

### Tahitian Voices: Mme de Monbart, Rousseau, and Diderot

In any exploration of the Enlightenment's engagement with the other, the fascination of late-eighteenth-century French authors with Tahiti is impossible to ignore. The philosophes saw the newly encountered island as the perfect crucible for their ongoing reflection on natural philosophy, faraway cultures, and colonial rule. In the three decades following Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's voyage to the South Pacific in 1769, Tahiti became a prevalent subject matter in French letters spanning a wide range of genres and perspectives. But in our courses on the Enlightenment's encounter with the other, we traditionally include only one text on Tahiti: Denis Diderot's canonical *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (Addendum to Bougainville's *Voyage*). In doing so, we silence the plurality of voices heard in late-eighteenth-century France on the topic.

I propose to move beyond such a monolithic approach by integrating Marie-Josèphe de Monbart's *Lettres tahitiennes* (Tahitian Letters) into our curriculum. Her 1784 novel expands our approach of the Tahitian theme in two ways. First, Monbart dramatizes the threat posed by European invaders on Tahiti, confronting the philosophes'—in particular Jean-Jacques Rousseau's—theories to the reality and urgency of the colonial situation of her time. Second, Monbart revisits the Enlightenment's anticolonial discourse by grounding it in the suffering of the female body. This relatively unknown, although once popular, novel sheds light on the blind spots of canonical works, prompting us to renew our approach to some of the most enduring texts on our syllabi.

Monbart was born Marie-Josèphe de Lescun in Paris around 1750 and was raised in Languedoc before she eloped with M. de Monbart to Germany. After their marriage ended in an

annulment in 1785, she was briefly married to a German army officer by the name of von Sydow. Her solitary life on a remote Prussian estate was brightened by her friendship with the German author Jean Paul Friedrich Richter (Béguin). She died in Berlin in 1829. Her literary career dates from the time of her marriage to Monbart and is strongly influenced by Rousseau. Although she also wrote poetry, two treatises on female education, and a collection of short stories, *Lettres tahitiennes* is her most famous work. It was first published in Breslau in 1784, and its publication in two more editions in Brussels and Paris speaks to its Continental appeal.

A sentimental epistolary novel, *Lettres tahitiennes* chronicles the correspondence between Zeïr and Zulica, two young Tahitian lovers, after the departure of Zeïr on a French ship returning to Marseille. On arrival, Zeïr becomes acquainted with St. Val, an educated and virtuous young man, who tries to warn his Tahitian guest against the corruption of civilized society. But when Zeïr leaves for Paris, he too falls victim to the evils of the city and becomes as corrupted as the libertines with whom he associates.

In her letters from Tahiti, Zulica tells of the horrors brought upon the island by French and later British sailors. She is sold by her fellow Tahitians to an English captain and is taken to Europe against her will. When she escapes at last, she finds Zeïr tied by a promise to another woman, Mme de Germeuil, and to be persecuted by still another one of his lovers. Zulica, however, never falters in her love for Zeïr. After Mme de Germeuil's timely death, the lovers are reunited and move with St. Val to the south of France, where we expect them to live "happily ever after."

*Lettres tahitiennes* belongs to the vogue of works inspired by European contact with Tahiti, particularly the expedition by Bougainville, the name most associated with the French Pacific experience. In a two-year-long voyage around the world on the *Boudeuse*, Bougainville and his men spent only ten days on Tahiti in April 1768. Coming after long and hard months of

navigation and characterized by abundance and sensuality, those ten days soon symbolized the whole expedition and founded the enduring myth of Tahiti in French culture. Bougainville was far more restrained in his enthusiasm than is commonly assumed. He delayed the publication of his journal until 1771, after he had had time to discuss Polynesian life and customs with a Tahitian man named Ahu-toru, whom he was taking back to France. Despite his caution, essays, pamphlets, plays, poems, novels, and treatises about Tahiti began to appear as soon as news of the island reached mainland France.

The first such text is a letter published in the French paper *Le Mercure de France* in November 1769 by Philibert Commerson, the naturalist on board the *Boudeuse*. In his short travel account, part scientific anthropology, part quixotic philosophy, Commerson claims to have witnessed in Tahiti “l’état de l’homme naturel, né essentiellement bon” ‘the state of natural man, born essentially good’ and children of nature whose instinct “n’a pas encore dégénéré en raison,” ‘has not yet degenerated into reason’ (qtd. in Bougainville 402-03).<sup>i</sup> These are Rousseauesque themes and rhetoric, and the encounter with Tahiti provided Enlightenment thinkers a perfect test case for Rousseau’s theory of the noble savage. In 1770, for instance, Nicolas Bricaire de la Dixmérie uses the figure of a Tahitian *sauvage* (‘savage’), a thinly veiled Ahu-toru, as the narrator for *Le Sauvage de Taïti aux Français* (‘The Tahitian Savage’s Address to the French’), which he follows by a rebuttal of Rousseau entitled “Envoi au philosophe ami des sauvages” ‘Envoy to the philosopher, friend of the savages.’ Monbart, too, sees in Bougainville’s voyage and the Tahitian topos an opportunity to enter into dialogue with Rousseau but does so more persuasively than Bricaire de la Dixmérie. Her *Lettres tahitiennes* can therefore be read as an illustration of the theories presented in the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (*Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*) and *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* (*Discourse upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind*). As she puts

into practice Rousseau's reflection on nature and human development in her novel, she both demonstrates how well she understands his philosophy and reveals its limits.

Not all texts inspired by Tahiti focused solely on Rousseau. In his collection of poems *Les Jardins* (1782; 'The Gardens') Abbot Jacques Delille portrays Ahu-toru wandering nostalgically in French gardens. Ahu-toru also appears the same year as the fictional author of *Histoire des révolutions de Taïti* ('History of the Revolutions of Tahiti'). The actual author, Jean-Charles Poncelin de la Roche-Tilhac, combines a fantastical account of the history of Tahiti with excerpts from travel narratives to better criticize the French society of his time. Within the diversity of genres and ideologies, three main themes emerge in late-eighteenth-century Tahitian literature: nature's bounty on an island where work is superfluous; a peaceful political regime under a paternalistic leader; and an unconstrained, wholesome sexuality, free from old Europe's concepts of shame and decency. (These themes are, of course, intellectual constructions by French authors and should not be confused with a faithful representation of Polynesian life.) After all, the men on the *Boudeuse* named the island Nouvelle Cythère (New Cytherea) after the Greek island of love. This focus on love, understood as uninhibited sexuality, came to characterize most works inspired by Tahiti—and to supersede other aspects of the Tahitian theme.

Already in 1775, Voltaire uses accounts of Tahitian sexuality to motivate his call for philosophical relativism in his short story "Les Oreilles du comte de Chesterfield" ('The Ears of the Count of Chesterfield'). Tahitian sexuality is also the theme of *La Vierge d'Otaïti* ('The Tahitian Virgin'), a 1788 play by Jean-Baptiste-Claude Delisle de Sales with a moralist conclusion antithetical to Voltaire's. These two works are examples of a rich literary production that culminates in Diderot's *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*. Penned and circulated among friends in 1772 and published posthumously in 1796, *Supplément* depicts an idealized

Tahitian society as the basis of a materialist philosophy and contestation of Eurocentrism.

Gender and sexuality play a great part in this vision.

Monbart also writes about love and Tahitian sensuality, but as a critique of European invaders: Sexual encounters become colonial encounters, uninhibited sexuality becomes coerced sexuality. As Monbart shifts the narrative focus from a male traveler to a Tahitian female main character with a prominent place and a forceful voice, she demystifies the male-centered fantasies of Tahiti.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Rousseau's influential discourses—his 1750 *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* and his 1755 *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*—are the theoretical lens through which overseas travelers and mainland philosophes approach non-European peoples, especially during and after the encounter with the South Pacific. A self-proclaimed disciple of Rousseau, Monbart offers in *Lettres tahitiennes* a cogent illustration of the two *Discours*, dramatizing Rousseau's theories in her fiction. Zulica and Zeïr's story exemplifies the “civilizing” of natural societies in the course of human development as well as the tensions between nature and culture, tensions that Monbart tries to solve in a postlapsarian paradise organized around Rousseauesque ideals. She also brings to light other latent tensions in Rousseau's work: his silence on colonization and slavery.

In *Lettres tahitiennes*, one can follow the progress of the two Tahitian characters who, at the beginning, have not had “d'autre maître que la nature” ‘have not had ‘a master other than nature’ ’ (1:vj) in the light of Rousseau's *Discours sur l'inégalité*. We can ask our students to map out Rousseau's theories in the novel. For instance, Zeïr's decision to board a ship bound for France, his thirst for knowledge, and his eagerness to emulate his French hosts demonstrate a crucial facet of human nature according to Rousseau: a sense of unrest and of amour propre natural to all men, the mark of their perfectibility and free will that lead them to evolve. The

novel then mirrors the three stages of human development put forward in *Discours sur l'inégalité*. Monbart places precontact Tahiti in the second phase, as St. Val, Zeïr's French mentor, tells his protégé that Tahiti represents not "l'état le plus parfait de la nature; mais seulement une des périodes des différentes gradations que vous parcourrez pour parvenir au point où nous sommes" "the most perfect state of nature but only one of the periods in the various stages that you will go through to reach the state where we currently are" (1: 54). Unlike some of her contemporaries, Monbart does not confuse Rousseau's analysis of the state of nature with a naive primitivism and the dream of returning to a presocial state.

We can also ask students to examine in *Lettres tahitiennes* Rousseau's mistrust of civilization—even when it is deemed ineluctable. Zulica's reflection on writing, in particular, echoes a major statement of *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, famously analyzed by Jacques Derrida in *De la grammatologie [Of Grammatology]*. Zulica articulates a strong critique of modern civilization that has at its core not the bountiful harmony of precontact Tahiti but rather lack and loss. Even though Zulica considers Zeïr and herself to be fortunate to be able to communicate through writing, she soon reflects that writing is truly European, that is, civilized, because it is born out of suffering, loss, and separation, like all things civilized: "l'écriture ne peut avoir été inventée que par des aman[t]s malheureux" "Writing can only have been invented by unhappy lovers" (1: 6). In *Lettres tahitiennes*, parting and estrangement are not just a topic but an integral dimension of writing. Even though writing can suture the separation it manifests, it is only a last resort, a coping mechanism after the disaster brought on the island by the colonizers. In that perspective, all the luxury, including writing, introduced by the Europeans is but a consolation prize; it can never make up for what has been lost, for what was bountifully provided in the state of nature. Nevertheless, Monbart's protagonists are aware that a return to Tahiti, to a precontact state of nature, at the end of their journey is as impossible as "retourner vivre à la

forêt avec les Ours” ‘going back to living in the woods with bears’ is for Rousseau (*Discours sur l’origine* 3: 207). The end of *Lettres tahitiennes* sees them establishing a small community in southern France and reconciling nature and culture in a postlapsarian utopia—a successful Clarens, as it were. In our classrooms, we can encourage students to analyze this final utopia, especially its hybrid combination of Rousseauesque ideals and elements from the Tahitian idyll that opens the novel.

Students can also be asked to pay attention to episodes in which Monbart diverges from Rousseau, addressing his blind spots. By dramatizing his philosophy, Monbart brings it to bear on issues that Rousseau only deals with in passing or metaphorically: colonization and slavery. The famous opening line of *Contrat social* (*Social Contract*), “[l’] homme est né libre et partout il est dans les fers” ‘man is born free and yet everywhere he is in chains’ (*Du contrat social* 3: 351) cannot be applied to Zulica even though she was born free and finds herself in chains halfway through the novel. Rousseau’s statement is a political one and the *fers* a metaphor for deleterious political regimes, not a reflection on the human consequences of colonization and enslavement. Similarly, when his *Émile* is held in slavery in North Africa in *Émile et Sophie, ou les Solitaires* (*Émile and Sophia; or, The Solitaires*), he muses, “*Émile* esclave! . . . dans quel sens? Qu’ai-je perdu de ma liberté primitive? Ne naquis-je pas esclave de la nécessité? Quel nouveau joug peuvent m’imposer les hommes?” ‘*Émile*, a slave! . . . how so? What have I lost of my original liberty? Was I not born a slave to necessity? What new yoke can men impose on me?’ (*Émile et Sophie* 4: 916-17). On the contrary, Zulica’s fate in *Lettres tahitiennes* shows that a “new yoke” can indeed be imposed on a human being by other human beings, especially in the double yoke of colonization and gendered power relations. For all his use of the concepts of slavery, Rousseau failed to fully address the moral issues at stake in such terms. *Lettres*

*tahitiennes* can be used as a reality check for Rousseau's ideas as Monbart goes beyond his silences and metaphors and confronts his ideas to the realities of colonialism.

*Lettres tahitiennes* was not the only Tahiti-inspired work to express fear for the future of the island after the encounter with Europe and to present a strong anticolonial message. One can create a fruitful dialogue between Monbart's *Lettres tahitiennes* and Diderot's *Supplément*. Students can be encouraged to compare both texts to their common source, Bougainville's 1771 *Voyage autour du monde*, and reflect on what each author chose to foreground or forget; to reflect, that is, on each author's construction of an idiosyncratic literary representation of Tahiti. Students can also read side by side Zulica's letters and the famed "Adieux du vieillard" ('The Old Man's Farewell') in Diderot's *Supplément*. The most productive element in this dialogue is the representation of female sexuality, especially in relation to colonial violence. If Diderot's text is deeply anticolonial, his treatment of sexuality is dissociated from this critique. For Monbart, on the other hand, female sexuality is inextricable from colonial violence and lies at the very core of her anticolonialism.

Classroom discussions about *Supplément* never fail to touch on Diderot's imagined sexual utopia. Even if the text claims that men and women are both free to engage in sexual relationships, students are often struck by the emphasis laid on women's reproductive systems and how limiting the expectation of their fertility is: Sterile and menstruating women are forbidden to engage in sexual intercourse and are ostracized by veils. Orou's description of sexual intercourse between French sailors and Tahitian women is particularly telling in this regard: he asserts that the offspring born of such unions are part of a plan to repopulate his island. Tahitian men first decide to test whether sterile Tahitian women could be successfully impregnated by the newcomers and send them to satisfy the French sailors' sexual demands: "ce sont celles que nous avons exposées à vos premiers embrassements" 'these we exposed to your

first embraces,' Orou explains (77). But in Diderot's text, when Tahitian men realize the intellectual superiority of Europeans, they put their most beautiful mates in the Frenchmen's beds: "nous vous avons destiné quelques-unes de nos femmes et de nos filles les plus belles à recueillir la semence d'une race meilleure que la nôtre" 'we sent to you some of our fairest wives and daughters to gather in the seed of a race that is better than our own' (77). The memorable *aumônier* ('chaplain') first turns down his host's offer to sleep with his wife and daughters but eventually gives in to their emotional pleas and converts to (Diderot's fictional) Tahitian mores, sleeping his way from Orou's youngest daughter to his wife. While Diderot's utopia has to be understood in the larger context of his materialist philosophy, the emphasis on women's reproductive system leaves no room for a portrayal of women as independent sexual agents. Rather, with the passive "exposées" and "destinées," they are simply receptacles for male seed, pawns in a larger demographic plan designed by their male counterparts.

Monbart writes of the same encounter but from the viewpoint of a Tahitian woman. Monbart's imagined sexual utopia is a lost Tahitian paradise, where lovemaking used to be a religious act and gender relations were marked by perfect equality and mutual respect. This idyll vanishes as soon as European invaders set foot on the island. Far from the open arms of the Tahitian women Diderot imagines in *Supplément*, Monbart's female characters are appalled at the sexual impositions of the newcomers, who remain undeterred by Zulica's "larmes, . . . répugnance, . . . continuel & humiliant refus, . . . résistance" 'tears, . . . repugnance, constant and humiliating refusals, . . . resistance' (1:124-25). When Tahitian women refuse to indulge the sexual cravings of French sailors, the response is one of extreme violence: "ils ont osé violer l'asile que nous leur avons accordé; ils ont souillé de sang ces gazons consacrés aux plaisirs" 'They [the French sailors] have dared to violate the asylum we had given them; they have soiled with blood these lawns consecrated to pleasure' (1:11-12). The verb *violier* is used

metaphorically here to express the defilement of both the place and the laws of hospitality, but its literal meaning of physical rape is dominant.

This defilement culminates with Zulica's rape, which opens letter 21 and constitutes the turning point of the novel: "C'en est fait Zeïr, la malheureuse Zulica est devenue la proie d'un monstre" 'It is done, Zeïr, the miserable Zulica has become the prey of a monster' (1:126). Zulica becomes the embodiment of the violent conquest of Tahiti. She no longer belongs to herself ("je ne m'appartiens plus" 1:126) and opens her letter in the third person. The tyrant she has denounced in previous letters is no longer the oppressor of an island but a personal tyrant, who has bought her and is taking her to England as one of his possessions. That Zulica is forced into the British captain's tent by her fellow Tahitians signals the destruction of the Tahitian society by mercantilism as a colonial tool, a far cry from Orou's indigeneous collective plan in Diderot's *Supplément*. Where Orou saw the potential regeneration of his people, Zulica laments the loss of her friends, relatives, and homeland ("Je n'ai plus d'amis, plus de parents, plus de patrie" 'I no longer have friends, relatives, homeland' 1:126) The fate of the colonized woman both heralds and symbolizes the fate of the island.

With Zulica's rape at the heart of the encounter with Europe, the novel forces us to reconsider the traditional representation of Tahitian woman as sexually available. By giving Zulica a voice, by placing the emphasis on a Tahitian woman through Zulica's resistance, Monbart not only denounces the double oppression that Zulica endures as both other and woman but also challenges the dominant, male-oriented discourse on Tahiti and makes her reader reconsider the traditional representations of the lascivious Tahitian woman. Bringing *Lettres tahitiennes* to bear on our students' readings of *Supplément* thus offers a counterpoint to Diderot's discussion of sexuality. It also shows that analyzing the male fantasies underlying the common representation of Tahiti is not an anachronistic projection of our modern-day sensibility

and feminism: As early as 1784, Monbart refused to accept the sexual stereotypes attached to Tahitian women in French fiction.

To recognize Monbart's exceptional voice, however, one has to break from the critical reception of her novel, which has traditionally shied away from addressing her analysis of the violence inflicted to Zulica as both colonized and woman. Critics either fail to mention Zulica's rape or interpret it in unsettling ways, until Julia Douthwaite's *Exotic Women*. In her seminal study, Douthwaite analyzes the effects of the "heroine's rape and enslavement" on the Tahitian social order and on French discourse about Tahiti (167-68). Some critics simply allude to Zulica's voyage to Europe without dwelling on the circumstances: "[f]inalement, Zulica rejoint son amant" 'Zulica eventually joins her lover' (O'Reilly 818). Most read the rape as a noble sacrifice on Zulica's part: "La mort dans l'âme, car infidèle à Zeïr, elle cède pour sauver ses compatriotes." 'With a heavy heart, since she has to be unfaithful to Zeïr, she gives in to save her fellow Tahitians' (Faessel 163). Here, she is forced by the fear of renewed violence against the islanders, not physical force; the choice is ultimately hers. The same idea presides over the statement, "Zulica rejoint son amant, en payant son passage à la façon de Sainte Marie l'Egyptienne" 'Zulica joins her lover, paying for her voyage in the way of Saint Mary of Egypt' (Chinard 421) as though Zulica was not raped and abducted but had chosen to pay for her trip to Europe with her body. Such readings are completely unsubstantiated by the text: Zulica never envisages joining her lover in Europe but rather entreats him to come back to her; she writes of being dragged to the English captain against her will and placed on a boat bound for an unknown destination. It is as though two centuries of colonialism and postcolonialism were necessary to recognize what Monbart discerned in 1784: the dangers of exotic sexual stereotypes that draw a veil over the fate of the colonized woman.

Critics may have been confused by *Lettres tahitiennes*'s paradoxical feminist statement. Like Zilia in Françoise de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (*Letters from a Peruvian Woman*) Zulica demonstrates both heroic resistance in the face of male violence and moral steadfastness.<sup>ii</sup> However, while *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* is a story of emancipation of a woman who, by the end of the narrative, leads an independent life on her own estate, Zulica never conceives of herself independently of Zeïr. Nevertheless, her story is a potentially empowering discourse for women. Confronted by male violence (at the hands of the British captain), Zeïr's errings (both geographical and moral) Zulica is the moral anchor of the novel, as well as its structural backbone (her letters and actions shape the novel). As the heroine is elevated to a superior, almost saintly status, *Lettres tahitiennes* exemplifies one of the responses to women's condition in early modern France: advocating for women's rights by arguing women's moral superiority and leading role in moral reform. Even though Graffigny's Zilia may be more to our taste, Monbart's Zulica offers an opportunity to present our students with a more complete image of women's advocacy at the time.

In this perspective, Monbart's statement can be taken further and used to discuss the influence of Rousseau's thought on feminism in the second half of the eighteenth century. In the wake of Rousseau's huge success among his women readers, especially after *Julie*, and because of his emphasis on sensibility, Rousseau's thought was seen to advocate "a new moral order in which women could play a central role" (Trouille, *Sexual Politics* 4) and to offer a new dignity to women—as wives and mothers and moral models certainly. But Rousseau's influence does not mean uncritical adhesion to his pronouncements on women anymore than on the topic of colonization. When Rousseau fails to provide Émile's female companion, Sophie, with a good education in *Émile, ou de l'éducation* (*Émile; or, Concerning Education*), Monbart feels compelled to offer her own treatise: *Sophie, ou de l'éducation des filles* ('Sophie, or on the

Education of Young Women'), in which she applies Rousseau's wisdom to Sophie's education, a work she later complements with *De l'éducation d'une princesse* ('On the Education of a Princess'). Monbart's project takes its place alongside important works such as *Adèle et Théodore* by Stéphanie-Félicité Ducrest de St-Aubin, comtesse de Genlis, and Louise d'Épinay's *Les Conversations d'Émilie* and is bound to appear in more courses on the Enlightenment.

*Lettres tahitiennes* is particularly distinctive among the literary works that followed Bougainville's voyage and can become a productive tool in our courses on the Enlightenment's encounter with the other. As the novel illustrates the inescapable Rousseauesque background to the topic, it offers students a chance to further their reflection on Rousseau's approach to nature versus culture, in all its subtleties and limits. If Monbart, like Rousseau, acknowledges that the state of nature belongs to the past and that the challenge lies in coming to terms with modern civilization, she does not hesitate to confront his discourse to the reality and urgency of the situation in Tahiti. Monbart's anticolonial critique stands in stark contrast to that of her contemporaries and, in particular, to Diderot's *Supplément*. Her novel is grounded in the suffering and resistance of the female body and articulated in a female voice. Not only does gender serve to denounce European crimes (here pillaging, bloodshed, and rape), it also questions the images that constitute the myth of Tahiti in the French *imaginaire* ('imagination'). The image of lascivious, scantily-clad women, eager to offer their favors to any man, is denounced as a dangerous fantasy by Monbart as she revisits the discourse on Tahiti. Monbart sheds light on the women of the Enlightenment, revealing them to be not just passive victims of violence but also considerable moral anchors, active agents of resistance against colonization, and, by her own example, engaging and consequential writers.

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<sup>i</sup> All translations from the French are mine.

<sup>ii</sup> The two novels are often discussed together. In fact, Monbart's novel was marketed as a "Suite aux Lettres Péruviennes" 'Sequel to the Peruvian Letters' on the front page of the Paris edition, probably in an attempt by the printer or bookseller to bolster sales.