Introduction

Thus the old America passes away; behold a new America appears, and her face is toward the Pacific.
—Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The New Pacific*

In the late 1990s, an advertisement for Fortunoff jewelers ran in upscale publications such as the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Magazine*: it depicted a windswept beach and the blue waters of the Pacific; a miniature rowboat and a string of black pearls rested on the sand. An eighteenth-century map of the Society Islands was featured in an upper corner of the page, where “Otaheite” could just be made out—a detail that immediately worked to blur one's sense of present realities with past Pacific histories. At the bottom of the ad, two sentences similarly collapsed present and past, myth and history: “Our representative had to choose between a young Tahitian Princess and the cultured South Sea pearls. Fortunately, he was trained that duty comes first, giving you a much more agonizing choice: cash or charge.”

On one level, the Fortunoff advertisement testifies to the persistent psychic hold that images of the South Pacific have on US audiences, a hold that still engenders popular fantasy from the film *Castaway* (1999) to the runaway TV hit *Lost* (2005), as well as reality programming such as *Survivor 4: Pearl Islands* (2003, shot on Nukuhiva) and *Survivor 5: Vanuatu* (2004). But the Fortunoff ad also suggests the more insidious and embedded stereotypes behind the Pacific island myth: the well-trained representative is obviously tempted, but too rational and civilized to accept the “savage” gift of the princess; he chooses money over sex, business over pleasure, sensible western enterprise over nonwestern self-indulgence. Behind the ad’s innocuous appearance lies the myth of a primitive people frozen in time, occupying a site still ripe for commercial exploitation and sexual fantasy. Simply put, the advertisement attests to the linked pleasures that South Pacific islands have, over centuries, afforded the consuming gaze of the west—connoting solitude, release from cares, and, more recently, renewal from urbanized modern life—while
promising economic rewards for those industrious enough to resist falling too deeply into reveries of Polynesian indulgence.

The persistence of this static image of Polynesia is remarkable, especially when one considers that it was already a long-standing cliché seventy-five years earlier, when Frederick O’Brien released his travel account *White Shadows in the South Seas* and helped to ignite a US obsession for all things Polynesian. As early as 1921—only a little over a year after O’Brien’s debut—*Publisher’s Weekly* was complaining that “the offices of the editors...are threatened with an early avalanche of South Sea material which menaces the pre-eminence of copra as the principal article of export from the Port of Papeete.”¹ This book outlines the contours of this Polynesian vogue, looking at the ways the South Pacific was envisioned by an interrelated group of travelers seeking inspiration, regeneration, or simply a means to escape on distant Pacific islands. These visitors to the Pacific together enacted a kind of collective cathexis on a dispersed geographical and cultural area and at the same time carried along a substantial proportion of the US population in their wake.

Yet at the very moment that so many Americans were dreaming of isolated, unspoiled islands, Pacific nations were undergoing political and cultural upheavals: the culmination of well over 150 years of significant western political and commercial intervention in the region. The period during which these travels took place closely followed on the heels of the US appropriation of substantial portions of the Pacific—including the Philippines, the eastern islands of Samoa, Guam, and Hawai’i—as the US strove to secure its regional, and ultimately global, economic and political influence. Hence the idyllic fantasies that these visitors carried with them into Polynesia came up against some unexpectedly harsh realities: the legacies of colonialism, the inequities of economic imperialism, and the instability of any preconceived notion of American exceptionalism itself.

**A Note on Terms**

I should start by underlining some of the issues and contingencies relating to the use of terms in this book—beginning with the title. As the epigraph above suggests, the phrase “facing the Pacific” partly mimics the westward-gazing imperialism of expansionist scholars such as Bancroft, who, shortly after the US annexations, envisioned the Pacific as the natural extension of the ideology of manifest destiny. But my intention is not to perpetuate the view that US expansion into the
Pacific should fundamentally or unproblematically be viewed as continuous with manifest destiny. To do this, as Amy Kaplan has argued, might be to risk effectively repeating the teleological narrative that US imperialism has told about itself—that of the “inexorable westward march of empire.” This neat and unified narrative presents an overly coherent image of imperial expansion rather than reflecting the often incoherent “anarchy” and particularity of empire building that actually took place. Therefore, while the very fact of US territorial expansion is not under question, it is also important to keep in mind the ways that the ideology of manifest destiny served as a kind of self-spun myth that helped to project and displace homegrown desires, fears, and emerging cultural contradictions within the US: the whole field of “domestic” cultural politics—including North/South issues of slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow segregation—sublimated in western expansionist fantasy. Though Facing the Pacific focuses narrowly on Polynesian fantasy after the First World War when commentators such as Bancroft were attempting to extend the life of manifest destiny, I suggest that these westward visions both reflected and helped to distract attention away from ongoing conflicts at home relating to the unity of US identity and nationhood, as the country experienced the upheavals of immigration, racial tension, and (perhaps more palpably than ever before) gender revolution.

There is an additional, and closely related, dimension to the title Facing the Pacific. As the writers and filmmakers examined here both engaged with and contested westward-facing expansionist fantasies, they also participated in a long history of facing—creating a kind of face for, putting a face on—Pacific islands and peoples, a face that conjured up dominant images of Polynesia and “types” of Pacific Islanders that would persist for many decades to come. This was a face that, on its surface, might have appeared to “show us them,” but it was a typology that more often reflected, and was the by-product of, an ambivalent and contested US self-image at the same time.

The book’s subtitle, Polynesia and the US Imperial Imagination, also could benefit from some further explanation, in that the west’s terminology for Pacific places and peoples continues to be burdened by the debris of history, ideology, and cultural solipsism. Seemingly value-free terms such as “Polynesia,” “Oceania,” and “South Seas” have the ability to mask their roots in western histories and typologies, sublimating the roles they’ve played in producing universal fictions out of diverse localities. “Oceania” comprises the geographical categories of “Polynesia,” “Melanesia,” and “Micronesia”—islands that are “many,” “black,” or “small,” respectively—a tripartite division usually traced back to the French explorer J. S. C.
Dumont D’Urville, who embarked on extended Pacific voyages in 1826–1829 and 1836–1839. While recently reappropriated and reimagined (as in the strategic employment of the term Oceania by writers such as Epeli Hau’ofa and Albert Wendt), these categories have helped to configure zones of geographical, political, economic, social, historical, and linguistic commonality—but have also worked to homogenize the Pacific’s diversity in all of these areas. Hau’ofa reminds us that Oceania should not typically be seen as a space of bounded territories, nations, and productive trade zones, but as a fluid network of peoples and cultures that once “moved and mingled unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers.” Jocelyn Linnekin suggests that “received categories such as Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia have become increasingly vulnerable. They were in their inception artificial creations by Europeans—labels to make sense of the cultural, linguistic, and phenotypic contrasts and commonalities that they encountered.” But the absolute dismissal of terms such as “Polynesia” also might have its limits: Alfred Gell complicates Edmund Leach’s claim that Polynesia might be “very nearly . . . [a] figment of the ethnographic imagination” by reaffirming the logic of conceiving certain Polynesian unities based on archaeological, linguistic, and historical evidence. The problem for Gell is in not in recognizing the resemblances and common origin of Polynesian societies, but in overemphasizing the idea of a pan-Polynesian culture at the expense of marking cultural differences, heterogeneities, and uneven transformations over time. Gell’s hesitancy in dismissing Polynesia as an organizing principle for ethnographic research makes sense within the remit of his comparative anthropological study, and he ultimately chooses to stress issues of cultural diversity while not fully dispensing with an overarching concept of Polynesia (though linked unified categories such as Melanesia, it needs to be said, lie on even shakier ground). My own project, concerned as it is with western constructs and fantasies, in a sense relies less on definitively answering the question of Polynesian unity than it responds to and interrogates a Polynesia imagined in western texts. The texts discussed in the following pages engage with islands encountered as part of the region known as Polynesia, and as such I make recourse to the term while attempting to keep its ideological and historical contexts—as well its strategic value—in constant view.

Another term that crops up in this book is “South Seas,” two words that evoke both actual and fictional journeys across the limitless “Great South Sea” sighted by Vasco Nuñez de Balboa from the Panamanian isthmus in 1513. “South Seas” thus might correspond to a real sense of place, but it is also a mythical and textually constructed space, in a sense, outside place and history. I employ the term essen-
tially to suggest a varied discourse of written and visual evocations of beaches, coral reefs, lagoons, coconut palms, and alluring native bodies, all holding the promise of sensual indulgence for western audiences. Herman Melville similarly identified “South Seas” as a tissue of overlapping texts and images: “South Seas is simply an equivalent term for Pacific Ocean. Then why not say Pacific Ocean at once?—Because one may have a lingering regard for certain old associations, linking the South Seas as a name with many pleasant and venerable books and voyages, full of well-remembered engravings.”

More recently, terms such as “Pacific Rim” and “Asia-Pacific region” have attempted to take in the wider postwar global exchanges, transformations, and perceptions that have marked the region. Yet these labels can also be seen as serving commercially driven, globalizing agendas of superpowers such as the US. For John Eperjesi, they are economic slogans that signify “smooth flows and big profits,” compressing time and space, defying geographical and cultural realities. Rob Wilson suggests they might further reflect attempts to forget colonial pasts: glossing Christopher Connery, he notes that “Pacific Rim” is an invention, an “American construct,” while “Asia-Pacific”—though seen as an advance beyond “Pacific Rim”—still bespeaks a transnational community “where market-driven coprosperity and democratic nation-states will have come home to coexist; where North/South colonialism, orientalizing binaries, and world war are said to get washed away forever in the magical waters of the Pacific.” Wilson further sees it as important to strike a balance between a positive global cultural imaginary and banner terms such as Pacific Rim that threaten to reinscribe the hierarchies and homogenizing tendencies of colonizing powers, absorbing Pacific localities into the East meets West free-market idealism of “Pacific Rimspeak” and the like.

While a cautious approach to language is something of a commonplace to New Americanist scholarship, it is nonetheless worth recalling that even the term “America” is far from transparent. “America,” as it commonly refers to the United States of America, of course elides and appropriates the rest of the Americas in one fell swoop; hence critics such as Malini Johar Schueller and Mary Renda have employed the neologisms “USAmerican” and “U.S. American,” respectively, in their efforts to draw attention to the implicit imperialist gestures of the terms “America” and “American.” In this book, whenever possible and for the sake of both specificity and simplicity, I use “US” as both a noun and an adjective, though “American” as a noun for “resident/citizen of the United States” has generally been retained, because unfortunately we do not yet have a routine English equivalent of something like estadounidense in Spanish (though this term too can lead to con-
fusion over another American “United States”: Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos). Also, as an “American” myself, I hesitate to suggest a potentially privileged status as a critical outsider through the use of neologisms that could appear to distance my position from others who recognize themselves as “American.” Thus “American” in this book refers to a construct of national identity and belonging, as well as being a label accepted by those who have constituted and recognized themselves within this group.

One final term, “imperialist,” also warrants comment, though I could not hope to equal here something like Eperjesi’s detailed anatomization of “imperialism” in *The Imperialist Imaginary*: Still, I would like to draw on at least one point from Eperjesi’s discussion: his highlighting of the increasingly economic sense of the word during the 1890s, and the ways that the US began to understand imperialism as a function of economic protectionism with the Spanish-American War that began in 1898 and the subsequent Filipino-American war that started in February 1899. These events form an important backdrop to the current study. Though the occupation of the Philippines carried with it all the ideological trappings of spreading freedom and civilizing the “savages,” it was a policy explicitly linked to the economic interests of the US and the protection of the China trade in the midst of increasingly fierce international competition. This close cooperation between national military policy and private enterprise might suggest the ways that “imperialism” in the new sense of the word was in fact closely associated with “colonialism” in the old sense. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman offer useful definitions that link the practices of colonialism and imperialism, suggesting that the former can be primarily identified with the nineteenth-century European acquisition and expansion of overseas territories, while the latter encompasses the “more far-reaching” implications of economic and ideological domination that have come as a result of the colonial situation. In other words, though we have “postcolonial” studies and do not yet have “postimperial” studies, it is important to keep in mind the very real political and structural continuities between colonialism and imperialism, both historically and as we currently understand the terms. It is in this broader sense that I employ the term “imperialism” in this book, though even as I write this, events such as the US military actions in Iraq are continually compelling us to reexamine the shifting assumptions behind these and other related terms. Eperjesi’s assertion that “these days, imperialism is universally held to be a bad thing” begins to sound vulnerable, as we witness the return of so-called liberal imperialist scholarship, which emphasizes the limits of sovereignty and “extols the virtues of imperial power acting to promote human rights and democracy, intervening in order to ‘civilize the uncivilized.’”

6 Introduction
The Production of “Whole Mythologies”

The cautious approach taken here to terminology is influenced by the work of contemporary writers and scholars such as Hau’ofa and Wendt, who have made a point of interrogating and resisting homogenizing labels for the Pacific’s complex cultural dynamics. As Wendt puts it, the west created not just terminologies and typologies, but a “whole mythology” to refer to Pacific islands, a mythology that is “more revealing of papalagi fantasies and hang-ups, dreams and nightmares, prejudices and ways of viewing our crippled cosmos, than of our actual islands”,15 and these myths persist in western cultural fantasy. Explorers’ accounts provided Enlightenment Europe with a concrete site on which to investigate, and reinvigorate, western mythologies. Empirical facts encountered on voyages of discovery promised to underwrite geographical myths of a lost continent, utopian myths of an ideal society, and origin myths of paradise and the tragic Fall. By the twentieth century, an extensive corpus of literary and visual representation had created a whole network of mythological “facts” about the Pacific, where truth and fiction were inextricably intertwined. Neil Rennie historicizes this process in Far-fetched Facts, describing the ways in which the discovery of the “South Seas” provided facts for philosophers that other authors embellished in turn with their own fabulations that were often popularly consumed as facts.16 Friedrich Nietzsche neatly summed up the process of searching for mythic realities in other cultures, suggesting that the post-Enlightenment west found itself “stripped of myth…without any fixed and consecrated place of origin” and was thus “condemned to exhaust all possibilities and feed miserably and parasitically on every culture under the sun.”17

A key theme underlying this book, then, is the notion that these “whole mythologies” about the South Pacific constitute a kind of euhemeristic phenomenon: that is, a collective attempt to explain, rationalize, and validate certain widely held myths as being grounded in historical truth, thus reviving the social role of mythical peoples, places, and events under the guise of presenting factual accounts. The term comes from the utopian writings of Euhemerus of Messene (4th century BC), whose Sacred Scripture was a novelized account of an imaginary voyage to a group of islands in the uncharted waters of the Indian Ocean, describing the way of life on its chief island, Panchaea. Euhemerus wasn’t the first to conjure up a utopian marriage of myth and history, but his work, in particular—somewhat like the colonial myths about distant peoples and places that were to come later—was soon subject to the ideological manipulations of parties eager to deify their politicians as heroes in order to advance their political aims. We might see manifest
destiny as one form of euhemeristic manipulation, of myth taken for history and used to political ends; the Enlightenment trope of Tahiti might be seen as another; and perhaps the prevailing image of Polynesia produced for US audiences in the 1920s could be seen as one more, closely related, phenomenon.

Gayatri Spivak explains western mythmaking about others as a self-centered ideological process and, couching her argument in psychoanalytic terms, sees the production of colonial images as linked to the construction of stable western subjectivities. Colonial images thus tend to represent the colonized essentially according to the terms of the colonizer’s own self-image, as the “self-consolidating other” (as opposed to the “absolute other”) so that the west “consolidated itself as sovereign subject by defining its colonies as ‘Others,’ even as it constituted them, for purposes of administration and the expansion of markets, into programmed near-images of that very sovereign self.”18 Building on this, Robert Young refers to the “narcissism” of the west—a narcissism that, in Pacific representations, might be seen to underpin and exploit perceptions of the “otherness” of island cultures.19

As variously defined through fictional and nonfictional texts, photographs, films, and other media, Pacific “others” were framed by a largely self-reflecting colonial lens. Thus it could be said that while helping to feed productive global networks of knowledge and commerce, the colonial gaze onto the Pacific reinforced the concrete and conceptual gaps of geographical distance and cultural difference, producing myths of otherness that helped to shape and consolidate western identities.

It is undeniable that western narcissism inheres in constructions of Polynesia, yet this book also suggests that whatever “universal” tendencies towards greed, lust, spatial mastery, cultural chauvinism, ethnocentrism, racism, and religious solipsism underwrote the process of colonial and imperial expansion, there are certain distinctive features to western images of Polynesia that, like the islands themselves, cannot be reduced to a unitary or overarching theory of colonial-era representation. Rod Edmond suggests that colonialism (and, by extension, imperialism) was itself never a “unitary formation,” while in the Pacific in particular,

the history of European presence . . . is not necessarily coterminous with the history of colonialism in the region. In particular, we need to distinguish between the early and later phases of contact. The inequality and subordination typical of contact in the late nineteenth century were not inevitably present in earlier exchanges between Europeans and Pacific islanders . . . Just as it is mistaken to assume some identity of interest, even ultimately, in the category of Europe, the self, or, indeed, any single imperial power, it is also misleading to homogenize different Pacific societies, or assume consensus within any one of them.20

8 Introduction
Edmond’s observations help to tease out the contingencies and irregularities encountered when reading colonial texts marked by differing geographies, histories, and cultural influences. And while this notion hardly negates the value of theories such as Spivak’s and Young’s in helping to construct an overview of the functions of power as they relate to (western) identity formation in colonial discourse, still, as Edmond suggests, any attempt to conceive a “single global answer” to larger questions of the changing nature of colonialism through time tends to become problematic, given colonialism’s “dispersed and differential impact” around the world. Indeed, specifically countering Young, Edmond argues that there can be no “general theoretical matrix” that might provide an “all encompassing framework for the analysis of each singular colonial instance” and that critics would be better off instead addressing these questions in specific historical and colonial situations.  

In reading island representations, it is important too to avoid characterizing island sites from continental perspectives, where islands tend to be seen “merely as metonyms of imperialism, rather than as specific locations generating their own potentially self-reflective colonial metaphors.” Nicholas Thomas has argued that European contact and established colonial relations in the Pacific can be seen as culturally “entangled”: islands held under the sway of colonial and imperial forces were not “tabula rasa” for the wholesale projection of western power and representation; rather, each encounter generated local and distinctive knowledge and information. Moreover, the authority of “western knowers,” Thomas argues, hardly possessed the kind of epistemic mastery that has often been attributed to it. Given that my own study strives to keep an eye on the peculiar relations between Polynesian islands and the US within a certain historical frame, I have had to recognize my indebtedness to the universalizing models of postcolonial theory while remaining cautious about theorizing away the particularities of time and place. On the one hand, this book investigates the overarching nature of the Polynesian fantasy in helping to consolidate dominant notions of modern American selfhood, but I also want to look at those modern Americans themselves and at their entanglements in Polynesian lives and cultures and their efforts to come to terms with the imperial power networks in which their works and lives were embedded.

Western fictions, travel accounts, ethnographies, films, and other kinds of representations created euhemeristic half-truths out of diverse Pacific islands and cultures. Indeed, as J. G. A. Pocock suggests in his analysis of Diderot, figures such as the South Seas “natural man” were inventions sited outside of (European) history: tropes that functioned to critique western Selves in the process of writing and revising western histories and identities. Wendt’s work suggests that respond-
ing to these myths and histories might not simply be a question of setting the record straight—of telling the absolute truth in the face of pakeha or papalagi lies. While not diminishing specific Oceanian identities, Oceanian writers and artists have been engaging with, reinscribing, and reshaping the received mythologies of the west. Scholars such as Futa Helu, Malama Meleisea, and ‘Okusitino Māhina have further attempted to rethink reductive notions of “legitimate” versus “illegitimate” facts themselves by redressing positivist dismissals of Oceanian-based histories and myths. “Myth may function in the interests of the dominant order,” notes Māhina, “but equally may encourage usurpation.”

This process in part involves reasserting the centrality of Pacific mythologies in the retracing of Pacific histories. Rather than privileging any single historical narrative, Helu, for example, outlines the interrelated nature of “three types of history”—island histories by foreigners, histories from indigenous perspectives, and histories hypothesized from the study of myths and oral traditions—arguing that there is “no logical difference between the three types of history (though procedural details can be very different).” Without collapsing the distinctions between “western” and “Oceanian” positionalities, this kind of analysis performs a useful function for western texts as well: it neither valorizes nor rejects western histories out of hand, but helps to relativize the constructs of the west, placing them in relation to other narratives and other forms of historical understanding. It also helps us to consider the ways that the west’s writing of island histories was another means for the west to write and revise mythical histories, and historical myths, about itself.

Imperialist Discourse

The readings in this book highlight the incessant duality of imperial representations. The creation of a whole mythology about Polynesia might on the one hand be summarized in a series of simple, truthful phrases: they came, they exploited resources and labor, they imposed their desires and superstitions, they invented stories and histories about us; yet the process was always more complicated and unstable than a Manichean framework positing “us” versus “them” might easily explain. European and US travelers mythologized Polynesia on their own terms, yet at the same time they overlapped and collided with local beliefs, behaviors, and practices, producing texts that can vividly reflect the irreducible nature of cultural encounters themselves. The textualization of Captain James Cook’s legendary murder and apotheosis (in the European press as well as, it has been argued, in Hawai‘i) after taking on the role of Lono—the god of fertility, fated to die—dur-
ing the Makahiki festival has been a prominent example of this collision, both then and now. Here the apparent misreadings and misapprehensions that constituted the event meet subsequent revisions, clarifications, and scholarly interventions: history replaces myth replaces history, and so on.28 Like the cultural encounter itself, the texts produced and reproduced in the wake of the encounter tend to be highly unpredictable and multifaceted, fraught with ironic reversals, ambiguities, ambivalences, and even resistance to dominant modes of representation.

We might begin to ask, as have critics such as Lisa Lowe, James Clifford, and Ali Behdad, to name just a few, whether the monolithic, oppositional categories of classic postcolonial criticism (which owes a great debt to Edward Said’s work—in particular Orientalism) are not in many ways convenient and even reductive markers of the complex and, at times, contradictory dynamics of imperial domination and anti-imperial resistance. As Behdad suggests of certain orientalist texts, perhaps as we leaf through these works searching for counterhegemonic resistances to colonial power, we will frequently find ourselves disappointed: we might find, rather, “counterdiscursive practices” working within the system “as effects of its power relations.”29 In the case of this study, which looks at popular travel writing, documentaries, and Hollywood films produced shortly after the US had colonized many parts of Oceania and was exerting its influence on others, this differential approach to the interconnected operations of power, which questions the logic of ever being absolutely “inside” or “outside” imperial ideology, is especially relevant. These ideological and discursive slippages within what could be called “imperial discourse” might be even more palpable in certain US texts as opposed to those produced under the sway of “high” European colonialism: while the US engaged in some versions of direct colonial administration, it also tended to slide towards the less rigidly centralized and more ad hoc, free market–based economic imperialism that still characterizes its foreign policy.

The critical dismantling of the Manichean framework for viewing colonial and imperial power relations has been both enabling and problematic; power might be figured not as an automatically oppressive entity to be opposed en masse, but as a function of multiple relations between and among varying social, political, and discursive forces. To paraphrase Michel Foucault, the discourses of power can be seen as heterogeneous processes, rather than as hegemonic totalities, and may be said to enable, even as they repress, oppositional discourses.30 To rupture a vertical model of power is to suggest that power is something that circulates, a “productive network” that runs through the whole of the “social body.”31 Colonial texts might create the effect of order and control, but as Lowe argues, the colonial text is neither monolithic nor internally consistent; representations are not characterized
by “discursive consistency” but are, rather, heterogeneous and contradictory, both internally and when compared to each other. Difference, ambivalence, and heterogeneity are fundamental attributes of colonial representations; they allow, as Behdad has argued of orientalist texts, “the possibility of multiplication and dispersion” of ideas, experiences, perceptions. But it is also worth recalling Schueller’s caution that, particularly in US literary studies, seeing the circulation of power in Foucauldian terms has at times too easily allowed moments of resistance and challenges to the mechanisms of power to be collapsed back into a larger social network, leading to little beyond noting that “any significant cultural practice is complicit in the power it might think to be opposing.” Schueller recognizes that challenges to imperial structures, even if written from “within” those structures, are not always merely complicit with furthering an imperial will, but might ultimately serve as the groundwork of its undoing.

Dennis Porter also avoids an overly tidy theoretical framework for explaining textual power dynamics, but importantly stresses that the texts themselves (and not just a theoretical framework or method for approaching the text) frequently point to these ambivalences and heterogeneities, doing so “because the human subject’s relation to language [and I would include here visual language, such as film] is such that he or she is never merely a passive reflector of collective speech. We leave our individual mark in our written and spoken utterances in ways of which we are aware, if at all, only after the fact.” Though the works examined here were produced when the US empire was extending its reach, their connotations and effects can be seen as more differential and problematic than summary notions of western cultural solipsism tend to allow: the texts are imbued with the give-and-take relations of travel, of distance from the familiar, of immersion in different ways of life. They also have a tendency to embody the paradoxes of island representations: marked by continental perceptions of islands as bounded, isolated sites remote from mainland centers of power, yet at other times incorporating a sense of the limitlessness, mobility, and interconnectedness of islands and island dwellers dispersed across vast expanses of ocean.

Overview

This book is not an exhaustive catalogue of the Polynesian-themed texts of the era. Rather, I wanted to present a cohesive and interlinked narrative by limiting the investigation to a group of individuals who traveled and worked in Polynesia during what could be called the “long 1920s”: the transitional period of economic
recovery, boom, and downfall that followed the First World War and lasted into the early years of the Great Depression. This was also a last gasp, at least until World War II, for the westward-gazing imperialist strategies of the US. These writers and filmmakers were all acquainted with each other and, in some cases, were long-time friends, and together they significantly contributed to introducing the US public to a new wave of postwar South Pacific representations. Those focused on here—the journalist Frederick O’Brien, husband and wife team Robert Flaherty and Frances Hubbard Flaherty, Hollywood director W. S. Van Dyke, and expatriate German director F. W. Murnau—participated at times openly and at other times covertly or subconsciously in the production of what Wendt calls whole mythologies about the region. Yet as I also hope to show, the work they produced is multifaceted and far from clear-cut or simplistic: most of these texts, even if at times complicit with the representational strategies of imperial power, cannot easily be dismissed as the end results of subjects wholly interpellated by an imperialist framework. If they sometimes unself-consciously adopt, at other levels they also confront, conventional social demands and prejudices.

The complex and at times disturbing quality of these texts arises from their tendency to enact a double gesture: they frequently repress or erase the “native” subjects in the text while empowering the authorial position of the text. Yet often those who strove to consolidate power in the colonial context were themselves marginal figures at home, disenfranchised in terms of gender, class, sexuality, or political affiliations. And while many of these works offer a well-worn nostalgic or solipsistic view of a precolonial paradise, in other, sometimes subtle, ways they reveal the rapid cultural and perceptual shifts that were taking place amidst a new social modernity and through the stylistic and political innovations of modernism. Polynesia often served as a screen—indeed, it often appeared as a vision on a film screen—onto which the cultural and ideological conflicts of the US could be displaced and projected, yet it also acted as a site where hidden, often forbidden, racial and sexual confusion and desire could be explored in sublimated form. As Antonio Gramsci suggested, to understand both the role of culture in “national-popular” hegemonic discourses and to comprehend the subaltern resistances existing within these formations, we have to consider the “real nexus” of the work—its fuller contexts as a socially produced text. We need to look carefully at where these texts come from, what modes of power or commerce facilitated them, how they were received and consumed by audiences. We also need to consider their absorption into the broader frameworks of culture and history.

Thus this book starts by looking backwards, at a history of Polynesian representations. The first chapter aims to provide some useful historical, textual, and
thematic contexts for looking at modern(ist) US representations of Polynesia, beginning with the Enlightenment and working forward to US expansion and up to the First World War. The heart of the story then begins in chapter 2, just as the war ended, when O’Brien released his best seller *White Shadows in the South Seas*, unleashing a wave of Polynesiana on the US public. This chapter positions the role of Polynesia in the US imagination just after the war and marks the ways that O’Brien’s manifestly anticolonial text both accorded with and resisted dominant modes of received Pacific representations. The story continues by looking at O’Brien’s friend and confidante Robert Flaherty and his wife, Frances Hubbard Flaherty, and examines the couple’s collaborative work on *Moana* (1925). *Moana’s* well-intentioned nostalgia for a seemingly passing way of life is reexamined from the standpoint of salvage ethnography and as part of the larger ethnographic sensibility of the 1920s. Chapter 3 follows Flaherty’s career in the Pacific by discussing his and Van Dyke’s directorial pairing on the Hollywood version of *White Shadows in the South Seas* (1928) and Van Dyke’s sequel, *The Pagan* (1929), focusing on the ways that fundamentally racist discourses can be embedded within manifestly anticolonial texts. The final chapter takes us up to 1931, with Flaherty and Murnau’s “pure native”—and strongly homoerotic—romance, *Tabu*, the release of which was shortly followed by Murnau’s death in a car accident in Santa Barbara. Encountered in these texts are various Polynesian islands and island groups: the Marquesas (O’Brien), Western Samoa (Flaherty), Tahiti (Flaherty and Van Dyke), and Tahiti, Bora Bora, and Morea (Flaherty and Murnau). At their most revealing, these texts offer insights into shifting notions of Polynesian otherness in the US imagination and their impact on US subjectivity: into the ways that US peoples as “mainlanders” sought solace and identification in images of distant islands.

Since this book deals with the links between the US and Polynesia, the omission of a lengthy discussion of the US relationship with Hawai‘i should be briefly addressed here. The central importance of Hawai‘i to the US, initiated in earnest with the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions’ indigenous conversion project in 1820 and culminating in the island group’s annexation in 1898, cannot be underestimated: Hawai‘i’s annexation, like that of the Philippines, was critical to shoring up US military and commercial investment in the strategic Pacific arena, especially as it related to the China trade, while its appropriation as a territory played a substantial role in helping to push frontier ideology further westward into the Pacific. Yet by the time of O’Brien’s, Flaherty’s, Van Dyke’s, and Murnau’s Pacific travels, Hawai‘i had been incorporated into an imagined US frontier, having long lost its mystique for the traveler in search of an “unmapped” paradise. The mythical Pacific remained an ideal to be met beyond the frontier’s known horizon, while
Hawai‘i was a safe travel option occupying the realms of tourism and international trade. A 1925 ad for the Hawai‘i Tourist Bureau stresses the islands’ selling point as familiarity, a kind of suburban garden of delights: “Here within easy reach lies Eden—for all folk who want rest, warmth, and new diversions. . . . Surrounded by modern conveniences and comforts, and with moderate living costs, you’ll want to enjoy several weeks or months in this smiling territory of the U.S.A.” 38

Still, Hawaiian cultural fantasy that translated into the marketable culture kitsch of hula and ukuleles continued to inhere in the US popular imagination, and still does. In the 1910s, the play Bird of Paradise was touring the country, its advertising copy claiming that it was “beautiful, intensely atmospheric. . . . Hawaii with its laughing, dancing maidens crowned and garlanded with brilliant flowers, maidens casting eyes of witchery on white strangers.” 39 Bird of Paradise implied that Hawai‘i could still conjure up enigmas of savagery no longer found on the “mainland,” but certainly to the more diehard Pacific adventurer, Hawai‘i’s exotic potential had been tamed, domesticated, and, perhaps most telling of the limits of US fantasy—hybridized. Writing just before annexation, Mark Twain noted that “wealth has introduced changes; some of the old simplicities have disappeared.” 40

As early as 1849, William Maxwell Wood could write of Honolulu’s international flavor and diversity, which he considered one of the positive achievements of western civilization:

When [Americans] hear of a wanderer amid the isles of the Pacific, [they] associate with him imaginings of barbarism, and sympathize with his severance from the artificial refinements of life; but here we are in those far away isles, and in a delicious climate, amid beautiful scenery; we are also in a handsome town, of five or six thousand inhabitants, with its strong and comfortable stone and white frame Venetian-shuttered houses, elegantly and luxuriously furnished. . . . its churches, hotels, shipping, and wharves; palace, king, court, cabinet, and regular laws. We are surrounded by, not only natives, but Yankees of every grade, degree, and profession; Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, Italians, and Chinamen. In large and well-fitted stores we can procure whatever we want, from any part of the world. 41

Hawai‘i would serve as a physical and conceptual base upon which to push US ambitions farther west and south: Honolulu and the islands were transitional cultural spaces of transnational flow, perched between the comfort and safety of home and the purer, more intense exoticism promised by the imagined, as yet untamed, southern skies of Polynesia. 42
TO PARAPHRASE Albert Wendt once more, the west created a mythology of Pacific peoples and places that in many ways had more to say about western fantasies and hang-ups than it did about Oceania’s actual islands. It is, in a sense, precisely these papalagi fantasies and hang-ups that I am examining here, and as a result I remain keenly aware of this book’s limitations. Perhaps most strongly, this book reflects my position as a so-called transatlantic scholar—marked by elements of both professional emplacement and displacement—working both in and between the US and Europe. It also reflects my background as a student and teacher of literature and film. No doubt if this book had been written from a different cultural, geographical, or disciplinary standpoint, these US-centered texts might have held less of a fascination for me, and the influences and expectations that frame the analyses would have led to very different conclusions.

Edmond has pointed out the problems of focusing solely on western representations, noting that “to concentrate on the conventions through which a culture was textualized while ignoring the actuality of what was represented is to risk a second-order repetition of the images, typologies, and projections under scrutiny.” 43 This study works to recognize the cultural contexts in which these writers and filmmakers produced their texts, but it is also guided by a sense that the critique of western representations can be an important step towards comprehending the complicated and extensive process of empire building, and empire dissolution. The analyses here are about discovering inner conflicts and lacks of resolution—what Jean Narboni and Jean-Louis Comolli called the “cracks”—in apparently unified texts created under the weight of an increasingly sophisticated rhetoric of US imperialism by those who sought out encounters with cultural difference, where selves formed by the bonds and blinders of cultural and national affinities meet alternate ways of life formed by different affinities and horizons of experience.44

This book, then, is limited to reading modernist-era texts that reveal a distinctive, heightened relationship between US self-fashioning and received versions of Polynesia. Yet the texts discussed in the following chapters are in many respects neither peculiarly “modern” nor even very “American,” just as US imperialism itself was never far removed from the structures of European colonial power it both contested and inherited. Texts are always haunted by their ancestors: as much as they are of their time, postwar US fantasies of Polynesia can be seen to have adapted and renewed much older—and primarily European—connotations, myths, and legends about the South Seas. Most forms of western travel have marked a return to an imagined past; as Rennie suggests, “Travel from civilization tended to be regressive, the traveller discovering not a new land so much as a new location for
old, nostalgic fictions about places lost in the distant past, now found in the distant present. The idea of traversing distance not only across space but also across time acquired a unique status in journeys to the South Pacific, where acts of travel were grounded in myths of discovering some version of a lost Eden, based partly on empirical “evidence” and partly on textual voyages of the imagination.

In looking at the following Polynesian-themed texts, we might be reminded that as we view the dreamlike landscapes of the “South Seas” and the bodies inscribed within them, the text’s geographical and chronological displacement from its subject matter is nonetheless somehow marked, at every turn, with a belated sense of self-recognition. Dennis Porter notes that travel texts that have attempted to capture and “bring home” images of other places always show the mark of a certain déjà vu and that these visible and invisible ghosts can be understood in part through recourse to what Freud called the uncanny. Porter thus describes a sense of the belatedness in the travel text that sets it apart from something like the explorer’s account, for these visited places are always already haunted by the ghosts of previous texts and travelers who have gone before. In many of the works discussed in the following chapters, this sense of belatedness nearly overpowers the text’s manifest content: the hegemony of the past threatens to turn present Pacific travels into simulacra of earlier observations. Yet the gap between textuality and reality tends to reassert itself: if travelers rarely find themselves amidst the rarified places and peoples they once read about and longed to encounter, the disordered and unpredictable experience of their own encounters inevitably gives rise to something new—if unexpected. The disaffected writers and artists examined here, who went to the Pacific in search of paradise, tended to return with a problematized sense not only of cultural otherness, but of home and selfhood. They returned telling tales that helped to feed, but also to unsettle, the ideological boundaries between here and there, home and away.