrast with the insular roving savages featured in the Discours. In Rousseau’s hypothetical history, savage men and women reproduce through a random and fortuitous succession of one-night stands. In the absence of property, men and women encounter each other by chance:

n’ayant ni Maison, ni Cabanes, ni propriété d’aucune espèce, chacun se logeait au hazard, et souvent pour une seule nuit; les mâles, et les femelles s’unissaient fortuitement selon la rencontre, l’occasion, et le désir, sans que la parole fût un interprète fort nécessaire des choses qu’ils avaient à se dire. (3: 147)

No affective or enduring bond is forged out of the union of the sexes; no language is required to communicate biological needs. The savage experiences the appetite “qui l’invita à perpétuer son espèce; ce penchant aveugle, dépouvu de tout sentiment du coeur, ne produisait qu’un acte purement animal. Le besoin satisfait, les deux sexes ne se reconnaîtraient plus” (3: 164). As imagined in the Discours, brute physical attraction reigns in the state of nature, but there is no social bond, no division of labor, no property, and no particularized desire. Indifferent to differences among women, the savage “écoute uniquement le tempérament qu’il a reçu de la Nature, et non le goût qu’il n’a pu acquérir, et toute femme est bonne pour lui” (3: 158).

According to Rousseau, the shift from random couplings to particular unions arises from the move from an itinerant, hunter-gatherer society to an agrarian mode of subsistence. With the advent of a more settled way of life, men and women form more permanent bonds. The children of neighboring families see each other at the watering hole and grow interested in and attached to one another. It is, thus, the proximity of families arising from an agrarian society that inaugurates the domestic. The individual arrogation of a woman follows from the cordonning off of land for a home; conjugality issues from the advent of private property for Rousseau. Rendering the couple as the effect of the household rather than the cause, Rousseau historicizes the family.
With the shift from felicitous encounters to sustained relations, Rousseau announces, society comes to distinguish “le moral du Physique dans le sentiment de l’amour. Le Physique est ce désir général qui porte un sexe à s’unir à l’autre; Le moral est ce qui détermine ce désir et le fixe sur un seul objet exclusive-ment.” Until sexual bonds are individuated, particularized, and hence imbued with “moral ideas,” the story goes, the law of nature cannot be replaced by the higher values of sociability. Moral love depends on the ability to discriminate among partners, which in turn depends on the relative leisure of the savage and his elaboration of abstract ideas. Without abstract thought (categories like beauty or merit), the man of nature cannot make comparisons among women: “cette espèce de mémoire par laquelle un individu donne la préférence à un individu pour l’acte de la génération exige. . . plus de progrès ou de corruption dans l’entendement humain, qu’on ne peut lui en supposer dans l’état d’animalité dont il s’agit ici” (3: 217n12). The particularizing of desire—the isolation of a single object of preference—pitches the man of nature into a fallen world of discrimination and difference. “All the depravity of culture, as the movement of difference and preference,” Derrida succinctly notes, “is therefore related to the possession of women” (181).9

The ability to discriminate between women arises not merely from the existence of abstract categories that allow the savage to differentiate among previously interchangeable women but also from the emergence of a sense of self above and beyond the self-preservation or “amour de soi” that, with pity, constitutes one of the two traits possessed by all in Rousseau’s state of nature (3: 219n15). In nature, there is no consciousness of the distinction between self and other: “chaque homme en particulier se regardant lui-même comme le seul Spectateur qui l’observe [. . .] il n’est pas possible qu’un sentiment qui prend sa source dans des comparaisons qu’il n’est pas à portée de faire, puissent germer dans son âme” (3: 219n15). The unselfconscious man of nature can neither see others as spectacles nor see himself as the object of their gaze. With passage out of the state of nature, however, “on s’accoutume à considérer différents objets, et à faire des comparaisons. [. . .] Chacun commença à regarder les autres et à vouloir être regardé soi-même” (3: 169). This capacity to apprehend one’s self through the eyes of another produces both the bonds of sympathy and the sundered self, alienated from its prior unity (see Marshall 144–51). When he becomes aware of the gaze of others, Rousseau’s man acquires a secondary form of self-love, the “amour propre” that leads an individual to prefer him- or herself before all others. Henceforth, “être et paraître devinrent deux choses tout à fait différentes” (3: 174).

With the doubling of the gaze that creates “amour propre,” sex ceases to be the instantaneous satisfaction of biological impulses and becomes a more complicated, but also more self-aware, experience of sexuality. Self-awareness endows the individual with the capacity to govern his natural impulses and allows civilized man to be more particular in the selection of his conjugal partners (as he can refrain from pouncing on the nearest woman). The emergence of the couple is inseparable from the subjection of unruly desires made possible through self-surveillance. Marriage,
in this scheme of things, can exist only in civilization, only once man has moved out of nature (in which partners are chosen indiscriminately for transient and random couplings) into a state of sociability and property. Because such an advanced stage also implies that man has ceased to act on each and every impulse, however, the investment—sentimental and sexual—in a single partner is also bound up with matters of self-restraint and repression. Self-restraint creates reserve; self-awareness hampers freedom. If departure from the state of nature creates the particularized sexual relations that foster sentimental bonds, it also produces a split subject, irremediably doubled. Rousseau’s couple is never just two; Rousseau’s fallen man is never quite himself. Like the French sailors in Tahiti who cannot shake off the sensation of being watched, Rousseau’s man is sundered within himself.

The individual arrogation of particular women precipitates a fall into property relations that produces a shift in the very nature of sexuality. Sexuality in the state of nature involves needs that can be satisfied and wants that can be filled; the properties that assuage male sexual urges are intrinsic to all women equally. *Jouissance*, for Rousseau, only becomes a problem on man’s removal from the state of nature, his fall into civilized society. With the particularizing of desire, impulses can no longer be slaked on the nearest woman. Moreover, the ability to differentiate among women creates competition among men. For Rousseau, this competition is a boon for women, because it grants power to the scarce resource (the woman desired by more than one man). The perception of differences among women confers on particular females the power of withholding themselves (or of being withheld by their families)—a situation “né de l’usage de la société, et célébré par les femmes avec beaucoup d’habileté et de soin pour établir leur empire, et rendre dominant le sexe qui devrait obéir” (3: 158). By arresting male desire on a single object, the move from physical to moral love enables women to usurp masculine political command, denaturing the social order. For Rousseau, then, the sentimental attachment to a particular man or woman potentially inverts gender hierarchy. Only modesty, by bridling the seductive powers of women, weakens female dominion and allows for masculine sexual and political right to reassert itself.

Civilization distinguishes between natural urges and sentimental love, between the indiscriminate need that lashes the human before it and the particular attachment to a unique object. Because it is no longer a simple biological urge that can be satisfied through intercourse, sentimental love cannot be sated in the way that the fleeting sexual impulses of the state of nature can be. Instead, it involves a kind of intersubjective pleasure, a refinement of the emotions experienced by the lover. Sentimental love is grounded not in an indiscriminate sexual desire for any member of the opposite sex that can be relieved by present possession (as in the state of nature), but rather in the sustained possession of a specific object, made possible by the capacity to defer consummation. The pleasures of sentimental love are not exhausted by a simple act of coupling: they are one side of the coin as humanity becomes civilized and discontented. The other side is the proliferation of libertine pleasures and perversities.
Because it restricts access to women, the emergence of property tampers with the immediate and unmediated expression of sexual urges. By virtue of being checked, deferred, countermanded, and denied, desires change with emergence from the state of nature. “L’imagination qui fait tant de ravages parmi nous,” Rousseau observes, “ne parle point à des coeurs Sauvages; chacun attend paisiblement l’impulsion de la Nature, s’y livre sans choix avec plus de plaisir que de fureur, et le besoin satisfait, tout le désir est éteint” (3: 158). Whereas the savage is a passive tabula over which the impulses of nature sweep and disappear, social man is the interlocutor of a speaking imagination that tortures him with desires that cannot be placated. If the savage is subjected to urges without choice or deliberation, social man is able—indeed, obliged—to create and manipulate his own affect through the imagination, devising a new order of pleasures and torments. Property makes it possible to possess without present enjoyment (to keep something for future use), and it registers potential wants (property is a repository of anticipated desires and enables one to accumulate beyond immediate necessity). In this sense, the very existence of property makes possession elusive. Rousseau’s man of society ceaselessly reaches for what he is unable to grasp. The fact that his ambitions invariably surpass his capacity to possess creates dissatisfaction and emptiness in his heart. This insatiability leads men to seek out novel means to satisfy their desires, distorting nature and themselves. The weakness of men, Rousseau writes in L’Émile, proceeds from l’inégalité qui se trouve entre sa force et ses désirs. Ce sont nos passions qui nous rendent faibles, parce qu’il faudrait pour les contenter plus de forces que ne nous en donna la nature. Diminuez donc les désirs c’est comme si vous augmentiez les forces; celui qui peut plus qu’il ne désire en a de reste. Il est certainement un être très fort. (4: 426)

Stemming from a disequilibrium or imbalance between one’s “force” and one’s “désirs,” the weakness of man is created by the self. Rousseau’s man, thus, becomes the engine of his own torture, incessantly inventing desires that exceed not only his material needs but even his capacity to enjoy. Passions supersede the powers conferred on us by nature. Humans seek forms of enjoyment or jouissance that exceed the capacity of the body—yet the lack that spurs such desires suggests that something is wanting. But if nature ought to lack nothing in itself, then the quest for such jouissance must create the very void it would fill. The existence of this model of jouissance is one distinction between the states of nature and society in Rousseau’s conjectural history; it also differentiates human from animal in the discourse of natural history. In his 1753 “Discours sur la nature des Animaux,” George-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, observes that the propensity for excess is a distinctive characteristic of the human:

Les animaux ne sont point sujets à toutes ces misères, ils ne cherchent pas des plaisirs où il ne peut y en avoir; guidés par le sentiment seul, ils ne se trompent jamais dans leurs choix, leurs désirs sont toujours proportionnés à la puissance de jouir; ils sentent autant qu’ils jouissent, et ne jouissent qu’autant qu’ils sentent; l’homme au
contraire, en voulant inventor des plaisirs, n’a fait que gâter la Nature, en voulant se forcer sur le sentiment il ne fait qu’abuser de son être, et creuser dans son cœur un vide que rien ensuite n’est capable de remplir. (4: 81–82)

The unerring election of animal nature would conserve a just proportion between desires and abilities, but Buffon’s humans deviate from the presiding light of “le sentiment seul.” Departure from nature (or from the state thereof) thus leads to two consequences: one, the need in society for increasingly elaborate means to placate desires, and two, a redefinition of the nature of jouissance. In striving to achieve pleasure beyond his proper capacity, man devises the desires that will become his bane. Gorged by excess, the pleasure-seeker delves the hole that damns him to the fruitless pursuit of plenitude.

In this sense, the allure of Tahiti in the accounts of Bougainville’s crew lies less in its fiction of unchecked abundance than in the ways in which it skirts the problem of insatiability that dogs these fallen versions of desire: the “wants of him that wants nothing,” in Samuel Johnson’s famous words (44). The fantasy of Tahiti suggests that plenitude may proffer satiety without creating discontent. The accounts from the voyage are, perhaps unsurprisingly, untroubled by the notion that, without checks on present possession, plenitude may annihilate desire; they depict a self-renewing Eden in which men are “délibéré de toutes les passions, de la jalousie même quoique environné de femmes charmantes” (Fesche 88). Yet, the questions of what is gained and what is lost in a seeming utopia of infinite bounty—of whether deliverance from all passions is a consummation devoutly to be wished—surface throughout Diderot’s philosophical investigation of the political and economic underpinnings of free love in the Supplément au voyage de Bougainville. In scrutinizing the ways the property taken in persons—both in women and in the children they bear—structures sexual desire, Diderot acknowledges the ways sexual enjoyment is inextricably bound to—even premised on—the restrictions intrinsic to proprietary jouissance.

**THE DANGERS OF DIDEROT’S SUPPLÉMENT**

Diderot’s Supplément au voyage de Bougainville (written c. 1772; first circulated in the Correspondance littéraire in 1773 and 1774, and subsequently published in a 1788 compendium of voyages edited by Charles Georges Thomas Garnier) retraces the trajectory in Rousseau’s Discours from unencumbered sexual enjoyment to self-aware, guilty pleasures. It asks how, as the subtitle puts it, man has come to “attacher des idées morales à certaines actions physiques qui n’en comportent pas.” The Supplément, as its title suggests, situates itself in the interstices of Bougainville’s voyage. The text begins with a dialogue between two philosophical speakers, A and B; moves to the harangue of a Tahitian elder who condemns the depredations of the French on the island; then turns to a dialogue between the Tahitian Orou and the ship’s Aumônier or priest. (One of the ironies of Diderot’s Supplément is that the notoriously anticlerical Bougainville almost forgot to embark a priest on the Boudese [see Vibart 132].) The Tahitian
persuades the *Aumônier* to suspend his vows of celibacy to have sex with Orou’s daughters, prompting a discussion of French and Tahitian mores, the imbrication of sexuality and property, and the demographic imperatives that prove to govern the islanders’ sexual behavior. The dialogue between A and B resumes in the closing section of the *Supplément*, as the two seek to distinguish between the codes of nature, religion, and law. Each speaker elaborates a different notion of the relation between sex and propriety, although the multilayered and multivoiced structure of Diderot’s text means that the *Supplément* refuses a central purchase point: the reader is frequently uncertain who is speaking and who is speaking for whom. In form as in content, the *Supplément* poses questions about political and literary representation.

The voices within voices, the dialogues contained within a dialogue, the speeches transcribed and interpreted by various interlocutors, all work to undermine the singularity of the speaking subject in Diderot’s work. If Diderot’s Tahiti is an “outside” that sketches out what it means to be “in,” then inside and outside swap places with the disconcerting fluidity of a Mobius strip. Because these boundaries between inside and outside are not clearly marked, it is difficult to define what lack in Bougainville’s account Diderot’s *Supplément* fills, as well as what Diderot’s text itself leaves wanting. Indeed, the opening discussion between A and B introduces the “Supplément” as a kind of subsection within the text of the Supplément one is already reading: “Et où trouve-t-on ce Supplément? B. Là, sur cette table [. . .] nous pourrons le parcourir ensemble, si vous voulez” (*Supplément*, ed. Dieckmann 11). The question of whether the discussion between the two philosophical observer-interlocutors can be absorbed into the text proper or whether it serves as a kind of prefatory or frame narrative exposes the difficulty—or impossibility—of collating narrative authority with a particular cultural perspective within the text: from what location can the feverish attempts at cultural self-description of the French and the Tahitians hold water? In the *Supplément*, the tension between “nature” and civilization is not represented as the static juxtaposition of two locations (Tahiti and France) or of two temporalities (the state of nature and civilization), but as a dynamic struggle within the individual. Diderot’s man is a divided soul, doubled over onto himself: “Il existait un homme naturel; on a introduit au dedans de cet homme, un homme artificial, et il s’est élevé dans la caverne une guerre civile qui dure toute la vie” (59–60). No prior unified state of being can be recaptured in Diderot’s account; his speakers can only describe the consequences of the transition.

Analyses of the relation between property and sexuality in Diderot’s Tahiti usually address Orou’s use of the language of property to describe the place of women within sexual union or the constitution of children as a form of wealth. Rather than focusing on the byproducts of sexual congress, I want to address the way property relations tamper with the very nature of sexual pleasure in Diderot’s Tahiti. The *Supplément*’s opening harangue by a Tahitian elder to the Western visitors who are leaving Tahiti describes and laments the transformative impact of Bougainville’s visit. The French have introduced syphilis and tainted
the unity and purity of precontact Tahiti with criminal passions, competition, and proprietary claims. In nature, the elder claims, no object bears within or on it the stamp of possession, but the French endeavor to mark the world as their own. Returning us to the “ceci est à moi” of Rousseau’s discourse, Diderot’s elder contends that the French have “enfoui dans notre terre le titre de notre futur esclavage” by inscribing on a

lame de métal: Ce pays est à nous. Ce pays est à toi, et pourquoi? Parce que tu y as mis le pied! Si un Otaïtien débarquait un jour sur vos côtes, et qu’il gravât sur une de vos pierres ou sur l’écorce d’un de vos arbres, ce pays appartient aux habitants d’Otaïti; qu’en penserais-tu? Tu es le plus fort, et qu’est-ce que cela fait? Lorsqu’on t’a enlevé une des méprisables bagatelles dont ton bâtiment est remplie; tu t’es récrié, tu t’es vengé; et dans le même instant tu as projeté au fond de ton coeur le vol de toute une contrée! (Supplément 13–14)\(^1\)

Although the passage partly mutes the violence of conquest through the mediating gesture of inscription, the power of the five words ce pays est à nous to dispossess the Tahitians is underwritten by the force majeure of the French. Diderot mocks the logic by which Europeans appropriate land unclaimed by other Europeans through a chiastic reversal that invites the reader to imagine that a literate “savage” might lay claim to his country. The logic of reciprocity surfaces only in the quid pro quo of vengeance for the pilfering of worthless bagatelles. The elder contrasts the petty larcenies of the Tahitians with the European expropriation of entire territories to expose that conquest is just theft on a majestic scale.

Yet the Tahitian elder is blind to the way his celebration of the reciprocity of mutual rights in others disguises unequal relations between men and women. In the elder’s account, the French not only claim property in land; they claim private property in women. It is not, however, that women become property with the advent of the French; instead, their property status shifts from communal possession to particular ownership: “Ici tout est à tous, et tu nous as prêché je ne sais quelle distinction du tien et du mien,” the elder scolds the French (13). All things (“tout”) are undifferentiated and belong to all men (“tous”) equally, but here, gender marks one set of humans as owners: the “tous” own the “tout,” which includes women. “Nos filles et nos femmes nous sont communes; tu as partagé ce privilège avec nous,” the elder observes (13); “tu as joui de tout,” he proclaims, “tu n’as trouvé sur ton chemin ni barrière ni refus” (17).

The individual arrogation of women who were formerly held in common leads to new kinds of appetites by creating a caesura between desires and acts, between natural impulses and their satisfaction. By creating objects to be desired and placing interdictions on their possession, the elder claims, property leads to the invention of “vertues chimériques” and “besoins superflus” (15, 14). The advent of the Europeans introduces pleasure and guilt, secrecy and duplicity: “L’idée du crime et le péril de la maladie sont entrés avec toi,” the elder states. “Nos jouissances autrefois si douces sont accompagnées de remords & d’effroi. Cet homme noir [that is, the priest] [. . .] je ne sais ce qu’il a dit à nos filles, mais nos garçons

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hésitent, mais nos filles rougissent” (16–17). The elder opposes the natural and good sexuality of the Tahitians that, producing no shame, is practiced in daylight under an open sky, to the dark and perverse pleasures of the European, who must hide himself within the forest.

Enfonce-toi, si tu veux, dans la forêt obscure avec la compagne perverse de tes plaisirs; mais accorde aux bons et simples Otaïtiens de se reproduire sans honte à la face du ciel et au grand jour. Quel sentiment plus honnête et plus grand pourrais-tu mettre à la place de celui que nous leur avons inspiré et qui les anime; ils pensent que le moment d’enrichir la nation et la famille d’un nouveau citoyen est venu, et ils s’en glorifient [...]. ils croissent pour multiplier et ils n’y trouvent ni vice ni honte. (17)

As the means “d’enrichir la nation et la famille d’un nouveau citoyen,” sex in pre-contact Tahiti requires no vindication. The elder’s distinction is less a dichotomy between French and Tahitian than a division between types of sex: between, that is, procreative sexuality (the good and simple urge to “se reproduire” and “multiplier”) and the sterile pursuit of the fleshly pleasures of the French man with his “compagne perverse.” The reproductive functions of sexuality—which, by virtue of their utility for the general good, can be witnessed by all—are juxtaposed with the pleasures of a sexuality that must be practiced in secrecy, as the individual arrogation of another person transforms all aspects of sexuality. In the elder’s account, the initial, happy, homosocial sharing of women has led to jealousy and violence, as the sailors claim exclusive rights to particular women (13). (“Tout guerre,” B tells us, “naît d’une prétention commune à la même propriété” [9].)

Exclusive claims of possession create strife, as scarcity and mimetic desire create competition for the same objects. Balked desires create ferment. The appropriation of Tahitian women by individual men destroys the free expression of desire. From a world in which women give themselves “sans réserve et sans secret” (35), one passes to a world of guilty duplicity and repressed passions, spawned by proprietary arrogation. The surging impulses that come into being with the emergence from the state of nature in Rousseau irrupt into the previously tranquil world of Tahitian jouissance. “Tu es venu allumer en elles des fureurs inconnues,” the Tahitian elder proclaims. “Elles sont devenues folles dans tes bras, tu es devenu féroce entre les leurs. Elles ont commencé à se haïr; vous vous êtes égorgés pour elles, et elles nous sont revenues teintes de votre sang” (13). The women develop a will and a series of preferences that they did not have before: they compete for the men and experience “des fureurs inconnues”—“inconnues” in the sense of both hitherto unknown and unknowable (appertaining to the unconscious). In this fallen world, the subject acquires depths that cannot be plumbed. Whereas, as B puts it, “la passion de l’amour réduite à un simple appétit physique n’y produisait aucun de nos désordres” (51), the civilized check on such impulses spurs the individual to elaborate on these desires in his or her imagination, producing libertine fantasies, insatiable passions, even unspeakable perversions.
The Europeans also create lack where there was none: “tout ce qui nous est nécessaire et bon, nous le possédons,” the elder proclaims. “Tu es entré dans nos cabanes, qu’y manque-t-il, à ton avis?” (14). The luxuries coveted by the Europeans harness men to ceaseless labor to procure what they do not in fact need: here, as in the passages from Rousseau’s *Émile* and Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle* quoted above, men become the agents of their own proper subjection, as chosen pleasures become pressing imperatives that tamper with their very nature. Once persuaded to “franchir l’étroite limite du besoin,” the elder asks, “quand finirons nous de travailler, quand jouirons nous?” (15). Men and women, he predicts, will be locked into a ceaseless quest for something beyond what they already possess. And, yet, the luxurious desires introduced by the French also broach broader questions about the human longing for something beyond mere need—which might be called the necessity of the superfluous, the utility of the unnecessary.\(^{16}\)

The superfluous—“ce qui est de trop, ce qui est au-delà du nécessaire,” according to the 1762 *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* (s.v., superflu), but also at times the “inutile”—is alternately a surplus to be enjoyed and the bane of one’s proper existence: “le superflu n’a point de bornes,” as the *Dictionnaire* warns. Although the Tahitian elder acknowledges only the negative aspects of excess (enslavement to the insatiable pursuit of more), the *Supplément*, as its title suggests, recognizes the elusive charms of that which supersedes the merely sufficient.

Whereas the elder criticizes the transformations wrought by the French on Tahitian society, Orou condemns the sexual mores of the French in their own country. European repression and unhappiness, he claims, stem from “la tyrannie de l’homme qui a converti la possession de la femme en une propriété” (58). By redefining virtue and vice alike, property has pitched humanity into the false code of civilized morality, for when

> la femme devint la propriété de l’homme et [. . .] la jouissance furtive d’une fille fut regardée comme un vol, on vit naître les termes pudeur, retenue, bienséance, des vertus et des vices imaginaires, en un mot entre les deux sexes des barrières qui les empêchassent de s’inviter réciproquement à la violation des loix qu’on leur avait imposées et qui prodiguaient souvent un effet contraire, en échauffant l’imagination et en irritant les désirs. (55–56)

The “jouissance furtive” of a girl becomes a theft (“un vol”) because sex ceases to be a transaction between the parties physically involved, and instead mediates relations between the proprietor of the woman (her father or brother) and her prospective partner. No longer a question of pleasure, sex becomes the taking and giving of proprietary possession in persons. Taking women as a form of property further transforms human affect and social mores. Modesty and chastity become the means of preventing women from acting on their natural instincts, while jealousy emerges from the assumption of sole and unique right of access to another’s body or affections. Codes of propriety reinforce the order of property, while different forms of emotional reserve stem from economic reserve—the effort to withdraw particular individuals from circulation.\(^{17}\)
Notwithstanding Orou’s condemnation of the property taken in French women and his laudatory remarks about Tahitian free love, the sexual morality of *Supplément*’s Tahiti famously proves to be colored by proprietary interest to the same degree as the sexual morality of France. As numerous commentators have observed, the wealth of pleasures available in Tahiti produces the population that eighteenth-century writers asserted constituted the wealth of nations. Although sexual relations between men and women are free, Orou acknowledges that the issue of these unions reintroduces property into the question in the form of children. As Georges Van Den Abbeele contends, in making women the “locus of production of personal and social wealth,” Tahitian culture has “made reproduction into the highest and most compelling of duties. The ‘il ne faut pas’ has simply been reversed into an ‘il faut’” (46). For this reason, it is not accurate to say that sexual activity in Diderot’s Tahiti requires no incentive; it is the wealth to be gleaned in the form of children that drives the Tahitian women into the arms of the European sailors.

In Diderot’s account, the emphasis on fecundity that allows Tahitian sex to be a pleasantly public act harnesses all desires to reproductive ends. Yet, the need for interdictions on nonreproductive sexual activity betrays that the purportedly self-directing procreative instincts of nature are not all they are cracked up to be. In Diderot’s Tahiti, color-coded veils—white for prepubescent girls, gray for menstruating women, black for sterile or menopausal women—remove nonreproductive women from circulation. Sexual commerce that does not produce value in the form of children is interdicted, although Orou confesses that libertine propensities lead some men to “relève [le voile] et s’approche de la femme” (41). The unfecund Tahitian women “qui sortent la nuit sans leur voile noir et reçoivent des hommes lorsqu’il ne peut rien résulter de leur approche” (44) expose the allure of the interdicted, the enticement of the useless, the wasteful, and the excessive, opening up a domain of unmastered sexual expenditure, of pleasure without use, of jouissance without a plausible return.

Apart from these libertines, there are no gratuitous acts, no extravagant gestures, in Orou’s Tahiti. Sex in Diderot’s Tahiti, like the random couplings in Rousseau’s state of nature, does not involve (or require) the higher, deferred pleasures of feeling. The Tahitians do not recognize the lure of the withheld, the elusive, the anticipated and hoped-for. For them there is no brave charm in the rash “serment d’immutabilité de deux êtres de chair, à la face d’un ciel qui n’est pas un instant le même, sous des antres qui menacent ruine, au bas d’une roche qui tombe en poudre” (27). Such an oath, Orou argues, merely violates a naturally vagrant sexual desire, belying “le changement qui est en nous, qui commande une constance qui n’y peut être, et qui viole la nature et la liberté du mâle et de la femelle en les enchaînant pour jamais l’un à l’autre” (27). Restricting oneself to one partner may clash with a mutable nature, but—as Diderot’s poetic language seems to suggest—such a vow is also a product of human freedom to pursue that which exceeds mere necessity, base impulse, and involuntary urge. The reduction of love to instinctive appetite or utilitarian practice creates an impoverished world.
The immediacy of Tahitian love produces a curiously diminished model of possession; the direct and unmediated enjoyment of a desired object—the absence of restrictions, barriers, and interdictions—may in fact create a diminished form of pleasure. Thus, although the proprietary arrogation of particular women produces, as the elder argues, feverish delirium, perversions, dissension, and despair by checking the expression of sexual desire, and generates, for Orou, “des vertues et des vices imaginaires” (56), these barriers also open up, for Diderot as for Rousseau, the tantalizing, elusive pleasures of an imaginary jouissance that binds subject and beloved object even more tightly together.²⁰

What is withheld may perversely be more desirable than what is offered or possessed. Diderot’s philosophical speakers tender an account of the interplay between the veiled and the exposed, drawing attention not to what is revealed or concealed, but to the relation between the visible and the hidden. “Lorsque je vois des arbres plantés autour de nos palais, et un vêtement de col qui cache et montre une partie de la gorge d’une femme,” B. observes, “il me semble reconnaître un retour secret vers la forêt et un appel à la liberté première de notre ancienne demeure” (56). This statement, as Janet Whatley has pointed out, does not embrace the Tahitian ideal of public love under an open sky; instead, the interplay between exposure and secrecy, between the clothing and the hint of breast below, expresses a yearning for a “retour secret vers la forêt,” an imagined longing to steal back to an isolated bower of bliss harbored within the forest, “notre ancienne demeure.” Diderot’s speakers do not seek to remove the “vêtement de col” but remain deliciously trapped in the undecidable: the clothing that hides and shows at the same time lures one in and locks one out.

That the interplay of hidden and displayed, common and sacrosanct, contains an erotic charge lacking in Tahiti suggests the inadequacy of the notion that sexuality is hidden because it is wrong and that things are better when they are splayed out in the open. It is not clear, as Whatley observes, “whether it is only a sense of wrongdoing that can lead to a need for privacy” (199). Both Rousseau’s Discours and Diderot’s Supplément pose a crucial question: what is relinquished in a world in which everything can be exposed to the relentless light of day because everything is held in common? One might argue that the absence of private possession and reserve means that there is no pleasure, no desire, indeed, no sexuality, in Diderot’s Tahiti or in Rousseau’s state of nature. It is hard to say to what degree that the sex acts Diderot and Rousseau describe constitute sexuality. As Judith Butler asks, “Can sexuality even remain sexuality once it submits to a criterion of transparency and disclosure, or does it perhaps cease to be sexuality when the semblance of full explicitness is achieved?” (15).

“Jouir,” Diderot tells us in his Encyclopédie article on jouissance, “c’est connaître, éprouver, sentir les avantages de posséder: on possède souvent sans jouir.” In beginning with the verb rather than the noun, Diderot casts the reader in a world of experience rather than event, of activity rather than act. As Benrekassa observes in a superb reading of Diderot’s article, “comblant l’intellect (connaître), l’imagination et la conscience de soi (éprouver), le corps (sentir), jouir est [. . .] une espèce de
possession de la possession” (“L’article” 12). The plenitude of possession requires a kind of doubling of the possessing subject that enables reflection on the fact of possession: the self-awareness implicit in this model of *jouissance* is only possible in a world in which the unity of the self has fallen away. The consciousness that creates the enjoyment of enjoyment—the possession of possession, in other words—also potentially creates the fallen model of shame at work in Tahiti.

In closing, I want to return to Bougainville’s voyage and to the Tahitian, Aotourou, who returned to France with the crew. The thirty-year-old Aotourou had scandalized Parisian society with his propensity to “faire le Tahitien” by making blatant sexual overtures to French women. The *académicien* Charles-Marie de La Condamine had an opportunity to meet Aotourou, and his observations furnish an intriguing account of the so-called savage’s confrontation with Western representation. La Condamine tells us that after he had examined the Tahitian, Aotourou caught sight of a painting of Venus:

> J’ai vu notre insulaire faire des signes qui n’avaient rien d’équivoque à l’aspect d’un tableau qui représentait une Vénus presque nue, il fit semblant d’abord d’écarter le linge qui la couvrait très légèrement. Ici, je me trouve embarrassé à décrire les autres signes qu’il fit le jeune sauvage. J’ai sans doute tort de lui donner ce nom. [. . .]
> Quoi qu’il en soit, le Cythérien qui ne rougit pas d’appeler les choses par le nom qu’on leur a donné, montrait du bout du doigt ce qui dans le tableau était caché par la draperie et répétait “Eros . . . Eros . . .”.

La Condamine reports that Aotourou, while repeating this word, touched the portrait of Venus and sniffed and tasted his fingers, first making a grimace of disgust, then repeating the gestures before passing judgment by uttering “bon, bon” (174).

La Condamine was primarily intrigued with how to interpret Aotourou’s sniffing and tasting his fingers, but I want to linger over Aotourou’s attempt to push aside the painted drapery to expose the body of Venus—a gesture arresting in its seeming assumption that there is something behind the surface that can be reached. Like the birds that peck at painted grapes in the classical tale of Zeuxis and Parrhasios so beloved of Lacan, Aotourou seemingly fails to recognize that the surface of the representation gestures toward an object it cannot deliver. It is not clear if La Condamine believes that Aotourou apprehends his error, distinguishing painted gilt from painted girl. Certainly Aotourou’s murmured appraisal “bon, bon” seems to be an assessment of the use value of the depicted Venus—“ces peuples,” La Condamine observes, “ayant acquis l’habitude de reconnaître par ce même sens et celui du goût si une femme est saine ou malade” (174)—rather than an appraisal of the mimetic qualities of the painting. Whereas La Condamine presumably views the Venus as an aesthetic object in appreciation of what Freud in the epigraph to this article characterizes as “the shape of the body as a whole,” Aotourou seems impelled to “complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts.” The European who understands the layering of representation stands in stark contrast to the Tahitian who treats representation as transparent and immediate, moving beyond
the body’s coverings to the flesh painted beneath. If Aotourou seeks to push aside the drapery of Venus to find the woman within, for La Condamine, it is the tension between what is hidden and revealed by the drapery of Venus that cannot be pushed aside.23

Aotourou’s frankness—il faut appeler un chat un chat—casts in stark relief the torturous paraphrases of an equivocal La Condamine who finds himself embarrassed to describe Aotourou’s gestures. Whereas Aotourou does not hesitate to apply to things the names “qu’on leur a donné” and finds a seemingly direct relation between word and referent, La Condamine waffles over words, deliberating over whether he can describe Aotourou as a savage: “J’ai sans doute tort de lui donner ce nom,” he notes. La Condamine’s position as observer is always already discomfiting, suggesting as it does that he, too, may be observed, that he must observe himself as well. His embarrassment solicits him as a particular kind of individual, fosters in him a specific set of behavioral responses, and in short, trains him to act like a civilized man. The European scientist does not imitate Aotourou’s attempt to undress Venus but is instead caught in the interplay between the trappings of the civilized body and the flesh beneath. In La Condamine’s description, the direct expression of inner impulses and sexual desires is reserved for the unconscious—or at least unselfconscious—savage. And the absence of crippling self-awareness creates what La Condamine recognizes as Aotourou’s more immediate relation to language, to objects, and to the world. La Condamine, it would seem in anticipation of Freud and Foucault, has discovered his own repression. Yet, it is by no means evident that La Condamine considers Aotourou’s position enviable; the tension between hidden and exposed, between Tahitian freedom and civilized constraint, yields pleasures of which the savage is wholly unaware: the possibility of a jouissance to be savored precisely because enjoyment is deferred.

The veil that Aotourou wishes to push aside marks a distinction between the unchecked impulses of the “savage” and the reserve of the civilized man, between the immediacy of Aotourou’s response and La Condamine’s mediated desires. The fantasy that one may draw back the painted veil to reveal the body of Venus beneath does not deliver the coveted object up to the spectator; nor does it uphold a model of unmediated desire and immediate possession. Instead, it allows the reader to possess and be possessed by the elusive possibility that there is something beyond what we already have. In this sense, the idea of Tahiti is of far greater value than an actual trip there (even supposing that were a possibility). The eighteenth-century accounts of Tahiti do not dissolve the barriers between subject and desired object, restoring the reader to a prior state of unmediated desire; instead, they hold out the promise of a fuller possession and enjoyment of Tahiti as the perpetual bauble of the reader’s imagination.

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NOTES

1. On the voyages of exploration to the South Seas, see Cheek; Douthwaite 140–83; Lamb; Marshall and Williams 258–98; Bitterli 155–77; Giraud; and Dauphiné.
3. “Journal de Charles-Félix Pierre Fesche, volontaire sur la Boudeuse,” Bougainville 2: 81–82. See, also, the journal of Charles-Othon, Prince de Nassau-Segen, passenger on La Boudeuse: “La jeune fille était très jolie mais les préjugés européens exigent plus de mystère. Un Indien se servit d’un moyen bien singulier pour exciter encore mes désirs. Heureuse nation qui ne connaît point les noms odieux de honte et de scandale” (Bougainville 2: 395–96). All citations will be made parenthetically in text. I have modernized all the French. On the use of theatrical metaphors in descriptions of these encounters, see Balme 67–85.
4. de Nassau-Siegen 2: 396. The posthumous publication of Fontenelle’s “Lettre sur la nudité des sauvages” in 1768 suggests the scope of interest in these questions at this historical moment. Fontenelle argues that “La honte ne consiste donc pas à paraître nu ou habillé, mais à violer les loix, les usages, les coutumes établies par les loix particulières de chaque pays” (172). French mores regarding sex are illogical: “l’on se cache soigneusement pour commettre une action dont on se glorifie des suites; l’on a honte de procurer en public un enfant, & l’on est tout brillant, tout glorieux de l’avoir fait” (Fontenelle 168).
6. Bougainville 1: 269. The passage was omitted from the published version, Voyage autour du monde. Rousseau minutely and repeatedly described his urinary maladies—real or imagined—throughout his life. He carried a probing apparatus with him almost everywhere in the belief that his difficulty urinating was caused by a stone. See Starobinski 365–77.
7. See Schwartz, esp. ch. 2, pp. 10–40. On the patriarchal underpinnings of the social contract, see Pateman.
8. Rousseau, Discours 3: 157–58. Rousseau blocks out the possibility of rape in the state of nature. As Joel Schwartz summarizes it, “[P]eace characterizes the primeval relations between males and females because there is a disproportion between their physical strength and their sexual desire: the sexes are equal because each sex’s superiority is compensated for by a corresponding inferiority. Men would have the strength to compel women but lack the desire to do so; women [. . .] might have the desire to compel men but lack the strength to do so” (18).
9. On the dominion of women, see, also, Derrida 171–81.
10. For Diderot, as for Rousseau, the moment in which women are withheld precipitates a change. Unlike Rousseau, however, Diderot attributes to women the power of discernment and comparison: “lorsque la femme commença à discerner; lorsqu’elle parut mettre de l’attention dans son choix, & qu’entre plusieurs hommes sur lesquels la passion promenoit ses regards, il y en eut un qui les arrêta, qui put se flatter d’être préféré, qui crut porter dans un cœur qu’il estimoit, l’estime qu’il faisait de lui-même, & qui regarda le plaisir comme la récompense de quelque mérite” (s.v., “jouissance” in Encyclopédie). The fact that the woman’s desire is arrested on a particular man ignites a reciprocal passion issuing from self-love. The chiastic structure of Diderot’s sentences (“qui crut porter dans un cœur qu’il estimoit, l’estime qu’il faisait de lui-même”) echoes the reciprocal generation of love in self and other, as the knowledge that he is loved by his beloved consolidates and fuels the man’s love of himself, leading him to love another.
11. For the 1788 publication date, see Cheek 177. For an account of the publication history and various manuscripts of the Supplément, see editor Dieckmann’s introduction (xi–xxviii) and editor Chinard’s introduction (42). They both list the first edition as in 1796.
12. The kinship between Diderot’s *Supplément* and Rousseau’s *Discours* has been the subject of considerable debate. Rousseau himself declared in *Les Confessions* that the *Discours* “fût plus du goû de Diderot que tous mes autres Écrits” (1: 389). See Dieckmann’s introduction to *Supplément* lxxiii–xciv. Goodman juxtaposes the conjectural history of Rousseau’s state of nature as a developmental argument with the speculative use of nature to suggest reforms in Diderot’s *Supplément* (123–37). Important distinctions exist between the two. The men in Diderot’s Tahiti are not indiscriminate in their selection of women but gravitate toward the most fecund; love is a public fête in Tahiti accompanied by the arts (which do not exist in Rousseau’s state of nature); and (as I will return to later) property and marriage both exist in Diderot’s Tahiti.

13. The question is echoed in British accounts as well: “Whether the shame attending certain actions, which are allowed on all sides to be in themselves innocent, is implanted in Nature, or superinduced by custom?” (Hawkesworth 2: 128).

14. That Diderot’s Tahiti is not free of property has been discussed in Whatley; Ben-rekassa, “Loi naturelle”; and Van Den Abbeele.


16. On the necessity of the superfluous, see de Grazia 17–42.

17. In his *Lettre à M. D’Alembert sur les spectacles* Rousseau explicitly contests Diderot’s derivation of virtues, vices, and even affect from property. Rousseau objects to the contention that “la pudeur n’est [. . .] qu’une invention des lois sociales pour mettre à couvert les droits des pères et des époux, et maintenir quelque ordre dans les familles” (213). For Rousseau, the question—“Pourquoi rougirons-nous des besoins que nous donna la nature?”—is misleading: both male and female seek solitude to protect themselves from vulnerability to predators both during sex and in the lassitude that follows. That there is greater modesty in the female than the male Rousseau attributes to biology: what he terms the “defensive nature of female sexuality” stems from the fact that the consequences (i.e., pregnancy) differ for men and women. Women, Rousseau notes, should be the passive recipients of male overtures rather than the initiators because men are not physiologically ready to have sex at the drop of a hat.


19. Diderot’s account of the origins of the monogamous vow in the *Encyclopédie* is pertinent to the argument here. In his version of the movement from savage to civilized love, it is the fact that women are not immediately accessible that leads to monogamous union: “lorsque les voiles que la pudeur jetta sur les charmes laisserent à l’imagination enflammée le pouvoir d’en disposer à son gré, les illusions les plus délicates concoururent avec le sens le plus exquis, pour exagérer le bonheur; l’âme fut saisie d’une enthousiasme presque divin; deux jeunes coeurs éperdus d’amour se vouerent l’un à l’autre pour jamais, et le céd entendit les premiers serments indiscrets” (s.v., *jouissance*). The veil of modesty leaves the imagination unbridled, allowing Diderot’s lovers to devise the very illusions that ensnare them. The elusiveness of possession perversely leads to the monogamous oath; it is the fact that one cannot immediately possess the beloved object that leads the lover to a temporally infinite bond (“pour jamais”).

20. Diderot and Rousseau differ in the value they assign to this imaginary *jouissance*: Rousseau is (unsurprisingly) far happier to defer possession than is Diderot. For Rousseau, the checks on present possession liberate one from the demands of an object: the person who possesses things only in his or her head can hold sovereign sway over the phantasmagoric object, tailoring it at will. “J’ai donc fort peu possédé,” Rousseau writes in his *Confessions*,
“mais je n’ai pas laissé de jouir beaucoup à ma manière; c’est-à-dire, par l’imagination” (1: 17). By diverting the demanding, intractable, immediate presence of the desired object into the domain of the imagination, it may be more fully savored and possessed.

21. The clandestinely circulated Parisian newsletter Mémoires secrets observes that Aotourou “se grise volontiers; mais sa grande passion est celle des femmes, auxquelles il se livre indistinctement. M. de Bougainville prétend que dans le pays où il a pris ce Sauvage, un des principaux chefs du lieu, hommes et femmes se livrent sans pudeur au péché de la chair; qu’à la face du ciel et de la terre ils se copulent sur la première natte offerte, d’où lui est venu l’idée d’appeler cette isle l’Île de Cythère.” Louis Petit de Bachaumont, Mémoires secrets pour servir à l’histoire de la République des Lettres en France, 10 July 1769, 36 vols. (Londres: John Adamson, 1781) 4: 298.


23. If an image taken for the real thing provisionally seduces the viewer, the revelation that one has seen through this deception produces pleasure by affirming the sanctity of the undeceived subject. What we seek in the play of resemblance between representation and reality is, as Jacqueline Lichtenstein has pointed out, “not perception of the same but awareness of the non-identical, so as to find in it the assurance of our own ever-uncertain identity” (169). By seeing through Aotourou’s mistake, La Condamine upholds his own identity.

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