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The travel imagination and the hybrid reality in the wake of colonialism

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The Travel Imagination and the Hybrid Reality in the
Wake of Colonialism

James McLaughlin
Honors Thesis
2006
Professor Anindyo Roy

Acknowledgements:

I took my first steps into the travel genre in Professor Roy's Postcolonial Literature and Orientalist Literature classes. I was inspired not only by travel writing, but by the experience of travel itself. So thank you airplanes, thank you luggage carrouseles, and thank you extendable tourist visas.

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Introduction: The Travel Imagination and Hybridity

Mary Louise Pratt, in Imperial Eyes, defines travel exclusively as an arrival.

Central to her argument is

“the term ‘contact zone’ which [she] use[s] to refer to the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other, and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (6).

Oddly, Pratt’s term, “contact zone,” has little to do with the subject she created it to describe: “travel writing” (6). Travel, as all the writers profiled in this thesis experience it, is a solitary and personal endeavor. Pratt seems to be describing invasion, not travel. Pratt’s concept of “contact” is inherently political. The idea of “establish[ing] ongoing relations” (6), sounds suspiciously like the purpose of the embassies maintained by the United States State Department. Travel is not meant to be “ongoing,” but to be “going.” The intrinsic transience of travelers makes “ongoing relations” impossible.

Pratt says contact, “usually involv[es] conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (6), because cultures cannot reconcile their differences before clashing. Pratt fails to realize that education is vital to travel. The traveler often reads everything that’s available about their destination in preparation for their arrival. The traveler, in essence, works hard to make the clash of cultures as soft as possible. The traveler doesn’t want the “contact zone” to be a place of “intractable conflict” (6), because war makes travel difficult. The traveler wants the “contact zone” to be as porous

as the border between two allies. It's in the traveler's best interest for the "contact zone" to be as congenial as possible.

Most egregiously, perhaps, Pratt does not realize travelers are special. Travelers, are, of course, part of the community they were born into, but they are not at all representative. Travelers do not "speak for" the countries they originate from. While people "geographically and historically separated" (6), may be understandably xenophobic, the travelers among them are not. Pratt bases her term "contact zone" (6), on contact languages, the "improvised languages that develop among speakers of different native languages who need to communicate with each other consistently, usually in the context of trade" (6). "Contact languages" represent the bare minimum of cultural exchange. In fact, such rudimentary forms of communication demonstrate that both cultures involved were too stubborn to learn the language of the other. Contact languages are actually the result of extreme isolationism, which is anathema to travelers. Travelers are the most likely to learn the native languages spoken in other places. Travelers veraciously read so they won't be "historically separated" (6). And travelers, by definition, are the most willing to move, and therefore the least "geographically separated" (6). In other words, travelers are the best at crossing borders. While those who represent government might want to maintain a "contact zone," travelers do not. In fact, often travelers cringe when they are reminded of the existence of "contact zones." For example, they often hate to see the cultural compromises a community has made under the pressures of colonialism. The "contact zone" represents an embarrassing era of history for western travelers, and reminds postcolonial travelers of many old indignities.

For both western and postcolonial travelers, the “contact zone” is an uncomfortable place, that they’d rather avoid.

The atmosphere of unease surrounding the arrival comes from the opposition of two concepts, not, as Pratt says, the opposition of two cultures. One of the concepts is “the travel imagination.” The word, “travel,” in “travel imagination,” is essentially a label used to differentiate the “travel imagination” from other types of imagination. The word, “imagination,” identifies the “travel imagination” as a product of the mind.

When the traveler arrives, and sees the destination with their eyes, not their imaginary eyes, smells the destination with their nose, not their imaginary nose, the inaccuracies of their imagination are emphasized in a unique way. Travel is, I think, special in this respect. Travel confronts the failures of the imagination directly, deliberately, and all at once. Because imaginings related to travel are destined for such a confrontation, they are different than other imaginings. Travelers are normally aware of the fate of their “travel imaginings,” so they construct their “travel imaginings” with unique care. The “travel imagination” is commonly made more out of facts and less out of creativity. Travelers tend to become emotional when their “travel imaginings,” are contradicted by reality upon arrival.

As Edward Said says in Orientalism, colonialists like to proclaim that they “discovered” things; countries, customs, savages. If sailors could “discover” land by simply sailing to it, then surely writers could “discover” cultures by simply writing about them. Much has been written about the colonial traveler, and the inaccuracies of their accounts have been enumerated many times. But the “modern traveler” is different than the colonial traveler. As David Spurr says, colonial writers, “establish[ed] authority

through the demarcation of identity and difference” (2). But the travel writers investigated in this thesis are too ambivalent about identity and difference to demarcate anything.

The writers I’ve chosen to analyze have the urge to close the gaps of difference. The often passionate research they do in anticipation of travel acclimatizes these travelers to the differences they’re likely to encounter. These travelers are more tolerant about difference because books have warned them to expect difference. But the travelers I’ve selected also show the opposite impulse. They’ve chosen their destinations precisely for their difference. They’ve chosen to travel to the places in the world where they’re most likely to be shocked. They don’t attempt to “establish authority through...difference” (2), but they do immerse themselves in difference, because, in some way, they find the sensation intoxicating.

According to David Spurr, colonialist writers defined themselves in opposition to “the other.” The simplicity of colonialist thinking, we are civilized and they are savages, could be reassuring to some. But for the writers I discuss later in this thesis, difference is destabilizing. They often switch their identities, back and forth, accentuating their foreignness, and then trying to fit in.

It’s critically popular to segregate westerners who write about postcolonial countries from their natural logical counterparts, postcolonials who write about the west. Ali Behdad in his book Belated Travelers conspicuously excludes western travel writers from his analysis, although they belong to the same “age of colonial dissolution” (13), the postcolonial writers he focuses on do. Behdad attempts to explain his critical approach by saying,

“traveling in the Orient at a time when the European colonial power structure and the rise of tourism had transformed the exotic referent into the familiar sign of western hegemony, these orientalists could not help but experience a sense of displacement in time and space, an experience that produced either a sense of disorientation and loss or an obsessive urge to discover an ‘authentic’ other” (13).

This passage is crafted so it pertains only to westerners, or, as Behdad calls them “belated orientalists” (13). Behdad’s main critical contribution is, as he says, to “travel...away from...essentialist views of Orientalism” (11), such as Said’s assertion that, “every European in what he could say about the Orient , was a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric” (11). It’s fairly easy to disagree with such an unequivocal statement, which, to be fair to Said, was taken out of context. If Orientalism is, as Said says, a “system...[used to] dominate the east”(11), “belated Orientalism” takes place post-domination. According to Said, westerners are bigots, “racist[s]” (11), but, according to Behdad they are merely confused, “disorient[ed]” (13).

As I’ve previously mentioned, a period of reading and studying is often the first stage of the “journey.” The pathologically obsessive way many writers prepare for a destination is driven by the same “urge to discover an ‘authentic’ other” (13), that Behdad described. The more information a person has about a destination, the more their “travel imagination” will mirror reality. One of the key characteristics of a traveler is the urge to imagine correctly. The most “authentic” way to experience another place is to be there, of course. This is essentially the reason the geographic dislocation phase of the “journey” takes place. At some point, the traveler realizes that their “travel imagination,” is as authentic as possible. The traveler has checked out all the books in the library and has memorized all the maps. There’s nothing further for the traveler to learn. Arriving in

the destination is a sort of final examination for the traveler. Some travelers are better students than others. Some travelers, whose “traveling imaginations” cannot be easily reconciled with reality, “experience...a sense of...loss” (13), as Behdad says. This feeling of loss is, essentially, a misunderstanding. The traveler decides that their “traveling imagination” is the “authentic” version of the destination, and the actual destination is, somehow, not. In other words, the traveler believes his/her conception of a place is more real than the place itself. This proclivity, as we will see, can be found among all the travelers I profile, westerners and postcolonials alike. These travelers, more than anything, want to “discover” a manifestation of their “travel imagination” in the destination. This “discovery” is, for the well-informed traveler, not very difficult. Historical landmarks are often right where the books said they would be. Streets are laid out just as they were on a map. This overlap between reality and the “travel imagination” often pleases travelers. This is the reason that travelers often “follow in the footsteps” of historical figures. This is the reason travelers often want to visit sights they’ve already seen pictures of.

The “traveling imagination,” is of paramount importance to both western and postcolonial travelers. Since both groups create “travel imaginations” by extensive reading, the nature of the books that inform them must directly affect their travels. A westerner, for example, who reads only colonial-era accounts has the “travel imagination” of a different generation. If all perspectives were represented equally in libraries, the “travel imagination” of a given person would be entirely his/her own. But usually the “traveler’s imagination” is biased by prevailing opinion. Libraries are not democracies, and sometimes extensive reading only indoctrinates the reader with the

biases of the canon. Perhaps the following generalization will be helpful. Westerners are able to create “traveling imaginations,” based on the books they trust. But postcolonials, who have reason to be suspicious of what they read, have complicated “traveling imaginations.” Sometimes postcolonial travelers base their “traveling imaginations” on what they read, and sometimes, in opposition to what they read.

The books discussed in this thesis, In Patagonia, The Cruise of the Shark, The Happy Isles of Oceania, A Passage to England and The Enigma of Arrival, were first published in, 1977, 1939, 1992, 1971 and 1987, respectively, in what Ali Behdad calls the “age of colonial dissolution.” Perhaps it would be more accurate to say these books are set in the “age of colonial demolition.” For the most part, the empires in these texts are in ruins, or at least in the process of being dismantled. In fact, two of the authors, Nirad Chaudhuri and V.S. Naipaul are canonical post-colonial thinkers.

Bruce Chatwin’s In Patagonia, provides an example of the juvenile travel imagination, made out of a witch’s brew of fiction and dream. Chatwin first planned on traveling to Patagonia as an illiterate child. In order to validate his boyhood conception of Patagonia, the adult Chatwin searches for fantastical mythology instead of the truth.

Jack London, in The Cruise of the Shark, is not really a traveler, but an adventurer. A childhood voyage gave London a taste for adrenaline, and his mid-life crisis cruise is an attempt to recapture that formative moment. Travel forces London to address the issue of hybridity. The connection between the travel imagination, travel, and hybridity will be a reoccurring theme in this thesis. London believes change and therefore hybridity is one of the advantages of the white race. He encounters no hybridized natives,

and believes the unadaptability of the Pacific Islanders makes them more prone to disease.

At times, The Happy Isles of Oceania, seems like a memoir of neurosis. Especially at the beginning of the account, Paul Theroux's emotions often stain his observations. But Theroux also can be a savvy traveler. Theroux associates travel with independence, and intervenes a number of times when he considers the freedom of the natives impinged. Contrary to his ideals, Theroux is a US exceptionalist. Theroux feels more comfortable with American cultural hegemony, than, for example, French cultural imperialism.

For Nirad Chaudhuri, A Passage to England, makes the questions of hybridity more unavoidable. Because he was trained as a child to be a hybrid by the British colonial administration in India, he's conflicted about his own hybridity. He genuinely loves certain facets of English culture, and is genuinely angered by British colonial history.

V.S. Naipaul, in The Enigma of Arrival, realizes, with discomfort, that the propaganda he was forced to learn as a child has matured into his travel imagination. Naipaul hopes that, by discrediting his travel imagination, he can, by extension, discredit the colonial institutions which promoted it. Since his travel imagination is actually quite accurate, Naipaul can only expose trivial flaws in it. The pettiness of Naipaul's complaints do not detract, however, from his legitimate grievances.

Bruce Chatwin and the Juvenile Travel Imagination

At the beginning of In Patagonia Bruce Chatwin describes,

“a small piece [of skin] only, but thick and leathery, with strands of coarse, reddish hair. It was stuck to a card with a rusty pin. On the card was some writing in faded black ink, but I was too young then to read [it]” (1).

The specimen of hide is mounted on a card, as scientific samples often are, and is displayed behind glass, as objects exhibited in a museum often are. The bit of hide in Chatwin’s grandmother’s living room therefore represents a scientific and curatorial collaboration, a powerful example of the interdisciplinary academia Chatwin was ignorant of when he was young. As I mentioned in the introduction, the travel imagination is commonly constructed in the company of many books. Because Chatwin’s travel imagination was created in an illiterate mind, In Patagonia is somewhat unique.

The beliefs of the younger Chatwin are comically wrong. He thinks, for instance that “the brontosaurus drowned in the Flood, being too big for Noah to ship aboard the Ark” (1), an idea both paleontologists and preachers could agree to laugh at. Chatwin says “I pictured a shaggy, lumbering creature with claws and fangs and malicious green light in its eyes” (1). The brontosaurus, now called the Apatosaurus, was a hairless herbivore with blunt, cow-like teeth, not a “shaggy,” aggressive creature with “fangs.” Perhaps it’s not such a big deal that Chatwin incorrectly imagined a dinosaur from the Jurassic period that’s been extinct for 140 million years. But Chatwin’s instinctual dismissal of contradictory information becomes habitual later in life. At school,

“they laughed at the story of the brontosaurus...[and Chatwin’s] science master said [Chatwin had] mixed it up with the Siberian mammoth...and told [him] not to tell lies...brontosaurus [the science master said] were reptiles [and] had no hair but scaly armored hide... [the science master] showed... an artist’s interpretation of the beast” (2).

Chatwin’s attitude towards his science teacher’s lesson rather instructively resembles Chatwin’s approach to travel in South America. In school, Chatwin watched his science teacher’s mouth move with some amusement, but did not believe any of the words coming out of it. Chatwin refuses to even consider the new facts being presented to him, preferring his original, faulty understanding.

Even as an adult, Chatwin’s conception of Patagonia is embarrassingly incorrect. For example, Chatwin believes Patagonia is “a country in South America, at the far end of the world” (1). In fact, Patagonia is a region including parts of Chile and Argentina. Patagonia isn’t a sovereign “country,” and hadn’t been in the 1970’s when Chatwin visited the area. A child as young as Chatwin was when he first saw the “brontosaurus” skin, could have been forgiven for referring to Patagonia as a country. But Chatwin, interestingly, seems to think that it’s alright to be as ignorant as a six year old when he’s, in fact, much older.

Chatwin admits that,

“Never in [his] life had [he] wanted anything as [he] wanted that piece of [allegedly brontosaurus] skin. [His] grandmother said [he] should have it one day, perhaps...[but] when she died...[his] mother said: ‘Oh, that thing! I’m afraid we threw it away’” (2).

Although Chatwin never explicitly says so, it seems he’s traveling through Patagonia in search of the piece of skin he lost. In Estancia Paso Raballos, for example, Chatwin is dreadfully bored by his picturesque surroundings. He amuses himself recording fairly

mundane details such as “in the salon a settee flaked patches of gilding to the floor” (84), and “the optimistic plumbing of half a century had collapsed and reeked of ammonia” (84)¹. Chatwin has little reason to be bored. One of the inhabitants of the house with the dilapidated furniture and deplorable plumbing, is a “gendarme...[assigned] to guard the frontier and detain sheep-smugglers” (84). But Chatwin doesn’t ask about the illegal trafficking of sheep, a subject which I at least find fascinating. Chatwin isn’t interested in the policeman’s more ridiculous beliefs either, not the “Vikings in the Brazilian jungle” (85), nor the “people of Mars [who] had landed in Peru and had taught the Incas the art of civilization” (85). Chatwin would rather, apparently, watch paint peel off the couch. If Chatwin’s so bored, why doesn’t he talk to the deliciously deluded man in front of him? And, if he’s not in the mood for conversation, why doesn’t he entertain himself by watching the storm engulfing the small house? As an aside, Chatwin mentions that, “hailstones battered the currant bushes of the garden” (84). Surely balls of ice plummeting from the sky are more interesting than old sofas. Since he’s surrounded by things that are odd enough to write about, Chatwin’s boredom seems not only unwarranted, but strange in itself.

Chatwin’s incomprehensible attitude is explained the following morning, when he’s informed a nearby mountainside was “where the fossils c[a]me from” (85). Suddenly

¹Nick Clapson, in his retrospective review of Chatwin, “In Search of the Miraculous” interprets such digressive descriptions as “introduc[tions] to the sights of exotic lands, vast parties of characters, all set free to live an existence untrammelled by the author’s irrepressible ego.” Clapson’s opinion rather neatly contradicts itself. If Chatwin’s ego is truly “irrepressible,” as Clapson correct observes, then the lands and characters Clapson cites must, by definition, be influenced by it. Chatwin’s ego is, paradoxically, present by its conspicuous absence. Since *In Patagonia* is dominated by what Clapson calls “ego” and I call “the travel imagination,” the lack of either, is, in fact, it’s own sort of commentary. Chatwin’s disinterested in details unrelated to his “travel imagination” precisely because his powerful “travel imagination” is distracted by its own concerns.

Chatwin's whole demeanor changes, and he's filled with purpose. Chatwin, "climb[s] up [the hillside], [and] shelter[s] behind a rock from the driving sleet" (85). Chatwin didn't need to scamper up slippery rocks in the middle of a sleet storm. But he did. Why? Well, it turns out that the notorious piece of skin in the glass cabinet was actually, "not a brontosaurus, but the mylodon or Giant Sloth" (2). Chatwin scaled the Argentinean cliffs, even though it was stupidly dangerous to do so in such furious weather, because he knew, a "Welshwoman in Sacramento [had] found mylodon bones [there]" (85). The ever-present bit of hide was the source of Chatwin's insanity, on the day in question, in the storm, on the cliff in Argentina.

Chatwin's fascination with the dinosaur is, in essence, a fascination with fiction². Although eventually Chatwin admits the brontosaurus was actually a Paramylodon Harlan, a member of an extinct line of mammal, Chatwin retains his taste for the probably untrue. Chatwin's preference for fiction is obvious, for example, when he "call[s] on Father Manuel Palacios" (71). Chatwin goes out of his way, to Comodoro Rivadavia, because he wants to hear some of the old man's entertaining and totally incorrect theories. Chatwin gets what he came for; fantastic fictions of the sort only partially insane people can come up with. Father Palacios believes, for instance, that "the Patagonian unicorn was contemporary with the extinct mega fauna of the Late Pleistocene" (73), and "in Patagonia, sentient beings in the Tertiary witnessed the formation of the Andes" (73). Chatwin's interest in this unlikely fantasy is

² Nick Clapson, for one, is tricked by Chatwin's skillfully counterfeited histories. He says "Chatwin weaves together curious observations with nuggets of historical information which manages to make this more than an account of a physical journey, and that, to me, is the essence of good travel writing." Clapson's complimentary opinion is based on the assumption that Chatwin's histories are reliable. In reality, what makes Chatwin's allegedly historical anecdotes "curious," is their fictional nature.

understandable, given how important his travel imagination is to him. The travel imagination, by definition, is necessarily a type of fiction. The traveler's conception of a place prior to arrival is never exactly correct. Chatwin's travel imagination, perhaps because it was born in an illiterate mind, is more flawed than most³. Because Chatwin is used to thinking of Patagonia as a fiction, he treats fictional ideas like Father Palacios's with more respect than they probably deserve. Chatwin says that while listening to Father Palacios talk, "the lecture melted into a dream voyage" (73), which sounds pleasant. When someone describes Father Palacios as "a genius" (74), Chatwin is nice enough not to contradict him. Chatwin, who knew from his experience at school how it felt to be told, "[you're] mixed up...[don't] tell lies" (2), seems to understand Father Palacios. Neither Father Palacios's Patagonia, with its fossilized unicorns, nor Chatwin's Patagonia, with its brontosauruses, actually resembles the real Patagonia.

³ In Patagonia Revisited, passages by Bruce Chatwin and Paul Theroux, rock stars of the travel genre, are arranged next to each other for better contrast. Theroux says, "I associate the word 'south,' with ... my first job... in the southern part of Nyasaland... there I could think straight, and began for the first time in my life to write" (11). Theroux's travel imagination, as it's expressed here, is firmly connected to "writing" (11), in particular, and literacy in general. Chatwin had much less education when he created his travel imagination. Also, the moment that sparked Theroux's travel imagination occurred, importantly, when he was twenty three, and also importantly, when he was overseas. Twenty-three year-olds are more inclined to apply themselves to the serious study than six-year-olds. As we'll see later in this thesis, travelers whose travel imaginations were formed at "home" tend to be more introspective. That said, Jack London, the next author in this thesis, is probably an exception to this rule.

Desiring Hybridity: Jack London

The Big Bang of Jack London's travel imagination took place when he was a teenager⁴. London describes the pivotal moment which "occurred when [he] was seventeen...in a three-masted schooner off the coast of Japan...in a typhoon" (3), as "the proudest achievement of [his] life, [his] moment of highest living" (3). London could have been sailing to the east of Japan, in the Pacific Ocean, but also could have been to the north, in the Sea of Okhotsk or to the west in the Sea of Japan. It's not clear which sea London almost drowned in when he was seventeen, but the emotional importance of the moment is obvious. Because he's not interested in traveling to a particular destination, London has a vague travel imagination. Two of the men London most admires, Roscoe, a yachtsman, and "Captain Slocum [who made a] three year voyage around the world in [his boat] the Spray" (1), wander with metaphorically broken compasses, as well. What travelers of Roscoe and Slocum's ilk love about travel is its

⁴ It's critically important not to confuse the following formative experience with other, seemingly similar bits of biographical information. As Mary Lawlor says, in Recalling the Wild, "London's inauspicious beginnings stood in dramatic contrast to the recognition and relative wealth that came to mark his adult life as a writer" (111). The story of London's life may be a rags-to-riches transformation of inspiring proportions. There is, arguably, a thematic equivalency between London's life and London's travel imagination, but this is coincidental. It doesn't matter if London's penchant for change was or was not instilled from childhood. It doesn't matter, if, as Lawlor says, London grew up in Oakland, which was, "a tough place in the 1890's, a haven for oyster pirates and wharf gangs" (111). London says his teenage voyage was "[his] moment of highest living" (3), and we must take his word for it. The travel imagination is not the product of some sort of subconscious Freudian memory. It's a personal, conscious, and in London's case, clearly articulated conviction.

unpredictability. In contrast to life at home, which can become routine, travel is the epitome of change. Even more significantly, perhaps, who you are when you're traveling is uncertain. About the typhoon off Japan, London says,

“I took the wheel. The sailing master watched me for a space. He was afraid of my youth, feared that I lacked the strength and nerve. But when he saw me successful wrestle the schooner through several bouts, he went below for breakfast” (4).

For London, the fraction of an hour he was allowed to hold the wheel was transformative. He changed from a nervous, incompetent, weak teenager into an able-bodied seaman. Of course, London felt important piloting “a hundred tons of wood and iron through a few million tons of wind and waves” (4). But what London really liked was the exhilaration of changing his identity.

Later, London says, “I'd rather win a water-fight in the swimming pool, or remain astride a horse that is trying to get out from under me, than write the great American novel” (3)⁵. London does not really regret being the bestselling author of such classics as The Call of the Wild. But he does seem to be frustrated with the monotony of his life in San Francisco. Designing and building a custom-made sailboat, named facetiously The

⁵ London's revelatory experience at sea pole-vaulted his literary career into solvency. John R. Eperjest, in The Imperialist Imaginary, says “[London's] career began aboard a sealing ship in 1893. Returning to San Francisco at the end of the year, he capitalized on the experience by writing an essay entitled “Typhoon Off the Coast of Japan,” which won first prize in a writing contest sponsored by a San Francisco newspaper” (107). This information only makes the above comment more enigmatic. London's authorial career and travel imagination have indisputably common roots. Why would London try to differentiate between the two? Eperjest's research suggests an explanation. He says “[the] vivid depictions of the chilly Alaskan climate [were] penned while London was sun-bathing in Pearl Harbor” (105). It seems possible that London was craving authenticity prior to his voyage. London knew just how fraudulent his fiction was, and was, perhaps, bothered by it. London's “Typhoon” essay, was based-on-a-true-story, while his bestsellers were not. The typhoon changed London. London seems to think non-fiction could change him again.

Shark, distracts London from his discontent for a while. The exciting exploits of the boat-building process take up most of the first thirty five pages of The Cruise. London seems to savor⁶ the many expensive problems he encounters.

“The seventy-horse-power engine went out of commission...[it had] come from New York; so did its bed plate; there were a lot of flaws in the bed-plate; and the seventy-horse-power engine broke away from its shattered foundations, reared up in the air, smashed all connections and fastenings, and fell over on its side...but what did it matter? Such things were mere accessories. There was the boat – she was all right, wasn’t she?”

An engine is an essential part, not a mere “accessory,” a fact that London surely knows. So why does London let himself laugh in the face of such an obstacle? I think it’s because the disaster was unanticipated and therefore exciting to London. The difficulties at the dry dock might not be as exciting as holding the helm of a boat in a storm at the impressionable age of seventeen, but at least they are new challenges. Already, London is becoming someone different. He’s no longer a writer, but a man who orders iron parts from New York.

Because, as I’ve already noted, London doesn’t have a “destination” per se, it’s particularly difficult to identify what “the Arrival” means in The Cruise of the Shark. London announces his departure on April 23 1907 with the simple pronouncement, “we sailed away on Tuesday morning” (27). After weighing anchor, London says, “we sailed out through the Golden Gate and set our course south toward that part of the Pacific

⁶ London’s masochistic enjoyment of the difficult boat-building process can, perhaps, be partially explained by his political tendencies. Mary Lawlor, in Recalling the Wild, says London, “read Marx...[and] delivered soapbox speeches...[and] shortly acquired the nickname of “Boy Socialist of Oakland” (115). As a Marxist, London must have had an aversion to money, and its associations. But while supervising The Shark’s building, London had to pay the salaries of workers, and hoard money for large expenditures. Basically, London had to become a capitalist. London found the novelty of this new position entertaining, I think.

where we could hope to pick up with the northeast trades” (27). London’s true objective is what the reliable breeze represents; propulsion. Since the sea is his destination, it takes London only the small slice of an hour to arrive. The time spent on the swaying deck of the moving ship, is essentially, for London, a period of assimilation. London adjusts to life amongst billowing white canvas, in much the same way an outsider adjusts to an unknown country. London’s travel imagination and reality conflict. London says,

“Right away things began to happen. I had calculated that youth was the stuff for a voyage...[but] my calculation was...off...I had forgotten to calculate on seasick youth...they immediately took to their bunks and that was the end of their usefulness for a week” (27-28).

The above passage demonstrates London’s energetic eagerness to admit his mistakes and immediately correct them. This attitude can be easily interpreted two ways, with diametrically opposed conclusions. London’s willingness to discard the assumptions he had about life at sea could indicate a healthy acceptance of reality. But I think there’s another, more convincing interpretation. As I previously mentioned, Change, in capital letters, is the motto of London’s travel imagination. London believes that travel is the thing you should do if you want to change. London expected to have his thinking changed during the course of his travels. London expected to be proven incorrect about something, if not the suitability of young men for ocean travel specifically. Somewhat counter-intuitively therefore, only a lack of surprise would be contrary to London’s expectations.

London has to learn how to use a sextant if he wants to transform himself into a legendary sailor like his idol, Slocum. There is, of course, the more fundamental question

of survival to consider; boats without navigators often sink. But London ignores the danger. He also ignores the advice of his friends, who, “objected, ‘how dare you go to sea without a navigator on board. You’re not a navigator, are you?’” (47). London is willing to risk his life, the life of his wife, and the life of his crew, in order to put himself in a situation where he’s forced to learn navigation. Instead of hiring someone comfortable using a ruler, a protractor, and a map, or learning to use those instruments himself, London relies on, “an agreement something like this: “[London will] furnish the books...and [his unreliable friend Roscoe] will study up on navigation [since London himself is]...to busy to study up on navigation. Then...[at] sea, [Roscoe] will teach [London] what [he] has learned” (49). It’s inevitable that this complicated scheme fails spectacularly. Instead of despairing, London is thrilled that he is lost at sea and spends, “one whole afternoon ...sit[ting] in the cockpit, steering with one hand, and studying logarithms with the other” (53). I’m unable to prove London created the situation that necessitated this happy afternoon on purpose. But I suspect he might have. Using, “the sextant, working out the index error and shot[ting] the sun” (53), under pressure is exactly the sort of experience that London came out to sea to enjoy.

“The taste of power I received drove me on [learning navigation]...Proud? No medicine man nor high priest was ever prouder...Proud? I was the worker of miracles...I was God’s messenger...I translated the high celestial speech in terms of their ordinary understanding” (56).

There’s only one other place in The Cruise of the Shark where London writes such happy hyperbole, and I’ve already discussed it. After struggling with the rudder with all the determination he could muster when he was seventeen, London says, “I [was] exulted...

glow[ing] all over...every fiber of me [was] thrilling with [pride]" (5). The main mission of London's travel imagination, to recapture the moment in the gale, has been accomplished. This means that the rest of the account describes travel which London had not even attempted to imagine. This sort of un-preconceived travel is very rare. Since Hawaii, Tahiti, and Bora Bora are not in London's travel imagination, he is predictably uninterested in them. This is perhaps the most extreme example⁷ of London's indifference;

"Tahiti is one of the most beautiful spots in the world but is inhabited by thieves and robbers and liars...therefore because of the blight cast upon Tahiti's wonderful beauty by the spidery human vermin that infest it, I am minded to write, not of Tahiti" (181).

London's travel imagination does come back to visit on a few momentous occasions. London possesses, for instance, a travel imagination concerning a man named Earnest Darling who London saw strolling down Market Street in San Francisco one foggy afternoon. Darling, London says, "was a tawny man, a golden tawny man, all glowing and radiant with the sun... ah, me, Ernest Darling, sun-worshipper and nature man... I...envy you and your carefree existence" (197). I feel obliged to point out that the

⁷ Eperjest says, "a wide range of critical affect [about London] stems from the fact that the most coherent thing that can be said about London is that his writings... are full of contradictions" (105). It's true that some of London's comments, like the harsh one about Tahiti quoted above, seem markedly different from London's usual compassionate enthusiasm for travel. But London's mood swings are scarcely contradictory, as Eperjest asserts. London is far more forgiving about things under the purview of his travel imagination. For example, London overlooks Darling's childhood of convalescence although he's repulsed by sick Marquesians. This is because London aspires to Darling-like hybridity. The islanders aren't part of London's travel imagination, so London tends to revert to what Eperjest calls, "the doctrines of Anglo-saxon masculinist supremacy" (105), which were common at the time.

“carefree existence” (197), London attributes to Darling, London himself experienced in the typhoon that’s the cornerstone of London’s travel imagination. London’s admiration for Mr. Darling, therefore, is entirely consistent with his wanderlust.

In Tahiti, London reacquaints himself with Darling. London refers to Darling as “The Nature Man” and the indigenous people as “The Nature Men,” a semantic similarity meant to emphasize a fundamental connection. Darling “wears only a loin-cloth” (189), “[and] live[s]...[on] a natural diet, the open air, and the blessed sunshine” (186), like the islanders. Like the Tahitians, Darling knows how to encourage local plants to grow. London says, out of “the fertile, volcanic soil [Darling]...gr[ew] five hundred coconut trees, five hundred papaya trees, three hundred mango trees, [and] many breadfruit trees” (191). Although it’s genetically impossible, Darling seems to have inherited the optimism Tahitians are known for. Like the smiling Tahitian girl, who, in 1768, climbed onto the deck of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville’s ship in the nude, Darling “believes he is in the world for the purpose of being happy, and...has not a moment to waste in any other pursuit” (193).

It may initially seem strange that London adores Darling, who is in so many ways similar to the Tahitians London thoroughly despises. In a passage I’ve previously presented, London describes the aboriginal people of Tahiti as “thieves and robbers and liars... spidery human vermin” (181). Since Darling, by all indications, shares most of the natives’ habits, customs, and beliefs, it must be the single characteristic that differentiates Darling from his neighbors that appeals to London. Darling is a white man, like London, who, like London, has lived in San Francisco for a period of time. The Darling-that-was, a sick man who for “twelve years lay close to death” (182), in a bed in Oregon, was

undeniably different from the Darling-that-is, who has “perfect health” (189). Darling’s “marvelous” (182), life seems to prove that complete transformations are possible. This evidence is extremely encouraging to London, who wants to complete his own metamorphosis from writer to sailor.

Darling, of course, is a clear example of an American/ Tahitian hybrid. But there are no Tahitians with western sensibilities in The Cruise of the Shark. London thinks the inability of Pacific islanders to change is an extremely serious liability. London says,

“Natural selection, however, give[s] the explanation [for the prevalence of leprosy and elephantiasis in the Marquesas]. We of the white race are the survivors and descendants of the thousands of generations of survivors in the war with microorganisms...we who are alive are immune, the fit – the ones best constituted to live in a world of hostile microorganisms. The poor Marquesans had undergone no such selection (170).”

Change, according to London, is a preventive measure that keeps disfiguring diseases at bay. Travel, as I stressed in the introduction, tends to make the traveler more aware of hybridity. That generalization is certainly true for Jack London. By definition, an American who becomes more like a non-American is a sort of hybrid. London’s overpowering desire to become a capable captain is particularly suggestive given the Pacific islander’s traditional aptitude for sailing, the skill London is attempting to master. London is changing, like Darling did, into a Tahitian, if to a lesser degree. And London feels rejuvenated by the change.

Paul Theroux: The Advocate For and Against Change

Theroux starts his book, The Happy Isles of Oceania, with the disclosure:

“My wife and I separated on a winter day in London and we were both miserable...we both thought ‘what now?’...it was the most sorrowful of goodbyes...I tried to console myself by saying ‘this is like going on a journey,’ because a journey can be either your death or your transformation, though on this one I imagined I would just keep living a half-life” (17).

Many of the worst metaphors in recorded history revolve around the revolting idea that life is like travel. Theroux, I think, can be forgiven for this literary atrocity given the recent failure of his marriage. One of the occupational hazards of being a travel writer is a tendency to describe all of life’s confusions with the allegory of travel⁸. But Theroux’s reflexive use of the “journey of life” theory demonstrates just how self-centered a traveler he is at the beginning of The Happy Isles.

In New Zealand, Theroux tries to distract himself from his own sadness by visiting “the edge of...fiordland” (25). Somehow, the sight of, “one of the world’s last wildernesses” (25), manages to remind Theroux of his imminent divorce. Like the

⁸ Theroux partially redeems himself by acknowledging this danger, and his susceptibility to it. In Patagonia Revisited, a travel book he co-wrote with Bruce Chatwin, Theroux says, “it’s only... in travel, that one understands that the greatest distance inspires the greatest illusions, and that solitary travel is both a pleasure and a penalty” (12). Theroux’s separation from his wife seems to be emphasized and exacerbated by geographical separation. At the beginning, the word “happy,” in the title of Theroux’s book seems almost sarcastic.

professional traveler he is, Theroux conscientiously describes the history of the area, with bland statements like;

“It was once so safe [in fiordland] that the birds lost their sense of danger, and without enemies, some stopped flying – among them, the flightless New Zealand goose and the Fiordland crested penguin, now extinct” (25).

But Theroux seems more interested in making biblically-flavored, enigmatic comments such as;

“a thousand years ago, before the arrival of any humans, it was like the world before the Fall” (25).

This reference to the old testament is particularly surprising because Theroux is normally a rather militant atheist. Theroux seems to have cultivated an interest in religion in order to resolve the uncertainties raised by the failure of his marriage. The night before Theroux entered Fiordland, he made an ill-conceived telephone call to his wife.

“I...told her what an awful time I was having. We both cried. She was miserable, she said. I said, So was I!

‘But it’s better we stay apart,’ she said. Then she begged me to stop calling her” (23).

New Zealand was, Theroux implies, The Garden of Eden, until “humans passed through [leaving] many of their animals behind...their foreign animals [bringing] a... chaos to Fiordland” (26). In other words, according to Theroux’s version of Genesis, the original sin of man had nothing to do with desirable fruit, and had everything to do with travel.

Let me repeat that; the original sin was travel. Because Theroux is “passing

through...Fiordland” (26), Theroux is at least partially to blame for humanity’s banishment from paradise, according to his own logic.

When Theroux sets off down The Routeburn Track, he stops creating strange self-incriminating metaphors based on major world religions. He says,

“There is an intense but simple thrill in setting off in the morning on a mountain trail...entering a world of natural beauty which has not been violated...even my recently gloomy mood...lifted” (27).

This passage directly contradicts Theroux’s earlier belief that “humans passing through” (26), had pillaged Fiordland. Travelers could not have been responsible for wrecking nature that, Theroux admits, “ha[d] not been violated” (27). Travel, in other words, according to Theroux’s new, revised thinking, is no longer a sin but instead a kind of joy. This, of course, is a much healthier attitude for a travel writer to have. Theroux’s hike along The Routeburn Track also marks a change in Theroux’s travel imagination. Theroux switches his previous travel imagination, based on the fatuous idea that, “goodbyes...[are] like going on a journey” (17), with a different, older travel imagination which Theroux describes like this;

“From the age of nine or ten, when I first began [traveling], I have associated [travel]... with personal freedom” (28).

For much of The Happy Isles of Oceania, Theroux oscillates between these two travel imaginations, which are almost binary opposites. As a result, his opinions are fairly hard to predict. In one travel imagination, travel is a sin, and in the other, it’s redemptive.

Because the travel imagination directly influences perceptions of hybridity, Theroux's attitude towards hybrid figures tends to be dramatically inconsistent as well.

Arguably most of the cultural hybrids in the South Pacific are Christian converts. I'm not, incidentally, the one who argues this; Theroux's the one who's obsessed with the subject. At the beginning of his travels through The Happy Isles of Oceania, Theroux meets John.

"John said that he was from Alotau and that God had sent him here to Kaisiga – which was the name of this village. This was a very fortuitous choice on the part of the Almighty because it so happened that John's wife, Esther, was from the next village, Bulakwa, just along the coast" (117).

In the above passage, Theroux seems bemused by John's admittedly rather ridiculous proclamation of faith. When John says, "I spent many years as a blind man....then I became a Seventh Day Adventist and I learned to see" (117), Theroux is nice enough not to laugh out loud, and manages to say, "I have to think...over [converting to SDA]...it's a pretty big decision in a person's life" (118). Theroux's good humor is uncharacteristic, given the history of SDA, which Theroux later demonstrates he's familiar with.

Seventh Day Adventism is a Christian denomination that was created by the Millerites who lived in upstate New York in the early 1800's and, believed, among other things, that Jesus Christ would return to earth on October 22, 1844. Theroux says,

"I expected... a dim-dim in a black frock [to be the Seventh Day Adventist missionary] but instead I was greeted by a Trobrinader in a T-shirt and a bathing suit" (117).

“Dim-dim,” a word which supposedly means “white man, “ has thus far in The Happy Isles only been used to refer to, “that white American named Paul Theroux” (117).

Theroux’s use of the word to describe the missionary therefore seems potentially meaningful. Theroux could be trying to speak more like a native. Or Theroux could be using “dim-dim” to express his assumption that the missionary will certainly be white, perhaps American, and maybe a lot like him. John, who is a Trobrinader, but has a dim-dim’s job, is obviously a hybrid figure. Because, as I mentioned before, travelers tend to be uniquely sensitive to hybridity, Theroux is immediately fascinated by John.

Theroux describes his arrival in the Trobriands in the following passage;

“I came to a white sandy beach, protected by a pair of cutting cliffs. There were green parrots in the trees, a big eagle overhead, and terns strafing the lagoon. There were no human footprints, no lizard tracks, and it looked like a perfect camping place” (116).

Theroux appreciates the light color of the beach’s sand, and seems favorably impressed with the quality of the local bird-watching. But it’s the fact that, “there were no human footprints” (116), that prompts Theroux endorse the beach as “a perfect camping place” (116). There’s a specific kind of footprint that Theroux’s particularly worried about finding in the sand; a foreign footprint. Theroux’s aversion to any kind of foreign influence is, of course, expected, given his earlier expressed, “hatred [of] foreign animals” (26). When Theroux sees “two bare breasted women paddling” (116), by the beach, he smiles, and forgives them for interrupting the beautiful solitude he was enjoying⁹. Theroux doesn’t “hate” the women, because they live in a “nearby village not

⁹ Eric Hansen, in his review of The Happy Isles of Oceania in “The New York Times” calls such moments manifestations of “the myth of paradise.” Hansen says this “myth”

marked on [Theroux's] chart" (116), and are therefore indigenous. The fact that they live in a place no westerner has marked on a map before is particularly encouraging to Theroux, because it's evidence that the village dominated by "a little thatched pavilion at the end of a pier" (116), has been uninfluenced by foreigners. Theroux actually compares his arrival in the village with Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski's writings of the "typical reception[s] in the Trobriands" (116). At first, it seems that the Trobriands hadn't changed since Malinowski's visit eighty years before. Then Theroux meets John, the SDA missionary. John's existence is rather unequivocal evidence that the outside world has been tampering with the Trobriands.

Though John is not an animal, and isn't really foreign either, he still represents the disruptive outside influence that the "foreign animals" (26), did in New Zealand. Theroux admitted to "hat[ing]"(26), the foreign animals, so why doesn't he hate John, who's the Trobriands' metaphorical equivalent? It's a difficult question. Perhaps Western Christianity has been so thoroughly misinterpreted, that Theroux recognizes its Trobriand manifestation as a discrete system of belief. The story of the village's conversion is so bizarre that it's entertaining.

was "discovered by early explorers (Louis Antoine de Bougainville and Captain Cook); embellished by writers, artists and travelers (Robert Louis Stevenson, Herman Melville, Paul Gauguin, Jack London, Somerset Maugham and James Michener)." Theroux would probably be flattered to placed in such famous company, even though there's no good reason to associate Theroux with this group. Hansen says, "now it is the islanders who wear pants and go to church while the visitors lie naked in the sun and play at being noble savages." While this comment is pleurably glib, it's way too simplistic. Theroux doesn't make a concerted effort to be like a native. Although Theroux admires certain indigenous customs, he also cherishes his freedom of movement; in other words, his ability to leave. The natives have not transformed themselves into Westerners as fully as Hansen implies either. Although many of them do, "go to church," as Hansen says, their type of worship is a particularly effective form of defiance.

“This village was United Church once. But one morning...a very big whale washed onto the beach...[and] the chief of the village had a dream. In the dream a voice...said, “[this is] not physical food, but spiritual food...so [the whale was]...buried... Then [the village] invited the Adventists and [John] was sent...to lead them” (121).

The chief of the village played the part of a prophet for a moment, so he was able to retain his traditional leadership role without being undermined by missionaries. Instead of competing with western Christians for the allegiance of the people, the chief skillfully manipulated the powerful appeal of Christianity to boost his own authority. The chief’s tacit acceptance of SDA theology, and his “invit[ation]” (121), dulled the SDA’s proselytizing. If the chief had asserted his heathenness, the evangelical group might have sent its most fanatical members to scare the villagers into accepting Christ into their souls. But because of the chief’s disingenuous conversion, the SDA sent only John, an exceptionally ineffective missionary, as their representative. John stands by, doing mostly nothing, and occasionally muttering, “the bible says that your body is the temple of god” (120), during the Yam festival, a “tug-of-war” (120), with vines that concludes with “boys and girls...fornicat[ing] on the grass” (120). Theroux grins when he learns of the Yam Festival, not because he’s a pervert who enjoys watching ritualized orgies, but because the Yam Festival is an example of traditional culture. The Yam Festival is triple X-rated evidence that Christianity in general and John in particular was unable to change Trobriand culture.

The persistence of the Yam Festival represents more than just the survival of an ancient custom. It represents how much a community is willing to change in order to preserve their past. Although the village has retained the right to have causal sex on the beach, it now is woken by “the banging of [a] drum...[at] five-thirty in the morning”

(121), on Sunday. During one sermon John “read some verses from the bible” (121), and interpreted them, explaining that “[the wine referred to a passage] was not alcoholic wine. It was pure wine. It was, let us say, something like grape juice” (121). The alcoholic content of the wine that may or may not have been drunk thousands of years ago is not a question of religious importance. John seems more like an Alcoholics Anonymous facilitator than a missionary. His message, basically “the bible does not condone drunkenness,” is secular, not religious. The Trobrinanders have managed to avoid being assimilated into a religion. But the islanders still have to be subjected to John’s public service announcements. The islanders, because they hear Jesus Christ mentioned every Sunday, share a weekly ritual with many people in the West. But this hybrid aspect of their lives is negligible. They accepted a little of the West in order to reject a lot of the West. Theroux likes this sort of cultural pragmatism, because it’s similar to a traveler’s ritual of arrival. A good traveler must learn to limit his/her degree of cultural adaptation. If a traveler assimilates too completely, it may be difficult for them to leave.

Theroux reiterates his approval of “defiant hybridity,” in Vanuatu. In Vanuatu, the “kastom” (194), religion, not Christianity, is used to explain everything. Theroux’s love of kastom culture is immediately and overwhelmingly effusive. Before he knows enough about “kastom” (194), to begin to judge it, Theroux says, “I found the whole [kastom] setup heartening, muddy buttocks and all” (194). What Theroux likes about kastom, and the only thing Theroux really understands about kastom, is that it was “totally traditional and wished to remain so” (194). Theroux approves of what kastom symbolically

represents, which essentially, is the same thing the Yam Festival represented; cultural independence.

The kastom village is within walking distance of a group of missionaries. Theroux has a not entirely paranoid fear of these missionaries, one of whom had, “told [Theroux] ..., stories of how he had been a violent and wicked sinner...[which Theroux] took as a warning that he would do terrible thing to [Theroux] if [Theroux] didn’t listen to him” (191). Theroux says, “the missionaries might get it into their heads that I was the incarnation of the Antichrist and drive a bamboo stake through my heart” (191). The kastom people, who are about to be invaded by these religious berserkers, seem vulnerable, and Theroux has a rather saintly urge to protect them. Theroux’s assumption, that the kastom people are in need of champion, is certainly understandable. The “small knob-headed blacks with short legs and big dusty feet...some of them...the nakedest [Theroux] had been the whole Pacific” (192), couldn’t even manage to clothe themselves acceptably. Nakedness in the west is often synonymous with vulnerability, and the “men and boys [were wearing only] little pubic bunches of grass...about the size and shape of whisk brooms...over their dicks” (192).). These people clearly need to be “saved” from the missionaries, who had done “terrible things” (191), and might do terrible things in the future. Theroux, standing between the missionaries and their potential converts, is in a position to prevent the west from changing the Pacific. Theroux is eagerly anticipating his argument with the missionaries on behalf of the natives. That’s why it’s so disappointing when a villager says “the missionaries might come...but we have different ways. We go our own kastom way” (194). The islander, essentially, is informing

Theroux, on behalf of his village, that Theroux's help is not needed. Theroux feels ridiculous for fretting about the durability of native culture so needlessly. Theroux says,

“All this time the snotty-nosed boys laughed among themselves and the dripping men murmured and passed the kava. And I crouched with them, making notes. I was wetter than they, and more uncomfortable, because I was wearing clothes and I was soaked. Their nakedness made complete sense” (194).

What's interesting about the above passage is the sense that Theroux's laughing at himself. A shack with a leaking roof and a muddy floor is not the sort of place you should attempt to write in. Theroux's stubborn note-taking is amusing in its futility. Also, the incongruous juxtaposition of a tall white man earnestly scribbling in a notebook while small muddy men drink themselves numb with the narcotic liquids, is inherently humorous. Theroux's sadly funny failure to fit in is significant, because it marks a shift in the discussion of hybridity in The Happy Isles. Most of the previous hybrid figures have been non-westerners, but, in the above quote, it's Theroux's hybridity that's emphasized. To distance himself from the missionaries he despises, Theroux spends much of the Vanuatu chapter identifying with the natives. The title of the chapter, “Cannibals and Missionaries” (188), seems to imply that everyone in Vanuatu falls in one of two categories. By default, because he abhors the missionaries, Theroux allies himself with the cannibals. In fact, Theroux goes to the kastom village in order to avoid the missionaries who shared his “three-room bamboo hut” (186), in the White Grass Village. Theroux hikes to Yakel Village, and hopes the natives will accept him. But the natives are disappointingly indifferent on the subject of missionaries, a subject Theroux cares passionately about. Theroux is “uncomfortable”(194), in the rain, but the villagers

“laugh” (194), and use drugs to better enjoy the wetness around them. Theroux is unable to comfortably assimilate into the Vanuatu village.

Generally, Theroux disapproves of native hybrids, while aspiring to hybridity himself. This contradiction is repeated in Imanaka. Imanaka, which Theroux calls “The Oddest Island in Vanuatu” (201), is the home of a cult that worships a “Floridian [named] Jon Frum...[who] appeared in 1943...proclaimed himself ‘King of America’...and had a airfield cleared on the north of the island, so that his cargo planes...would have a place to land” (203). John Frumism is a cult, and Christianity is a religion, but that small semantic distinction is only meaningful on the mainland. In the Pacific, Christianity and John Frumism are barely distinguishable types of insanity. It is, perhaps, just as logical to worship a US air force quartermaster as it is to worship an Israeli carpenter. In terms of our discussion, both Jon and Jesus are foreign influences. Since both Frum and Christ undermine traditional culture in exactly the same way, logically Theroux should despise each of the personas with equal fervor.

Although John Frumism initially seems like the product of a forgotten US propaganda campaign, its connection to America is actually quite coincidental. Theroux explains,

“The notion was that since Jon Frum was American, [that] cargo would come from America, and mixed up in this iconography of the red cross and the mysterious vanishing American was the Stars and Stripes. In some villages the American flag was flown often” (203).

Although the inspiration for Frumism came from the US, insane people from Vanuatu created the nonsensical religion, not insane people from America. Since Frumism is

indigenous craziness, not imported craziness, it can reasonably be characterized as a local religion. In many ways it is similar to the sort of Christianity practiced in the Triobriands; foreign in appearance only.

In Sulfur Bay, Theroux says, “I was reminded of how dreary such a village could seem, and this was – dusty and flyblown and poor, clinging to its belief in Jon Frum – sadder than most I had seen” (203). The village was “obviously poverty stricken” (201), sure, but poverty should not have been surprising given usual squalor of the region. The kastom village, for example, was also lamentably poor. The word “clinging” invokes a sense of infantile helplessness, which is oddly wrong for the situation. The villagers are, “hungry people [who might]... behave unpredictably...they might get it in their head[s] to kill [Theroux] and eat [Theroux’s] shoes” (202). Despite the danger, Theroux manages to say, “what a delightful village it was and happy I was to be in it” (202).

I think it’s the sight of Old Glory that prompts Theroux to “g[ive] to people who were hospitable” (204), some “fishhooks and spear points and trinkets and scarves” (204). The Imanakans were not hospitable in the normal sense of the word; they didn’t give Theroux food, and they didn’t invite Theroux inside their homes. Theroux is generous with the presents he normally conserves, not because the Imanakans deserve the gifts, but because Theroux feels obliged. The American flag flapping on a pole in the center of the village makes the US symbolically responsible for community. The village, is not “sadly” poor compared to other Pacific villages. It’s only “sadly” poor compared to the territories of the United States of America. In the Frumist village, Theroux reveals a loophole in his travel imagination. He condemns foreign influence in all its forms, except when the United States is doing the influencing.

Theroux admits that colonialism is a crime, but thinks the US should be tried as a minor in the court of public opinion. All the US is guilty of, according to Theroux, is “handing over roughly seventy-five million dollars to American Samoa” (346). Theroux describes the islands as “carefree and bounteous” (346), and the islanders as “hoggishly contented” (346). There are problems with American Samoa, but the United States isn’t legally liable for them, according to Theroux. For example, “politically [the American Samoan government] is perhaps a kleptocracy” (346). According to Theroux, stealing is a traditional Samoan custom that’s also practiced in Western Samoa, where people are “light-fingered, quoting the Bible while they pick your pocket” (320). Now, with American “intravenous, dripping cash” (346), the American Samoans simply have more to steal. US currency, according to Theroux, is proof of America’s benevolence. The “per capita income in Western Samoa was \$580 a year; in America Samoa it was almost ten times that” (346). But tradition was preserved by poverty in Western Samoa; “women at dawn...wash[ed] their clothes and themselves at the edge of the Faleala River” (347), and “houses in Western Samoa [were] true fales” (347). America, in contrast, has created a colony of hybrids, where

“an American Samoan can revert from being a fat guy in a Bart Simpson T-shirt, with a can of Coke Classic in his hand, watching the Super Bowl; and at moment’s notice, turn into a big dark fire-breathing islander, confounding you with obscure incantations and unfathomable customs” (347).

This hypothetical American Samoan is, in a sense, the perfect hybrid, as pathetic as an American and as frightening as a Samoan.

It's interesting that Theroux is happy for, "fat jolly people [of American Samoa], with free money, having a wonderful time" (347), because Theroux's generally more conflicted about hybrid figures. For example, in Queensland, north of Cairns, Theroux met a man whose name was, well, "you can call me Tony" (87). Tony, "a small grubby man" (84), was living off the land with his "dejected-looking dog" (84). The aboriginals, in contrast, had moved into "the lower-middle class English suburban culture" (69). In a sense, Tony was the last aboriginal. And he had a British accent. Theroux says,

"somehow, even standing barefoot in his beachcomber's camp on the shore of an Aboriginal reserve in north Queensland, it did not seem so off that he should express his writing ambition. After all, I had the same ambition and I was barefoot and whisky too" (86).

Not only are Tony and Theroux both lost in the wild, they are both lost on purpose. But Theroux does not embrace Tony as his long lost twin brother. Theroux calls Tony a "tramp...[like] many of the homeless men [Theroux] had run across in London – the ones who slept on the common land outside London" (88). There's nothing admirable about a man asking for a few spare pence please. Theroux forgets about Tony as easily as a commuter forgets about the beggars sitting on the subway steps with their hands outstretched. Theroux immerses himself in his "nightly ritual: drinking tea, writing...notes...[listening] to radio programs from distant lands" (89). Tony, the hybrid, is too pathetic to think about, apparently.

Theroux gets far more upset about the "frenchified" (361), island of Tahiti. Perhaps it makes sense that the island of love, Tahiti, should speak the language of love, French. Or perhaps not. Theroux says,

“It is true that America has overwhelmed its own territory in Samoa and made it a welfare state...[but]...there is no profit in Samoa for us. But Polynesia is all profit for the French; they need that land and the distance to capitalize on world air routes for French airlines...and – most... of all – they need nuclear testing facilities for their arms industry. As an old-fashioned colony it is a racket. The French effort is devoid of idealism” (361).

It’s hard to know what Theroux means by “idealism.” Whatever it means, America, in Samoa, has retained its idealism, according to Theroux. The French, Theroux says, “are among the most self-serving, manipulative, trivial-minded, obnoxious, cynical, and corrupting nations on the face of the earth” (363).

In one of his lucid moments between insults, Theroux says, “[the French] planted themselves in the islands and consistently discriminated against Polynesians and refused to learn their language” (363). The issue of language is important. The French “refused to learn...language[s]” (363), but Theroux is a lingua-ophile . On every island, Theroux writes down various important words, like “woman”, “boat” and “sea,” so he see how local languages and dialects are related. Theroux respects languages; that’s Theroux’s most un-french-like characteristic. By the coast, Theroux says “most Tahitian bungalows had signs saying TABU, which needed no translation, and the French houses had security cameras and signs saying ATTENTION CHIEN MECHANT! (Beware of Fierce Dog!)” (362). The way Theroux differentiates between these two languages he doesn’t really understand is fascinating. The Tahitian word, “tabu,” which sounds the same as the English corruption “taboo,” means basically the same thing as “attention chien merchant;” that is “keep out.” Theroux says the Tahitian word, “need[s] no translation” (362), but the French phrase apparently does need translation...because Theroux translates it for us. It’s strange that Theroux translates “attention” which is a word in both French

and English with the exact same meaning. Between the two words, “tabu” and “attention,” only “attention” literally needs no translation. “Tabu” needs to be translated into “taboo.” Admittedly, the meaning of “chein merchant” might not be immediately obvious to an English speaker, at least not until the big-toothed, saliva-dripping dog starts barking. But Theroux’s intention is clear. Theroux is trying to establish a linguistic connection between English and Tahitian.

The trajectory of Theroux’s verbal attacks could easily be changed to an American target. Most of Theroux’s major complaints with France are equally applicable to the United States. It’s hard to criticize the French for blowing up coral and cute brightly colored fish when you come from the country that dropped “Little Boy” on Hiroshima. But Theroux doesn’t mention any of these commonly known facts. Theroux’s criticism of America is much more subtle¹⁰. Despite his extensive traveling, Theroux cannot bring himself to admit the downsides of American-influenced hybridity¹¹.

¹⁰ This sort of US Exceptionalism has a long, if not necessarily honorable tradition. Eperjest, in The Imperialist Imaginary, noticed the same tendency in Jack London’s writings. London’s “expression of admiration” (106), for Hawaii is notably different from London’s usual disdain for similar Pacific Islands, Eperjest says. Eperjest implies London’s comment, “I love [Hawaii]. I love [Hawaiians]” (106), was made out of patriotic duty, not actual conviction. If Eperjest’s is right, London’s feelings for Hawaii are similar to Theroux’s feelings about American Samoa. Both London and Theroux displace their love of America onto American protectorates.

¹¹ Eric Hansen, in his review of The Happy Isles of Oceania in “The New York Times” thinks Theroux’s complaints are relatively equivalent, that “the cynicism is dealt out evenly.” But the examples Hensen uses to prove the lack of US exceptionalism are misleading. Hensen cites a passage in which Theroux compared cannibalism to French colonialism, and then includes the following excerpt; “Mormonism was like junk food: It was American to the core and it looked all right, but it wasn't until after you had swallowed some that you felt strange.” Other than the fact that both include images of eating, there are hardly any similarities between the two passages. As I hope I’ve made sufficiently clear, political control is very different than religious conversion in the Pacific. The natives are better able to resist religion, including American forms of

Theroux wants to believe his journey, and by extension, his life, caused no permanent damage. And perhaps it didn't. But the impact of many travelers like Theroux can be felt, and seen, regardless of the rationalizations of Theroux's travel imagination.

Christianity. Theroux does have a fairly uncharitable view of Mormonism, it's true, but compared to French colonialism, Mormonism is almost harmless, Theroux thinks.

Nirad Chaudhuri: The Nervous Transnational

Chaudhuri's A Passage to England is fundamentally about hybridity. But Chaudhuri buries the issue deep in his rather innocuous notes on British tourism. When the subject of hybridity is raised more directly, Chaudhuri laughs uneasily. For example, when "a friend of [Chaudhuri], a Bengali, told [him]... 'even [the English] shoe-blacks think they are our masters'" (123). Chaudhuri says he "laughed out loud"(123), a strange reaction given the difficult colonial history between England and India. Chaudhuri, knowing that he needs to explain his giggling, says, "to me, both the question and the reaction to it seemed so typical...but the attempts I made to persuade my friend to take a less lurid view of the matter failed entirely"(123). Chaudhuri, in other words, acts like an Englishman, who laughs at the vestiges of colonialism, and tries to persuade others that imperialist remainders aren't such a big deal.

While investigating the Anglo-Indian stereotype of the "John Bull" in modern England, Chaudhuri internalizes the definitions of "Indian", "African" and "English." For example, as "[Chaudhuri] was coming out of the Canterbury cathedral [he] observed a little English boy of about six sitting on the grass looking at [him] with an intense gaze, like a lion cub watching a distant zebra"(118). Chaudhuri is describing a boy, who, like all other children his age, has large eyes and an even larger sense of curiosity. But Chaudhuri is also describing a lion, an animal which, not coincidentally at all, represents England on Britain's coat of arms. The boy who "cries with a sharp treble"(118), does not roar like a great cat, and therefore the comparison is ridiculous, and funny, at least to certain sensibilities. On one hand, Chaudhuri is making fun of the country pompous

enough to use the king of the beasts as their symbol. But on the other hand, the comparison is somewhat apt. Chaudhuri describes the boy's gaze as "intense" (118). If the boy is like a lion cub, Chaudhuri, in terms of the metaphor, is certainly the "distant zebra" (118), who, though not immediately in danger, is obviously the prey. Zebras can easily outrun juvenile lions, or bludgeon them with their hooves. Chaudhuri, even in the logic of his metaphor, is safe, and yet he still feels threatened; "this was the moment for me to scream" (118), he says. It's the gaze from the Lion of England, that makes him uncomfortable, and the words from the maw of the Lion of England, "You're from Africa" (118), that make him want to scream. This moment, in front of Canterbury Cathedral, is a somewhat silly but still serious reenactment of British Colonialism in India. The English came, defined the Indians incorrectly, and the Indians wanted to scream.

Chaudhuri's reaction to this metaphorical replaying of history, "no, [I'm] from India"(118), seems straightforwardly patriotic. But, though Chaudhuri is quite proud to say "I'm from India"(118), he realizes his small salute to the saffron, white and green is not really meaningful. After all, a middle aged, well educated man cannot engage in a meaningful debate about colonialism with a "mischievous little child" (118). Although metaphorically, the stakes are high, in reality, the moment is meaningless. Despite this, Chaudhuri does seem a little bothered that the "little fellow...clearly felt that he had succeeded in teasing [him]" (118). Metaphorically, it seems, the little six year-old English ambassador had somehow won concessions from Chaudhuri.

Chaudhuri retells another, similar story of mistaken identity. A French workman asks, "monsieur est anglais?" (119). Chaudhuri's response is exactly the same as it had

been in England, except this time, in French; “Mais non, indien” (119), he says. The Frenchman’s accusation is damaging, considering being, “pro-British... is one of the worst terms of abuse in contemporary India” (9), according to Chaudhuri. If being pro-British is so bad, imagine how horrendous it would be to be mistaken as British. Essentially, what Chaudhuri’s talking about is assimilation. Chaudhuri feels anxious in both situations, ready “to scream”(118), in one, and actually “run[ning] away” (119), in the other. Just as colonialism was the contentious issue of the past, assimilation is the difficulty of the present.

Unlike colonialism, Chaudhuri is ambivalent about assimilation. Although he can say, “I’m Indian” in many languages, including English, French, and, presumably Bengali, Chaudhuri seems to enjoy being included in English society. Chaudhuri is proud when one Englishwoman writes, “everyone was pleased to have met you, especially as you fell in with all our habits and customs as if you had lived among us for years”(119). Someone who, “fell in with all [the English] habits and customs”(119), and enjoyed those habits and customs, could easily, and correctly be called, “pro-British.” But Chaudhuri clearly doesn’t see the time he spent “in the house of [his] friend in the outskirts of London” (119), this way. If he did, he would have no doubt “r[u]n away” (119), yelling “I’m Indian.”

Chaudhuri’s forced to disclose his identity in culturally significant locations. For example, the little English boy confronts Chaudhuri outside Canterbury Cathedral, a cultural landmark which happens to be in England but is universally recognized beyond the United Kingdom. The Canterbury Cathedral could possibly be considered an example of what Fakrul Alam in Writers of the Indian Diaspora calls, “the best in English

civilization” (45). Chaudhuri, it seems, thought so. He, after all, went on a pilgrimage to see the church. Alam says, “Chaudhuri’s mother knew no English, but she... influenced him intellectually, introducing him to, among others, Shakespeare whom she had read in Bengali translation”(45). Chaudhuri, in his essay “England,” is not shy about expressing his admiration for Shakespeare. Canterbury, the town of, and the cathedral in, are constantly referred to in Shakespeare’s work. Chaudhuri’s reaction to the literary landmark with the crosses on top is dramatically different from Chaudhuri’s reaction to the boy. It seems to be true that, as Alam says, Chaudhuri distinguishes between England the place, and England, the source of culture. But Chaudhuri’s confrontation with the boy in Canterbury is evidence that no such distinction can be made. Canterbury was both a place that inspired Shakespeare, and an imperialist center. Perhaps Chaudhuri realized this. Perhaps he realized his love of English culture could not be neatly reconciled with his hatred of English imperialism. Perhaps that was why he “ran away” (119).

V.S. Naipaul and the Discrediting of the Travel Imagination

In The Enigma of Arrival, Naipaul likes to point out that England is different than the way it's described. For example, Naipaul says, "the river was called the Avon; not the one connected with Shakespeare" (5). This description is significant because it refuses to actually describe anything. A river might be large. It might have a current that creates ripples on the surface of the water. A river might be dyed brown with fallen leaves. But Naipaul does not describe the river, he describes what the river is not. The river is "not the one connected with Shakespeare" (5). Naipaul is interested in the difference between the real river Avon, and the other river the flowed out of Shakespeare's head. Put more simply, Naipaul's interested in the place between reality and imagination¹².

¹² The relationship between fiction, and its semantic opposite, non-fiction, is fundamentally important to The Enigma of Arrival. Maya Sharma and Frank Purcell in Writers of the Indian Diaspora, say "The Enigma of Arrival is officially designated a novel, but there is no doubt that the novelist-narrator... lived Naipaul's life... this license enables [Naipaul] to bring out the truth behind the facts" (278). Naipaul's life, as Sharma and Purcell imply, is many times over "in exile" (279). Naipaul, who started out life as an ethnic Indian on the Caribbean island of Trinidad was essentially born into hybridity. Once Naipaul moves to England, his identity is a confusing cultural amalgamation of Indianness, Trinidadness, and Englishness. Since Naipaul has always been a hybrid, he's always been a traveler in the way I've defined it. Because he's a particularly experienced traveler, Naipaul has an unusually intricate travel imagination. As a child, Naipaul had to form a travel imagination of India, his parent's country, and England, the colonial administrator of Trinidad, which was omnipresent. Naipaul basically became an expert in creating travel imaginations. As I've mentioned before, the travel imagination, because it's necessarily imperfect, is a sort of fiction. Naipaul capitalizes on his impressive experience with travel imaginations to write fiction. Because Naipaul spent so much of his life creating travel imaginations and writing fiction, he's literally unable to conceive of his life as non-fiction. Hence, his obvious mischaracterization of his autobiographical The Enigma of Arrival as a novel.

Initially, Naipaul describes the San-Andreas-sized fault line between fantasy and reality as disappointing. He says,

“This idea of winter had always excited me; but in England the word [winter] had lost some of its romance for me because the winters [were]...seldom...as extreme as I had imagined...far away in my tropical island” (5).

Naipaul, who, “had been living in England for twenty years” (5), should have had a more realistic, “idea of winter” (5). Naipaul should have expected “four days of rain” (5). But still Naipaul seems surprised that the “severe weather [like]...in Simla in December, and in the high Himalayas in August...hardly seemed to come [to England]” (6). Real rain is falling, but all Naipaul can see is icy air swirling around a high summit, off far away, somewhere else.

When snow, the “severe weather” (5), Naipaul was expecting, does fall, Naipaul is still discontent. The snow “dusted the lawn in front of [Naipaul’s] cottage; dusted the bare branches of the trees” (6), right outside Naipaul’s window. But instead of savoring the moment, Naipaul looks away, at “the empty houses...the gap in the hedge...[and] the forest beyond” (7). Naipaul had said that “the idea of winter had always excited [him]” (5), and yet when winter literally falls out of the sky, Naipaul is unexcited. Naipaul immediately focuses on “the forest beyond” (7). Naipaul says, “I saw a forest. It wasn’t a forest really; it was only an old orchard at the back of the big house in whose grounds my cottage was” (7). Naipaul is comparing the view from his frosty window with some artwork he’s seen. Specifically, Naipaul is comparing the scenery to “the reproduction of [a] Constable painting... in my third-standard reader” (7). Little girls in school, when given crayons, will probably, at some point, draw a picture of a cottage and a forest. It’s

an iconic image, a clichéd image even. Naipaul went to some trouble to put himself in the center of the ubiquitous picture. He “moved to [the] new place...[where he] worried about the cost of heating” (6). He rented a cottage. It snowed. Naipaul was in the cottage covered with snow, on the edge of the forest. Except the forest “was only an old orchard” (7). With the word “only,” Naipaul indicates he finds the orchard lacking. Naipaul’s expectations are unrealistically high. It’s as if Naipaul wants to stay perpetually disappointed with the world that’s never quite as good as he imagined it. It’s as if Naipaul wants to remain between reality and fantasy. Naipaul must be consciously cultivating this sense of surprise, because it’s abnormal considering the twenty years he spent in England. He’s deliberately acting like more of a foreigner than he actually is. He is, in essence, drawing attention to his hybridity.

Why does Naipaul complain about the seemingly idyllic scene, with “rabbits... play[ing] in the snow” (6), outside his cottage? Rabbits, like teddy bears, are impossible to dislike. The sight of the “mother rabbit, hunched, with three or four of her young” (6), would make most people sigh, and make cooing noises. But Naipaul, strangely, says “I was...in a kind of limbo” (7). The OED describes “limbo” as “a region supposed to exist on the border of Hell as the abode of...unbaptized infants.” It’s pretty melodramatic of Naipaul to say he’s in limbo, when he’s actually inside a warm cottage, and outside, rabbits are playing. How bad could England be if it has rabbits? The horror, for Naipaul, originates from “[his] tropical island, before [he] was ten” (7), and involves a “four-color reproduction [of an English winter scene in his]... third-standard reader” (7). Naipaul’s angry because “[he] had thought [the winter scene] was the most beautiful picture he had ever seen” (7). Naipaul’s angry because, as a child, he was seduced by the propaganda.

He's angry because, when he was younger, he was gullible enough to believe England was more beautiful than Trinidad. Naipaul doesn't say he's angry. But only an angry man would be discontent on a seemingly perfect day. Just after disparaging the "only...old orchard" (7), Naipaul says, "I knew that the house I had come to was in one of the river valleys near Salisbury" (7). The infamous "reproduction of the Constable painting of the Salisbury Cathedral" (7), had been, of course, in Naipaul's despised "third-standard reader" (7). Naipaul has, very deliberately, gone to the exact place that inspired the painting. By faulting the "river valley near Salisbury" (7), for, first, having insufficient snow, and then, for having insufficient trees, Naipaul is, in a roundabout way, insulting the Constable painting¹³.

It's understandable that a post-colonial subject would want to insult his former colonial master's home. But while doing so, Naipaul reveals just how much of a hybrid

¹³ Both of the postcolonial authors I profile, Chaudhuri and Naipaul, have images in their travel imaginations. Chaudhuri, in his essay "England," remembers, "two colored pictures seen in a school text-book printed in England made a profound impression on me. One of them was the picture of a cricket match, showing not only the batsman, the wicket-keeper, and some of the fielders, but also the pavilions in the background" (15). It's interesting that none of the western writers in this thesis, not Chatwin nor Theroux nor London, have illustrations like this in their travel imaginations. Chaudhuri, in "England," demonstrates the Herculean strength of his education. Chaudhuri says, for example, "I cannot remember any time when I did not know the names of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, Napoleon, Shakespeare...Milton, Burke, Warren Hastings, Wellington...Lord Roberts, Lord Kitchener, General Buller, Lord Methuen, Botha...Mr. Gladstone, Lord Rosebery, Martin Luther, Julius Caesar, Osman Pasha" (4). It can be said, without exaggeration, that Chaudhuri knows more about European history than almost anyone in Europe. Naipaul is similarly well informed. Naipaul and Chaudhuri have arguably the most complete and therefore the most accurate travel imaginations. That's why only trivial things arrest their attentions. Chaudhuri is not surprised by the 297-foot central tower of Canterbury Cathedral, which presumably he's seen accurate pictures of, but by a three-foot child. Naipaul finds a insignificant flaw (the trees in the distance are not dense enough) in an otherwise perfect winter scene. The human eye is exceptionally good at finding inconsistencies between images. Chaudhuri and Naipaul are forced to use the power of the critical eye to find flaws in their otherwise apparently perfect travel imaginations.

he is. After all, Naipaul lives in a quintessentially British cottage in the country. Naipaul complains that his “cottage is hard to heat” (6), and that he has only electricity which is “more expensive than gas or oil” (6). Naipaul, despite himself, is thinking like a normal, frugal English countryman. Some of Naipaul’s descriptions of the “whitening hedge” (7), in the “late-afternoon snow light” (7), seem to contain a bit of admiration. Perhaps, in another twenty years, Naipaul could grow to love an English winter. But, in The Enigma of Arrival, Naipaul is conflicted, like a true hybrid.

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