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# PERFORMANCE ANXIETIES: GRIEF AND THEATRE IN EUROPEAN WRITING ON TAHITI

*Vanessa Smith*

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During 6–7 December 1788 the ship *Bounty*, anchored in Matavai Bay, Tahiti, was almost lost in a fierce storm. When the danger passed, commander William Bligh was visited by various Tahitian friends, bearing gifts and expressing relief at his survival. On 8 December, Poeno, chief of Matavai, and his wife came to pay their respects. As Bligh recorded:

Poeno and his wife came of[f] with another supply of fruit. This Woman has on many occasions shown that she is possessed of great Sympathy, and now marked it with such excess of Greif for the danger the Ship had been in, that would have affected the most dispassionate creature existing. The strongest and only established proof among these people of their sincerity on those occasions is the Wounding of themselves on the Top of the Head with a Sharks tooth until they bring on a vast profusion of blood, and having a knowledge of this I was prepared to prevent this Woman from doing it; but I had no sooner come to her than the Operation was performed before I was aware of it, and her face was covered with blood in an instant. This circumstance however frequently happens upon trifling occasions, and with the drying up the Blood all feelings of the mind subsides it is allways a proof of great joy as well as excess of grief, but at this last time it was a lasting token of the latter, and this affectionate creature could not be brought to resume any kind of cheerfulness for two hours that she remained on board.<sup>1</sup>

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Poeno's wife shows the hallmarks of a sentimental heroine: she is "possessed of great Sympathy" which threatens to teeter into excess. But unlike the sentimental heroine, for whom tears are the "incontrovertible markers of sensibility,"<sup>2</sup> for the Tahitian female tears will not suffice. A more explicit "proof of sincerity" is required: "wounding" and bringing on "a vast profusion of blood" is the only real index of genuine feeling. On the other hand, if self-mutilation is, as Bligh claims, as often a sign of joy as of grief, and if the drying of the blood signifies the relatively swift dismissal of mental distress, then the very extremity of the act may be testimony not to deeply visceral but to shallow and ambiguous emotion. Displays of feeling such as that of Poeno's wife raise doubts about calculated effects. To what extent can grief and joy be put on and off like masks, performed like theatre, or merge vaporously like symptoms of nervous disorder? In this essay I want to pursue the problematic of the genuine in early European accounts of Pacific Islanders; to probe the confusing search for sincerity that impels certain kinds of encounter and their narration.

### EMOTIONAL PROPRIETY

The man whose sympathy keeps time to my grief, cannot but admit the reasonableness of my sorrow.

Adam Smith

The signs of emotion displayed by the Tahitians present Bligh with a problem of affective interpretation. They differ from those signs that are culturally familiar to him, and while the difference is identified as excess, it remains unclear whether such excess is to be equated with deeper or shallower emotion. The question of the universality of sentiment was one that occupied eighteenth-century moralists. In chapter XV of his *Elements of Criticism* (1762) Lord Kames discusses the "External Signs of Emotions and Passions." Kames argues that emotions constitute a universal semiotics, promoting instant intelligibility even in the absence of shared language or culture:

The natural signs of emotions, voluntary and involuntary, being nearly the same in all men, form an universal language; which no distance of place, no difference of tribe, no diversity of tongue, can darken or render doubtful: even education, tho' of mighty influence, hath not power to vary nor sophisticate, far less to destroy, their signification. This is a wise appointment of Providence: for if these signs were, like words, arbitrary and variable, the thoughts and volitions of strangers would be entirely hid from us; which would prove a great or rather invincible obstruction to the formation of societies: but as matters are ordered, the external appearances of joy, grief, anger, fear, shame, and of the other passions, forming an universal language, open a direct avenue to the heart. As the arbitrary signs vary in every country, there could be no communication of thoughts among different nations, were it not for the natural signs, in which all agree: and as the discovering passions instantly at their birth, is essential to our well-being, and often necessary for self-preservation, the author of our nature, attentive to our wants, hath provided a passage to the heart, which can never be obstructed while eye-sight remains.<sup>3</sup>

For Kames, emotional language is innate and direct, bypassing linguistic communication and registering on the features. Yet Bligh and other Pacific voyagers who describe encountering displays of intense emotion within actual scenarios of cultural contact do not show confidence in their ability to read the “universal language” of affect. The self-mutilation that opens, quite literally, “a passage to the heart,” in Bligh’s account retains the status of “arbitrary sign.” He seeks, behind the blood which covers Poeno’s wife’s face, alternative “natural signs” of a feeling that persists beyond performance, that cannot be dissimulated.

Bligh’s concern with what he regards as the excessive elements of the Tahitian woman’s display of grief chimes with the philosophy of sympathy expounded by Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). In his discussion of “reflected passion” Smith raises the issue of proximity, in describing the emotional dialectic whereby the spectator seeks to identify with the sufferings of another, while the other struggles to moderate his or her emotion to accord with the spectator’s capacity to identify. Smith suggests that, within the hierarchy of friend/acquaintance/stranger, it is the stranger who best helps the individual to moderate emotion: we compose ourselves best before those with whom we are least intimate. He goes on to elaborate a disgust for excessive grief and to fetishize self-command in ways that themselves seem particular to his own British cultural heritage:

What noble propriety and grace do we feel in the conduct of those who, in their own case, exert that recollection and self-command which constitute the dignity of every passion, and which bring it down to what others can enter into! We are disgusted with the clamorous grief, which, without any delicacy, calls upon our compassion with sighs and tears and importunate lamentations. But we reverence that reserved, that silent and majestic sorrow, which discovers itself only in the swelling of the eyes, in the quivering of the lips and cheeks, and in the distant, but affecting, coldness of the whole behaviour. It imposes the like silence upon us. We regard it with respectful attention, and watch with anxious concern over our whole behaviour, lest by any impropriety we should disturb that concerted tranquillity, which it requires so great an effort to support.<sup>4</sup>

For Smith, the appropriate “marks,” or physical manifestations of grief, are precisely those that indicate its restraint: the “swelling of the eyes” and “quivering of the lips and cheeks” that testify not, as they might, to any self-brutalization, but to an equally brutal self-possession.

By Smith’s account, the most legible signs of emotion are those that indicate restraint. This paradox only resolves itself if we recognize the elision of cultural specificity in his discussion of sympathy. Even as he spells out the process of identification that characterizes sensibility, he accommodates social- and gender-inflected understandings of emotional propriety (the “silent and majestic” version of sorrow he espouses has an aristocratic bearing; Julie Ellison argues that such stoicism is repeatedly invoked in a complex tension with masculine sentiment during the eighteenth century).<sup>5</sup> An anatomization of emotion resorts in the end to a shared and unarticulated cultural consensus between writer and reader. Yet in situations of cross-cultural encounter such as Bligh’s, complacency regarding shared values is troubled by the apprehension that performativity and sincerity may not be reconcilable; that neither restraint nor effusion may be fully legible.

As Douglas Oliver has observed, the European archive of contact with Tahitians evidences numerous examples of visitors' concerns over apparently contradictory displays of emotion. On the one hand, grief seems excessively violent, but on the other overly dramatic. The Tahitian lexicon supports this confusion, containing "numerous words connoting (and implicitly censuring) the dissimulation of emotion." Oliver cites the following terms from the London Missionary Society Dictionary of 1851:

*'arufa'ahema*, deception by fair words, while a plot of destruction has been planned.

*'arufa'a'paea*, words of conciliation, without sincerity.

*aureva*, to impose upon a person under the appearance of friendship.<sup>6</sup>

Such vocabulary (whose translation may well be inflected by missionary values) seems to indicate that Tahitian culture allowed for an ambiguity of response that Europeans found ethically and interpersonally confounding, and tended to attribute to conscious dissimulation. Self-mutilation, however, pushes the question of cultural differences of response into new territory. Unlike the slippery play of facial features, or the familiar physical indexes of blush and tear, self-mutilation is neither clearly fakeable nor genuine, simply calculated nor involuntary. It is at once mechanical and dramatic, automatic and excessive. The exemplary discussion of such "marks of grief" takes place in European voyaging accounts in relation to Oceanic rituals of death, burial, and mourning.

### LOUD LAMENTATIONS AND SILENT SORROW

I will not pretend to say whether it was real or feigned grief they shewed on this occasion, perhaps it was a mixture of both, but was I to abide by my own opinion only I should believe it was real.

James Cook, *Voyage of the Resolution and Adventure*

Joseph Banks regarded the Tahitian disposal of the dead and ceremonies of mourning as "so remarkable that they deserve a very particular description." He wrote in his *Endeavour* journal:

As soon as any one is dead the House is immediately filld with their relations who bewail their Loss with Loud lamentations, especially those who are the farthest removd in blood from or who profess the least greif for the deceas'd; the nearer relations and those who are really affected spend their time in more silent sorrow, while the rest join in Chorus's of Greif at certain intervals between which they laugh, talk and gossip as if totally unconcern'd.<sup>7</sup>

Banks's account inaugurates a more dismissive trend in European writing on Oceanic emotion than we saw in Bligh, in which an excess of grief is instantly refigured as false grief. His diction echoes directly Adam Smith's contrast between "the clamorous grief, which, without any delicacy, calls upon our compassion with sighs and tears and importunate lamentations" and "that silent and majestic sorrow, which discovers itself . . . in the distant, but affecting, coldness of the whole behaviour." In the tradition of his home culture Banks reflexively precludes any equation of public, theatricalized expression with genuine sentiment.

Tom Lutz devotes a chapter of his engaging study *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears* to cultures of mourning. He notes the suspicion aroused in European observers by what is perceived as the ability of mourners from a wide variety of other cultures “to turn their tears on and off,” arguing that “their very fluency in the languages of grief is exactly what made them suspect to outsiders.”<sup>8</sup> Banks’s account reveals the hallmarks of this kind of suspicion. After discussing the laying out of the dead, Banks dilates on the subject of displayed grief:

The women (for the men seem to think lamentations below their dignity) assemble Led on by the nearest relation, who walking up to the door of the House swimming almost in tears strikes a sharks tooth several times into the crown of her head, on which a large effusion of blood flows, which is carefully caught in their linnen and thrown under the Bier. Her example is imitated by the rest of the women and this ceremony is repeated at the interval of 2 or 3 days as long as the women chuse or can keep it up, the nearest relation thinking it her duty to Continue it longer than anyone else. Besides the blood which they beleive to be an acceptable present to the deceased, whose soule they beleive to exist and hover about the place where the body lays observing the actions of the survivors, they throw in Cloths wet with tears, of which all that are shed are carefully preservd for that purpose, and the younger people cut off their hair either all or in part and throw that also under the Bier. (*Journal*, 1:377–78)

Banks probes the authenticity of the grief exhibited here by determining particular roles. He isolates lamentation as a feminine prerogative, and, contradicting his earlier claim that those “farthest removed in blood” display the most grief, identifies the nearest relation as the chief female mourner. The shift from a metonymic use of the word “blood” in association with private, less expressive emotion, to the figuration of the “nearest relation” as sacrificial victim, letting a blood whose abject materiality is rendered even more explicit by its “careful” collection in pieces of linen, might be seen to enact the shifting perceptions of an observer, keen to associate genuine emotion with restraint, but confronted by all-too-material evidence of grief. Traces of skepticism persist in the reference to the nearest relation leading “on,” rather than simply leading, the other mourners, and subsequently “thinking it her duty to Continue it longer than anyone else.” Yet these are relatively ineffectual against the overwhelmingly evidentiary impact of caught tears and blood and hacked hair.

Lutz includes rituals of self-mutilation in his discussion of mourning, and through them turns to Freud’s paper on “Mourning and Melancholia.” Developing Freud’s notion of melancholia as pathological mourning, Lutz initially suggests that self-mutilation is the expression of unresolved loss. He then seeks to extricate himself from the implication that such mourning rituals are, in Freudian terms, “mourning gone bad,” by arguing that the desire to resolve loss through “normal” mourning is in turn particular to Western cultures. His representation of self-mutilation as a form of culturally inflected melancholia, however, blurs the specificity of both Freud’s argument and the self-mutilation ritual. Lutz writes, “Melancholia includes refusing to give up the dead, and the only way to do this, Freud suggests, is by some form of self-denial or masochism” (*Crying*, 216). Yet Freud does not use the term masochism in his paper, focusing instead on types of verbal “self-beratement”<sup>9</sup> which seem in excess of or mismatched to their subject, and which he argues disclose the transformation of object-loss to ego-loss.<sup>10</sup> The

flow of shameless verbiage Freud associates with this type of self-indictment is far removed from the loud lamentations described by Banks, through which Tahitian women directly “bewail their Loss,” or from their practice of bloodletting. Furthermore, by figuring their mourning rituals as inherently melancholic, Lutz fails to allow members of the various cultures he examines the capacity equally to maintain a distinction between mourning and its more aggravated, melancholic manifestation. Yet this more nuanced understanding is present in Banks’s account, where he writes that after five nights “the mourning then ceases unless some of the women who find themselves more than commonly afflicted by the Loss repeat the ceremony of *Poopooing* or bleeding themselves in the head, which they do at any time or in any place where they happen to be when the whim takes them” (*Journal*, 1:378). For Banks this persistent, melancholic version of mourning remains ambivalent: is it genuine sign of uncommon affliction or simply “whim”?

The destabilization of Banks’s confidence in assessing the authenticity of the mourning rituals may also be accounted for by what lies between these two discussions of female lamentation: the putrefied corpse. While the priest performs his offices, a house is erected: “In the center of this house are posts set up for the supporting of the bier which as soon as the ceremonies are finished is brought here and set upon them, where the Corps is to remain and putrifie in state to the no small disgust of every one whose business requires them to pass near it” (*Journal*, 1:376–77). Compared with the performances and traces of grief, the corpse has a salient irrefutability, producing an immediate and identical reaction in “every one.”<sup>11</sup> Yet this object of universal disgust is also to some extent an object of prestige. Although there is some discrepancy in the sources, it seems that only the wealthy could afford to display the corpse for any length of time: its very state of public abjection was testimony to the status of the deceased. The missionary William Ellis suggests that wealth influenced the length of time for which the corpse was kept before the public eye:

However great the attachment between the deceased and the survivors might have been, and however they might desire to prolong the melancholy satisfaction resulting from the presence of the lifeless body, on which they still felt it some alleviation to gaze, the heat of the climate was such, as to require that it should be speedily removed, unless methods were employed for its preservation, and these were generally too expensive for the poor and middle ranks.<sup>12</sup>

While Ellis is sensitive to a potential for emotional ambivalence in grieving (“melancholy satisfaction”) and tolerant of its apparently perverse manifestations (“alleviation to gaze”), he stresses the prerogatives of wealth over attachment in keeping the putrefying corpse above ground. More recent historical-anthropological studies remain perplexed by the question of which types of bodies were exposed and which buried directly. Douglas Oliver acknowledges that it is logical to assume that wealth and status played a part, but also notes evidence in Bligh’s account “of relatively unimportant persons as well having been accorded this treatment,” and concludes by assuming that strongly motivated kinship and friendship ties—presumably the very bonds of “great . . . attachment” whose significance Ellis deemphasized—lead to arrangements being made “for the body to remain in view to receive further expressions of grief” (*ATS*, 1:496).

The apodictic corpse, then, turns out to be as contentious as the emotions displayed around it. Julia Kristeva has argued that corpses confront the survivors with the threshold of their own animation. "As in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live."<sup>13</sup> However, if Douglas Oliver's interpretation is correct, the staging of the corpse in Tahiti is testimony to a continuation beyond death of lived, affective relationships. Like the blood of the mourning women, the corpse appears in this context to be a visible, visceral sign of sustained feeling. Yet European observers such as Banks, by maintaining their skepticism, represent such displays as false theatrics rather than "true theatre." Abjection becomes not a sign of emotional interiority, but perversely its opposite: a sign of the surface nature of Tahitian sentiment.

### "THE RAGE INSPIRED BY HIS SORROW"

Tell me now, Can one pass and repass in this way from one deep feeling  
to another, from sorrow to anger, from anger to sorrow?

Diderot

Banks concludes his comments on death and mourning by remarking on the male ceremony of mourning that succeeds the female ritual of self-mutilation.

When these ceremonies have been performed for two or three days the men, who till now seemd to be intirely insensible of their loss, begin their part which the Nearest relations take in turns. They dress themselves in a dress so extraordinary that I question whether words can give a tolerable Idea of it. . . . In this dress they patrol the woods early in the morn and late at night, preceeded by 2 or 3 boys who have nothing upon them but a small peice of Cloth round their wrists and are smutted all over with Charcoal; these sable emissaries run about their principal in all directions as if in pursuit of people on whom he may vent the rage inspired by his sorrow, which he does most unmercifully if he catches any body, cutting them with his stick the edge of which is set with sharks teeth, but this rarely or never happens for no sooner does this figure appear than every one who see either him or his emissaries fly inspird with a sort of religious awe, fly with the utmost speed, hiding wherever they think themselves the most safe but by all means quitting their Houses if they lie even near the path of this dreadful apparition. (*Journal*, 1:378)

Like the feminine shifts between laughter and self-mutilation, these masculine ceremonies enact a similar transition from insensibility to a kind of performative excess, betraying a familiar slipperiness of affect, as sorrow inspires rage. The "sable emissaries'" displacement of the displays of the women marks a movement in which grief turned inward now turns outward: the shark's tooth employed against the self is now used to threaten others, and a kind of incorporation is replaced by venting.

Banks's claim that his words are insufficient to describe the costume of the male mourners belies the fact that he has an intimate knowledge of this ceremony, having played the role of "sable emissary" himself. On 9 June 1769 he witnessed for the first time the male mourning ceremony, and was inspired to request if he might attend. Banks was granted this access only as participant-observer, upon

agreeing to take up a role in the ceremony among the boys who attended on the chief mourner. The image of himself “smutted” for the role is prominent in his subsequent description of the scene:

I was next prepared by stripping off my European cloths and putting me on a small strip of cloth round my waist, the only garment I was allowed to have, but I had no pretensions to be ashamed of my nakedness for neither of the women were a bit more covered than myself. They then began to smut me and themselves with charcoal and water, the Indian boy was compleatly black, the women and myself as low as our shoulders. . . . Having scattered any Tahitians they could find we the *Ninevehs* then came to the *Heiva* and said *imatata*, there are no people; after which we repaired home, the *Heiva* undressed and we went into the river and scrubbd one another till it was dark before the blacking would come off. (*Journal*, 1:288–89)

The act of mimicry in which Banks engages as participant-observer is a particularly complex one, which claims a unique authority from a display of utter unself-consciousness. Although he disowns shame, confining its potential to the heterosexual politics of self-display (however naked he feels he is less exposed than the women), a sense of illicitness pervades a scene in which the aristocratic Englishman dresses down to play with native women and boys.<sup>14</sup> Banks’s impersonation is precariously poised between vulgar theatrics and a display of consummate cross-cultural flexibility. The repetition of the word “smut,” which in Banks’s day as now denoted indecent or obscene language as well as sooty matter, vulgarity as well as the possibility of a chameleon change of skin, reinforces the illicit aspect of his research. So, too, does Banks’s transliteration of his role (*neneva*) as Nineveh, invoking the biblical city that narrowly avoided being punished for its corruption by divine destruction (Jonah 1:2). Banks’s narrative entangles the acts of stripping and putting-on in ways that further complicate the act of mimicry. He “strip[s] off” in order to “put . . . me on a small strip” of material; he smuts himself black, but so do the Tahitians, so that any essential distinction between his white and their darker skin becomes equally obscured. Then, when stripping themselves of the disguise to which they had stripped, Banks’s jumbled phrasing—“scrubbd one another till it was dark before the blacking would come off”—ambiguously implies that the party becomes darker through the very act of ablution: an inadvertent acknowledgment, perhaps, that he has become nativized at a more than superficial level through his participation in the mourning ritual.

Banks’s participant role aggravates rather than assuages those issues of sincerity that later trouble his and other European accounts of Tahitian grief. If the theatre of death in Tahiti can incorporate such ill-rehearsed and disingenuous players as Banks, allowing him to supplant those “nearest relations” who, he has established, should play such roles, and whose interests apparently become subordinate to a desire to impress and include the European visitor, then how genuine can Tahitian rage or sorrow or friendship be? Banks’s flagrant participation in cross-cultural theatrics highlights a more general phenomenon, in which the presence of the participant-observer in the arena of sentiment casts doubt on the validity of the emotion expressed, raising the spectre of mimicry.<sup>15</sup>

### AFFECTIVE THEATRE: "THE OUTWARD SIGNS OF FEELING"

I seem exactly as if I suffered grief and shame: but do I suffer either?

Diderot

Banks's involvement in the funeral scene brings the European suspicion of Tahitian emotion full circle: anatomizing the theatrics of Tahitian grief by engaging in an inherently superficial performance. The relationship between acting and genuine feeling was extensively debated in Britain and France in the years preceding the first European voyages to Tahiti.<sup>16</sup> In England, John Hill's *The Actor: A Treatise on the Art of Playing* (1750) dilated on the "laws [for] the French stage" of Rémond de Sainte-Albine in promoting the notion of an essential link between theatrical and genuine emotion. Hill argued that:

The performer, who does not himself feel the several emotions he is to express to the audience, will give but a lifeless and insipid representation of them. All the art in the world can never supply the want of Sensibility in the player; if he is defective in this essential quality, all the advantages of nature, all the accomplishments he may have acquired by study, are thrown away upon him; he will never make others feel what he does not feel himself, and will always be as different from the thing he is to represent, as a mask from a face.<sup>17</sup>

Hill sets up a distinction between art and embodied feeling: without the invigorating essence of real sentiment, both natural and achieved accomplishments serve as the mere decoration of a corpse.

If Hill's comments suggest a natural relationship between heartfelt sympathy and the ability to represent it, however, this is complicated by an understanding of sensibility as epitomized by emotional flexibility, or what Hill terms "that pliantness of disposition by means of which the different passions are made easily to succeed one another in his soul." The notion that genuine sensibility was best represented by a quick succession of highly reflexive emotions led in turn to the development of gestural codes and exercises for stage actors. Aaron Hill's *Essay on the Art of Acting* identifies ten dramatic passions: Joy, Grief, Fear, Anger, Pity, Scorn, Hatred, Jealousy, Wonder, and Love, and proposes facial exercises that will enable the actor best to convey these emotions individually and in succession. For the purposes of this essay's argument, I will quote from his instructions on performing Grief:

A speaker, who would distress his imagination, into a complete assumption of . . . sorrow . . . , will first consider, that *grief* being a passion the most opposite in nature to joy, his look, that before was enliven'd, must, now, in a moment, take a mournful and declin'd impression. His muscles must fall loose, and be unbrac'd into the habit of languor.—And, then, no sooner shall his nerves have form'd themselves to this lax disposition, for complying with the melancholy demand of the sentiments, than his voice also will associate its sound to the plaintive resignation of his gesture, and the result, both in the air, and in accent, will be the most moving resemblance of a heart-felt and passionate sorrow.<sup>18</sup>

In eighteenth-century acting theory the language of emotion is figured as one of flux. Emotions are defined interrelationally, in terms of the subtle expressive differences that belie highly contradictory emotional states. The consolidation of a language of gesture was not intended, in texts such as Hill's, to call into question the genuineness of the emotion portrayed. Yet if texts such as the *Essay on the Art of Acting* seek to define the essential lineaments of human emotion, they also imply a lack of definition between emotions—their capacity to slip into one another. They also, of course, reveal techniques by which expression can be artfully manipulated, so that, as William Worthen elucidates, “if the actor's use of the natural language of gesture epitomizes the principles of social interaction, his ability to depict the signs of passion disingenuously—to become a kind of sincere hypocrite—profoundly threatens the necessary spontaneity of expression that makes gesture so crucial to the benevolent society.”<sup>19</sup>

Worthen has argued that texts such as Hill's can be placed alongside social theoretical writings of the same period, such as Kames's discourse on the “External Signs of Emotions and Passions”: both argue for an expressive language that is universally intelligible. The facial communication of expression appears capable of transcending particularities of language and culture. But if theories of acting and social emotion in this sense combined to create a climate of confidence for the assessment of cross-cultural representations of emotion such as those represented by Tahitian mourning, they equally undermined that confidence by suggesting that faces might be put on, not in the recognizably stylized mode of masks, but through careful manipulation of skin and muscle, creating not a static but a “moving resemblance” of heart-felt and passionate emotion. Take Edward Robarts's description of the apparently quickly shifting emotions of Marquesan women in mourning. Robarts writes:

Numbers of women allways comes to weep over the deceased. Their tears are allways very handy. I have seen women weep with so much apparent sorrow that I thought their hearts would break, and at the same breath would get up, wipe her eyes and go sing in another part of the house, or tell those around her what a fine schole of fish had been caught that day. This sudden change I could not let pass unnoticed to see the difference between real and false sorrow.<sup>20</sup>

Robarts's neologism “appearant” highlights the notion of deceptive appearances, which is supported by a range of references that suggest a confusion of gestural language. “Handy” tears spring to the hand rather than to the eye, presumably by a kind of sleight of hand; the same breath breaks hearts and invigorates; rooms of the house, rather like those of the body's temple, are devoted to apparently contradictory behaviors. Robarts's affront that such contradictions can be accommodated without self-fragmentation produces an attempt to infer a typology of expression from what he sees, with the shifts of emotion in the Marquesan women figuring as allegories of “real and false sorrow.”

In France, two of the most didactic treatises on theatricality were produced by authors who also romanticized “savage” over “civilized” society. Jean-Jacques Rousseau promulgated a distinction between natural and social behaviors, arguing that progress rendered natural feeling egocentric and attenuated. In his *Discourse on Inequality* (1754) he wrote of “the pure emotion of nature, prior to all kinds

of reflection,” and used the example of the theatre to epitomize the falsification of emotion that arises with increasing cultural sophistication:

we daily find at our theatres men affected, nay shedding tears at the sufferings of a wretch who, were he in the tyrant's place, would probably even add to the torments of his enemies; like the bloodthirsty Sulla, who was so sensitive to ills he had not caused, or that Alexander of Pheros who did not dare to go and see any tragedy acted, for fear of being seen weeping with Andromache and Priam, though he could listen without emotion to the cries of all the citizens who were daily strangled at his command.<sup>21</sup>

Rousseau invoked “the sanguinary Sulla [who] cried at the accounts of evils he had not himself committed” again in his *Letter to d’Alembert Concerning Spectacles* (1758), a response to d’Alembert’s suggestion in his *Encyclopédie* entry on Geneva, that the city would be improved as a civilized center by the construction of a theatre. Here Rousseau again figures the theatre as a microcosm of urban society, and as such a space of disingenuous feeling:

I hear it said that tragedy leads to pity through fear. So it does; but what is this pity? A fleeting and vain emotion which lasts no longer than the illusion which produced it; a vestige of natural sentiment soon stifled by the passions; a sterile pity which feeds on a few tears and which has never produced the slightest act of humanity.<sup>22</sup>

Rousseau recognizes the capacity of emotions to suggest or morph into one another: thus tragedy exploits the imbrication of pity and fear within the human psyche. But he further observes that theatrical catharsis constitutes a closed emotional circuit: sentiment expends itself within the theatre, rather than producing moral outcomes in the world beyond its walls:

If, according to the observation of Diogenes Laertius, the heart is more readily touched by feigned ills than real ones, if theatrical imitations draw forth more tears than would the presence of the objects imitated, it is less because the emotions are feebler and do not reach the level of pain . . . than because they are pure and without mixture of anxiety for ourselves. In giving our tears to these fictions, we have satisfied all the rights of humanity without having to give anything more of ourselves. (*Letter*, 268–69)

In Rousseau’s ideological syntax, the theatre is to “natural” sentiment as civilized is to “natural” man. Tears are caught up in its economy of fabrication, flowing more readily in contexts of manufactured sentiment than in situations where they might lead to charitable impulses.

Like Rousseau, Denis Diderot, in his *Supplement to Bougainville’s Voyage* (1771), opposes a genuine “savage” sentiment to metropolitan false feeling, albeit in far more skeptical mode. Diderot’s essay *The Paradox of Acting*, a text finished in 1778 but not published until 1830, evinces a more particular skepticism about urban sensibility. Where John Hill saw the actor as drawing on genuine feeling, and Rousseau bemoaned theatre’s engagement of a false or vestigial sentimentality, for Diderot the actor in the theatre must *ideally* be emotionally disengaged, “an unmoved and disinterested onlooker” with “penetration and no sensibility.”<sup>23</sup> Diderot elaborates at length on the particular art behind the actor’s emotional deception:

The actor has listened over and over again to his own voice. At the very moment when he touches your heart he is listening to his own voice; his talent depends not, as you think, upon feeling, but upon rendering so exactly the outwards signs of feeling, that you fall into the trap. He has rehearsed to himself every note of his passion. He has learnt before a mirror every particle of his despair. He knows exactly when he must produce his handkerchief and shed tears; and you will see him weep at the word, at the syllable, he has chosen, not a second sooner or later. The broken voice, the half-uttered words, the stifled or prolonged notes of agony, the trembling limbs, the faintings, the bursts of fury—all this is pure mimicry, lessons carefully learned; the grimacing of sorrow, the magnificent aping which the actor remembers long after his first study of it, of which he was perfectly conscious when he first put it before the public. (19)

In the figure of the actor, Diderot makes a virtue of a phenomenon that posed a threat to so many eighteenth-century commentators: the possibility of standing aloof from and falsely representing genuine sentiment. He manages this by maintaining a complete separation of spheres between the world of the stage and the world at large: “the actor says nothing and does nothing in private life in the same way as on the stage: it is a different world” (57). The unsettling specter of false sentiment embodied in much theatrical criticism of the period when Diderot composed his essay becomes contained: relegated only to the profession of the actor.

There are, however, traces of an ongoing ambiguity about the status of performed emotion in Diderot’s discourse, which surfaces in the slippage between a notion of the actor as on the one hand lacking sensibility, and on the other as embodying emotional self-restraint. Like Adam Smith’s restrained griever, both Diderot’s actor and dramatist exert “that recollection and self-command which constitute the dignity of every passion.” Diderot privileges a dramatic poetry that is created “in moments of stillness and self-command,” claiming that “the extravagant creature who loses his self-control has no hold on us; this is gained by the man who is self-controlled” (17). The contrast between “extravagant creature” and “the man who is self-controlled” is inherently gendered, and Diderot soon makes this explicit, arguing that “If a man who is really manly drops a tear, it touches us more nearly than a storm from a weeping woman” (18). Behind this dichotomy of sentiment lies a distaste for and fear of their opposites: the effeminate man, and more particularly the cold woman. Diderot initially praises the actor Clairon for her performative detachment: “she has herself well in hand, she repeats her efforts without emotion. . . . As she lies careless and still on a sofa with folded arms and closed eyes she can, following her memory’s dream, hear herself, see herself, judge herself, and judge also the effects she will produce” (16). Yet from this image of a feminine abandonment that is perfectly calculated develops a more unsettling vision of a false maternal sentiment:

This is all very well, you may reply; but what of these touching and sorrowful accents that are drawn from the very depths of a mother’s heart and that shake her whole being? Are these not the result of true feeling? are these not the very inspiration of despair? Most certainly not. The proof is that they are all planned; that they are part of a system of declamation; that, raised or lowered by the twentieth part of a quarter of a tone, they would ring false; . . . Look you, before he cries “*Zaire vous*

*pleurez,*” or “*Vous y serez ma fille,*” the actor has listened over and over again to his own voice. (19)

Natural sentiment turns out, once again, to be the product of a very careful “system” calculated to the smallest fraction. And with this realization, the actor as falsely grieving mother morphs into the male actor addressing a daughter: as though even Diderot must shy away from his own harsh contemplation of disingenuous maternity. Against this he in turn sets the pathetic spectacle of genuine grief which cannot communicate, but rather, by failing to embody coldly the ideal image of emotion, provokes contradictory responses of indifference, amusement, or dislike:

An unhappy, a really unhappy woman, may weep and fail to touch you; worse than that, some trivial disfigurement in her may incline you to laughter; the accent which is apt to her is to your ears dissonant and vexatious; a movement which is habitual to her makes her grief show ignobly and sulkily to you; almost all the violent passions lend themselves to grimaces which a tasteless artist will copy but too faithfully, and which a great actor will avoid. (23)

Diderot’s model of the genuinely sensitive but theatrically untalented actress is Madame Riccoboni: “There was an incident in her life which led her to the brink of the tomb. After an interval of twenty years she has not ceased to weep; the source of her tears is not yet dry” (58–59). Still welling with tears of genuine grief, Madame Riccoboni is nonetheless and indeed therefore “one of the worst actresses that ever appeared on the stage” (59).

The shifting pronouns of Diderot’s sophisticated discourse on acting are illuminating for thinking about European responses to Oceanic sentiment, and particularly to the sentiment of grief. As I noted earlier in this essay, Europeans observed Tahitian mourning rituals to be significantly gendered, and were careful to distinguish female and male roles. It was, however, consistently the female mourner who raised the specter of false feeling. Thus William Bligh felt free to doubt the sincerity of a mourning mother:

I was suddenly surprised by a violent degree of distress by some one at a little distance off . . . . As I expressed a desire to see the distressed person, Tynah took me to the place, but we no sooner came in sight than the Mourner burst into a fit of laughter at seeing me. This person was a Mother of a Young female Child that lay dead. Several Young Women were with her, but they all resumed a degree of cheerfulness, and the tears were immediatly dried up. I told Tynah the Woman had no sorrow for her Child, as her greif could not so easily have subsided if it was that case that she regretted the loss of it. When with some humour, he told her to cry again; however we left her without any visible marks of its return. (2:18)

However, Bligh respected paternal grief. Encountering the two bereaved parents of a young man who died of consumption, a mother and father both overwhelmed by sorrow and engaged in complementary rituals of self-mutilation, he singled out the father as exemplary:

I may state the above instance as an example of Parental tenderness and sorrow at the loss of a Child, equal to what it would have been in the most civilized society. We see the Father in the height of sorrow and distress assisting his beloved Son in his last moments, and when life no longer remained, effecting such offices, manfully Struggling against the weight of Sorrow that would carry everything before it, but for that intuitive principal of duty, which nothing can get the better of among these people. (2:51)

The father's resistance to his own distress created a space for that distress to be recognized as genuine. The mother's grief, on the other hand, in its lack of containment and labile expressivity, became suspect. Its very visibility rendered it fit for disregard. Yet it is Bligh's own voyeuristic detachment that stands out in the earlier passage. Motivated by a "desire to see the distressed," Bligh rushes to a scene of mourning, whose tenor shifts once he himself is "in sight." The mother responds to his sudden arrival with laughter that might threaten to expose the inappropriateness of Bligh's own prurient enthusiasm for others' grief, but for his ability to refer it instead to her want of feeling. Tynah maintains the mode of levity by, "with some humour," and presumably recognizable irony, directing the mother to cry on cue, yet Bligh finds confirmation of her lack of feeling in the fact that "visible marks" of sorrow do not at this stage reappear. He factors out the effect of his own dominant emotion, curiosity, upon the emotions of the female mourners he is keen to observe. The intrusion of two high-status males, one of them a foreigner, into the rituals through which grief is being managed makes the scene of bereavement an explicit performance space, and the emotion which Bligh had conceded was surprisingly "violent" when private becomes self-conscious and abashed. In Diderot's terms, this very inability to hold a pose, to become emblematic of grief like the bereaved father, rather than a messy participant in the mixed emotions with which encounter confuses ritual, would signify genuineness of feeling. Like Madame Riccoboni, the mother cannot act. Bligh's assumption that therefore she does not feel leads to his enjoyment of Tynah's humor, which has something of the punitive relish of a male child affronted by the very possibility of a callous maternity.

The unnatural mother and the feeling father seem to invert the conventional feminine gendering of sensibility. Bligh's portrait of restrained and therefore eloquent masculine emotion exemplifies that union of stoicism with feeling that Julie Ellison has shown to complicate discourses of sensibility,<sup>24</sup> and which was exemplified by Adam Smith's endorsement of "reserved, . . . silent and majestic sorrow." On the other hand, if curiosity is associated in the late eighteenth century primarily with masculine authority—with the burgeoning world of exploration and collecting—it also connotes a lax acquisitiveness and morally dubious intrusiveness that tend towards feminine gendering. As Nicholas Thomas has argued, during the period of European exploration in the Pacific, "though the idea of legitimate inquisitiveness is often encountered, there are many forceful statements in a variety of genres to the effect that curiosity is feminine, unstable, somehow tarnished, and licensed in the sense of licentiousness rather than in that of authorization."<sup>25</sup> Bligh's over-enthusiastic coffin-chasing during his Tahitian sojourn (see 2:18, 35, 43–44, 50, 57) risks participating in this version of curiosity. Instead he passes the burden of emotional indignity to the grieving mother, and then retrieves true sensibility for masculine subjectivity through the figure of the appropriately restrained grieving

father. The Tahitian scene of mourning, then, opens up for European voyagers not simply differences between cultural rituals, or reflections on the authenticity of sentiment, but also the question of how both ritual and sentiment are gendered and reassigned across cultural boundaries. It is an intimation of the blurring of their own intentions and motives in these foreign landings that prompts Europeans to seek out, scrutinize, and suspect the feelings of others.

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NOTES

1. William Bligh, *The log of the Bounty: being Lieutenant William Bligh's log of the proceedings of His Majesty's armed vessel Bounty in a voyage to the South Seas, to take the breadfruit from the Society Islands to the West Indies*, ed. Owen Rutter, 2 vols. (London: Golden Cockerel Press, 1937), I:416. (Hereafter cited in the text.)
2. Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 97.
3. Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 2 vols. (New York: Garland 1885), 1:434–35.
4. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 29–30.
5. Julie Ellison, *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999), 70.
6. Douglas Oliver, *Ancient Tahitian Society*, 3 vols. (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1974), 2:591. (Hereafter cited in the text as ATS.)
7. Joseph Banks, *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks 1768–1771*, ed. J. C. Beaglehole, 2 vols. (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1962), 1:376. (Hereafter cited in the text as *Journal*.)
8. Tom Lutz, *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears* (New York and London: Norton, 2001), 203. (Hereafter cited in the text.)
9. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997), 140.
10. "Mourning and Melancholia," in Sigmund Freud, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, Pelican Freud Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 257–58.
11. The sustained presence of the corpse confronts the ethos that Joseph Roach argues informs an expanding project in eighteenth-century Europe: to confine the dead outside the city in "dedicated and isolated cemeteries," and so reform the hitherto "scandalous propinquity" of living and dead. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1996), 50.
12. William Ellis, *Polynesian Researches, during a residence of nearly six years in the South Sea islands*, 2 vols. (1829; London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1967), 519.
13. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982), 3.
14. Robert Levy describes the male mourning ritual as "inverse behavior" in *Tahitians: Mind and Experience in the Society Islands* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1973), 291.
15. Jonathan Lamb has argued that metropolitan sympathy was subject to a pressure akin to the one I'm suggesting skewed perceptions of peripheral grief: it could quickly appear mechanical or theatrical: "the consistent transformation of an egoistic into a social impulse ran the danger of losing its self-evidence and becoming a performance" (*Preserving the Self in the South Seas 1680–1840* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001], 253).
16. Detailed analysis of a more comprehensive selection of acting treatises than could be covered in the scope of this article can be found in Paul Goring, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century*

*Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005). Goring suggests that via such treatises the bodies of actors “became invested with the potential to symbolize politeness and to propagate its modes of expression, and consequently they were enlisted as civilizing tools in both the legitimization of the theatres and the nurturing of polite culture more broadly” (9). Goring skillfully argues that such texts were instruments of legitimation in metropolitan Britain: however, I am concerned here to emphasize the potential they also had to foster incredulity in the arena of the emotions.

17. John Hill, *The Actor: A Treatise on the Art of Playing. Interspersed with Theatrical Anecdotes, Critical Remarks on Plays, and Occasional Observations on Audiences* (London: R. Griffiths, 1750), 15–16.

18. Aaron Hill, “An Essay on the Art of Acting,” in *The works of the late Aaron Hill, Esq; in four volumes. Consisting of letters on various subjects, and of original poems, moral and facetious. With an essay on the art of acting* (London, 1754), 4:348.

19. William B. Worthen, *The Idea of the Actor: Drama and the Ethics of Performance* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), 84.

20. *The Marquesan journal of Edward Robarts, 1797–1824*, ed. Greg Denning (Canberra: Australian National Univ. Press, 1974), 56.

21. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on a subject proposed by the Academy of Dijon: What is the Origin of Inequality among Men, and is it authorised by Natural Law*, Trans. G. D. H. Cole, Part 1, <http://www.constitution.org/jjr/ineq.htm>, 03.

22. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Letter to D’Alembert and Writings for the Theater*, ed. and trans. Allan Bloom, Charles Butterworth, and Christopher Kelly (Hanover and London: Univ. Press of New England, 2004), 268.

23. Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*, trans. Walter Herries Pollock (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 14. (Hereafter cited in the text.)

24. Ellison has convincingly argued that the assumption that sensibility is gendered feminine is overdue for revision: “the relationship between gender and sensibility is not symmetrical or transitive” (20).

25. Nicholas Thomas, “Licensed Curiosity: Cook’s Pacific Voyages,” in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion, 1994), 123.