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Chapter X

Finitude Before Finitude: The Case of Rousseau-Bougainville-Diderot

Benoît Dillet

[The] song [of sirens], we must remember, was aimed at sailors, men who take risks and feel bold impulses, and it was also a means of navigation: it was a distance, and it revealed the possibility of traveling this distance, of making the song into the movement toward the song, and of making this movement the expression of the greatest desire. Strange navigation, but toward what end (Blanchot 2003: 4)?

The New World

‘Our world has just discovered another one’, wrote Montaigne (1991: 1029) after reading and condemning detailed accounts of the massacres orchestrated by the Spaniards in present-day Mexico, Florida and Brazil. It is from the notes and fragments of his *Journal de Voyage* (1580–81; discovered in 1770 and published in 1774), written before the period of the Grand Tour, that Montaigne compiled and developed in his reflections in his *Essais* (1580–95). Gilbert Chinard studied Montaigne as one of the first French thinkers (with the philosopher of law, Jean Bodin) to recognise the good nature of Native Americans; their defence of these Indigenous people was a way to critique French society without being condemned (Chinard 1970: 212–17). In his well-known and controversial chapter ‘On the Cannibals’, Montaigne (1991: 228–41) neither advocated a return to nature, nor a celebration of cannibalism, but he aimed at denouncing, much like many humanitarians

today, the atrocities and the massacres in America. Perhaps independent of his will, Montaigne started a new tradition, what Chinard called 'the exotic dream'. It is precisely this rise of 'exoticism' that Chinard studies that interests us here: how the opening of a new world, America, has had tremendous effects on both anthropological thought and the imaginary of travel. Yet, the notion of exoticism is ambiguous and how it links to finitude. 'Exo-' in exoticism denotes both the possibility of an exteriority, but it is a *known* exteriority. It is, however, not an overstatement to claim for instance that Montaigne's defence of the 'primitives' makes him a precursor to subaltern studies since he aimed not only at writing about the human traits of the primitives, but also to launch the first critique of European humanist thought by joining the resistance of these peoples against colonialism and imperialism.

For the literary critic, Michel de Certeau (1986: 68), the 'discovery' of the 'new world' was only really significant because of the space that it opened in the text. Montaigne's text produces the other inside the text; the discovery of a new place is then also replicated inside language to reveal the reworking of space inside the text. This reworking was not necessarily a positive one for the primitives, and Montaigne's defence aimed precisely at participating in the re-writing and the re-shaping of this space to lodge the resistance of the other. Following the same line, Anthony Pagden (1993) argues that the 'new world' is not America but Europe, since America in itself had always already been there when the Europeans 'discovered' it, what was new was the space America started to take in Europe's image of space, but also the change in Europe's understanding of time. In creating a new space, travellers participate in the task of *poiesis*, with the material supports of books, drawings and maps but also artefacts and plants found in remote lands. One of the main themes underlying this chapter is how anthropology and ethnography were born overseas or, to be more precise, how anthropology was invented

between the writing of overseas travels and their reading by some of the most prominent Enlightenment figures (Liebersohn 2008: 17–31).

Tahiti

I believe that understanding travel as poetics *today* requires another voyage, a travel back to the eighteenth century when the travel writing genre (especially ‘sea-narratives’) was immensely popular. Hundreds of narratives were published, sometimes real accounts, sometimes unauthorised compilations of previous accounts, or simply pure fabulations. Although this new literary production had multiple effects, it served many different and sometimes conflicting roles. Overseas travel writing had to respond to a compromise and tension between the ‘general public’ who made it profitable and gratifying, but it also had to provide as much scientific and technical observation as possible (Edwards 1994: 8). The competition between France and Great Britain for world domination was fierce and travel narratives did not escape this conflict. Apart from the essential legal and political control of the seas, narratives and testimonies also aimed at justifying the imperial conquest. The ‘discovery’ of Tahiti, first in 1767 by the expedition led by Samuel Wallis, then 10 months later by Louis-Antoine Bougainville, did not escape from this logic.

Tahiti is synonymous with a long history of exoticism in French thought. Soon after the publication of Bougainville’s travel accounts, it quickly became rightly or wrongly the epitome of Rousseau’s description of the state of nature, and it also led to the development of anthropology before anthropology. At that time, overseas travellers were employed by the state to explore, study, and most importantly colonise; for instance Louis-Antoine Bougainville and Charles de La Condamine for France, and Thomas Cook for the British Empire. The infinitude of the world for European thought meant that there was a contiguity

between knowledge and travel, a border between the known and the unknown could be drawn.

The context of Bougainville's voyage around the world (1766–69) is two-fold. First from the eighteenth century onwards, travels were organised by patronage, which shaped both their routes and their writings. 'Many decades before the British, the French state took a direct role in organizing expeditions with scientific ends, method, expertise, and organization' (Liebersohn 2006: 81). Given the well-defined aims of these voyages, the specific routes to follow and the explicit commitment to further colonial expansion for evermore political domination, intellectuals read travellers' accounts with suspicion. Almost contemporary to Bougainville's voyage, Raynal and Diderot wrote in *L'histoire des deux Indes*: 'the contemplative man is sedentary, and the traveller is ignorant or a liar' (Raynal 1794: 66).¹ Secondly, the context was also that of Rousseauism and the noble savage. Atkinson argues that it is not a coincidence if the 'noble savage' was not found in Africa but on the other side of the Cape of Good Hope, in Oceania and in the Pacific islands, 'distance adds a lot to beauty' (Atkinson 1924: 64–5). The search for an earthly paradise inherited from the Christian tradition motivated and guided the travellers (Eliade 1955).² The mythical figure of the noble savage fascinated the sailors much like sirens. Atkinson also notes that to the mythical figure of the noble savage, should be added the significant presence of the Utopian tradition from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This tradition was first renewed by Thomas More and Francis Bacon, but a 'literary tradition of Utopias had become very French before the death of Louis XIV [in 1715], through Utopists who nowadays are much less known: Bergeron, Foigny, Vairasse, Gilbert, Lahontan and Tyssot de Patot' (Atkinson 1924: 22). In the Utopian tradition, what is idealised is not the individual but societies, it is the living together – the being-with (*Mitsein*) – that is emphasised. Therefore, the co-existence of the myth of the noble savage

with Utopian thought meant that Bougainville and his men ‘were prepared, before travelling, to find “republics” in savage or semi- civilised countries’ (Atkinson 1924: 47).³ It is in this difference and spacing that Bougainville’s *Voyage Around the World* should be read.

Rousseau

At the same time as his famous *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, Rousseau argued for the necessity of scientific travel. This is particularly well-developed in the section ‘On Travel’ at the end of *Emile, or On Education*, originally published in 1762, where he gives prescriptions on a good way of travelling:

But once the utility of travel is recognized, does it follow that it is suitable for everyone? Far from it. On the contrary, it is suitable for only very few people ... Everything that is done by reason ought to have its rules. Travel – taken as a part of education – ought to have its rules. To travel for the sake of traveling is to wander, to be a vagabond. To travel to inform oneself is still to have too vague an aim (Rousseau 1979: 455).⁴

Ultimately, the purpose of travelling for Rousseau is to find a home, in order to ‘fix’ one’s life to a place. Travel functions as a way to return to home, since there is no return to the state of nature, but an appreciation of the origins of humans. Only by recognising the goodness of humans, and by gathering the customs and practices of other societies, can travel be fruitful to the self and others. While a similar positive judgement on travel is found in Diderot and D’Alembert’s *Encyclopedia* – in Louis de Jaucourt’s entry on ‘Voyage’⁵ – Rousseau (1979: 455) emphasised that ‘it is suitable for very few people to

travel'. In his elitist picture of travel, Rousseau warns against vagabonds who travel for travel's sake and affirms that on the contrary, before leaving his home, the traveller has to know philosophy (if not become a philosopher) in order to know what he is searching for.

While in the work of Rousseau there is a progression and a movement from his *Discourse on Inequality*, first published in 1755, to *Emile, or On Education*, published in 1762, it is nonetheless important to remember that these two treatises were published before Bougainville left for his voyage around the world in 1766. Bougainville returned from his voyage in 1769 and published his accounts of the travel (which is a rewriting of his diary) in 1771. Diderot first wrote an unpublished review of Bougainville's *Voyage* (Diderot 1995) and finally published his *Supplément to Bougainville's Voyage* in 1773, which will be discussed after Rousseau and Bougainville in this chapter.

Therefore, when Rousseau, as it is well-known, denigrated the status of travel writing in his *Discourse on Inequality*, he prepared the ground for his reflection on the educational benefits of travel in *Emile*:

For the three or four hundred years since the inhabitants of Europe inundated the other parts of the world and continually published new collections of travels and stories, I am convinced that we know no other men but the Europeans alone ... *it seems that philosophy travels nowhere* ... The reason for this is manifest, at least for distant countries. There are hardly more than four sorts of men who make long voyages: sailors, merchants, soldiers, and missionaries. Now we can hardly expect the first three classes to provide good observers; and as for those in the fourth ... we must believe that they would not voluntarily commit themselves to investigations that would appear to be sheer curiosity (Rousseau 1987: 99, emphasis added).

For Rousseau, the production of travel writing is problematic because ‘philosophy travels nowhere’, and only interested men travel and write travel accounts that compete with and overshadow the more noble philosophical treatises. However, this is why there is a compatibility between his argument in the *Discourse* and in *Emile*: he explains in the *Discourse on Inequality* that if a voyage were made by a philosopher or a man of letters it would be ‘the most important voyage of all’, since ‘we ourselves would see a new world sally forth from their pen, and we would thus learn to know our own’ (Rousseau 1987: 100).⁶

Rousseau extensively used travel writing (Chinard 1911) to formulate his argument in the *Discourse on Inequality*, especially in order to formulate his idea of the natural goodness of man.⁷ His disdain of travel writings comes from his desire to see an established discipline of anthropology. At the time of the writing of the *Discourse on Inequality*, neither ethnology nor anthropology existed as such, and this is why he could only use the work of travel writers as well as naturalists (or natural historians). In fact, the other main source for the text, beside his debate with Hobbes and Locke, is Buffon’s *Natural History* (published between 1749 and 1788), especially the ‘natural history of man’ from the second book.⁸ In the absence of any form of anthropological thought, Rousseau turns to natural history to find how a discourse on nature can inform the knowledge of man. As it is well-known, this is the questioning of the relationship between nature and the human that led Claude Lévi-Strauss to consider *Discourse on Inequality* as ‘the first treatise of general ethnology’ (Lévi-Strauss 1996: 47).⁹

One of the ambiguities of Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality* is the place given to the natural man. At times, Rousseau refuted his concrete and historical existence (Rousseau 1987: 58), yet the notes that he later added attempted to provide empirical proof

of the existence of a state of nature and of natural men in remote lands, discovered by the travellers. The notes then complicate the text and give it a second layer. He could have easily refuted his argument about the solitary life of the natural man with the descriptions of the social life of ‘the savage men’, but he decided to keep the ambiguity by juxtaposing the fictional and timeless ideal state of nature together with the discussion of empirical descriptions from travellers’ accounts. According to Lévi-Strauss, only philosophers, who come after Rousseau, can do ‘a reversal of the relation between the self and the other’, while also asserting that ‘nature presents us incarnated in “sensible objects”’ (Lévi-Strauss 1996: 51).

Thus, Rousseau opened the path to anthropology and ethnological studies, explicitly asking philosophers to travel in order to report back on the social and political organisation of the ‘savage men’ encountered during the ‘discoveries’ made by these great travellers. It will therefore be tempting to *a posteriori* call Bougainville the philosopher-traveller that Rousseau desired, but while Bougainville was a mathematician and was a remarkably talented man of letters (he also studied under d’Alembert), the reality is rather different.

Bougainville

What is remarkable about Bougainville’s travel is the voids of the map that it intends to reach and know. But it is also only through the text of the map and the text of his ‘relation of voyage’ that his and his men's discoveries could be actualised. As de Certeau (1986) argues, it is the text that produces the first figure of the other, but differently from the surfaces of the book, the map also worked towards ordering the world, appropriating land and tracing lines of powers. Cartography codifies the names of continents, islands, rivers, hills, etc. given by travellers, and the map is turned into a technology of power that

‘frames’ the environment of everyone who visits these places (Waggaman 1992: 99-115).¹⁰ Cartography is more than simply a spatial representation of the world, but is also a writing of space, a composition of both verbal as well as non-verbal signs. For navigators, especially in the eighteenth century, to use their predecessors’ map was like ‘travel[ing] in their predecessors’ language’ (de Certeau 1986: 145).

Bougainville’s map of his company’s travel (Figures X.1 and X.2) clearly illustrates the infinite nature of the world in 1769: Australia has no contours, many of today’s islands are ‘missing’, the earth is an unknown place. The fifth continent did not have a name until the French geographer and cartographer Conrad Malte-Brun named it ‘Oceania’ in his treatise *Géographie de toutes les parties du monde*, published in 1804.



Figure X.1 : World map by Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d’Anville (1771) from Bougainville’s dairy *Bougainville et ses compagnons autour du monde*, vol. 1, ed. E. Taillemite (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1978). By permission of Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figure X.2 : Detail of world map by Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville (1771) from Bougainville's dairy *Bougainville et ses compagnons autour du monde*, vol. 1, ed. E. Taillemite (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1978). By permission of Bibliothèque nationale de France.

It is as if the voids of the maps were waiting to be filled for these empty spaces are not merely representations of the sea but of the unknown, outside the borders of European knowledge. This configuration is hard to imagine today, but the 'voids' of the world captured the imaginary of both travellers as well as the readers of travel accounts. The relations of travel change how the world is imagined, by contesting legal, moral, political and epistemic borders. In fact, the map and textual descriptions are the first way to 'acquire a *dominium*' (Pagden 2008: 427), to begin the appropriation of new spaces. The first objective of these scientific (or proto-scientific) explorations was the appropriation of land – which is denounced by Denis Diderot in his *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* – rather than a disinterested study and a disinterested admiration of these remote and unknown lands. Maps frame Europe's relation to the world, reading the world can only be done through the *dominium* of the maps.

The methods to acquire such knowledge of the ‘outside’, the ‘beyond’ or the ‘unknown’ are diverse, and the authenticity of these travel accounts was often questioned. There is no definite method that was in use for directing travel accounts besides the fact that they were destined for the royal courts or the other powers that had financed the travel. For instance, in the agreement describing the objectives of the voyage undertaken by Bougainville (1766–9), addressed to King Louis XV by Bougainville (though referring to himself in the third person), it first states that ‘it may be advantageous for France to know [these Pacific islands] and to acquire them’. Regarding the collection of ‘ethnographic’ information, the guideline is rather vague:

it is in these climates that we find rich metals and spices. Sir Bougainville will examine the soils, the trees and the principal productions; he will bring back samples and drawings of everything that he will judge of interest; he will observe, as much as possible, all the places to be used for anchorage for naval vessels and everything that can be of interest for navigation (Bougainville 1966: 25).

The politics of naming then comes into play as a method of assigning meaning to the unknown parts of the world. A nominalist practice comes to substitute the lack of precise ethnographic methods, and it is in fact both a minimalist and powerful method: inscribing space to leave an indelible mark of the journey on the map. In describing travel as the process of writing space, de Certeau certainly captures well what it may have been like for some of the great travellers of the nineteenth century (Cook, Wallis, Bougainville, Humboldt, and so forth): ‘What gradually fills the world’s voids with words, multiplies and details representations (geographical maps, historical enactments, etc.), and thus

“conquers” space by marking it with meanings, is a component of and force within history’ (de Certeau 1986: 139, emphasis added).

The writing of the world is then a process of history-making, and the authors of the text of the world become the great men of history, to be remembered and commemorated. Of course, the politics of naming is not independent of everyday occurrences and accidents. For example, Bougainville writes in his *Voyage* that he decided to name a small isle, *île de la Pentecôte* (Pentecoste island), because that was the day when the ship perceived it. Another one was named *île de l’Aurore* (Daybreak island) since the crew saw it in the early morning (Bougainville 1966: 242). The act of naming can also fall under certain prejudices about the people being named, for instance Bougainville called another island, *île des Lépreux* (island of Lepers) due to the first judgements he made regarding the inhabitants.

The choice of names for the ‘newly discovered island’, Tahiti, is insightful in understanding the impressions of Bougainville and his company and the objectives of the mission. Wallis decided to name the island in 1767 ‘King George III Island’, but the first name given by the French to designate Tahiti was ‘Utopia’, revealing a desire to establish an exchange between philosophy and empirical observation. This name was given by the French naturalist and botanist Philibert de Commerson, who is not as well known as Bougainville, but Liebersohn’s recent work reconsidered his influence, leading him to affirm that Commerson ‘came close to fulfilling Rousseau’s call for a scientific world traveler’ (Liebersohn 2006: 20). However, Bougainville’s expedition was far from being a scientific exploration. Jacques Proust notes that the expedition did not bring back many samples of plants, spices and animals, but remained famous for its description of Tahiti as a natural Utopia, illustrating the ‘trendy “rousseauism”, even though the myth of the “noble savage” had nothing to do with the thought of Rousseau’ (Proust 1982: 13). Proust

is right to emphasise the difference between Rousseau's thought and a form of 'Rousseauism' that was popular at the time, and Bougainville and his company were certainly more influenced by this *air du temps* than by the philosopher's theses. By explaining how Banks and Solander from Cook's expedition spent three months in Tahiti, while the French spent only nine days, Proust can conclude: 'The era of great scientific explorations had begun [with Cook], while the time of the adventure as *rêverie* [*l'aventure rêveuse*] ended with Bougainville' (Proust 1982: 14).

The fact that Commerson, the naturalist who was selected by Buffon for the expedition, named the island 'Utopia' in itself questions the accuracy of the ethnographic material that the company brought back. The second name given by the French to Tahiti was '*la Nouvelle-Cythère*'¹¹; Bougainville's first impressions of the island seem to have been the only motives for this name: the Tahitian offered 'their' women to the sailors as soon as they arrived and Bougainville thought that the beauty of the women was goddess-like.

While Bougainville and his team were still on the ship, the first Tahitian pirogues were welcoming the crew with noise and excitement, screaming '*tayo*' (friend):

[T]he pirogues were crowded with women; who for agreeable features, are not inferior to most European women; and who in point of beauty of the body might, with much reason, vie with them all. Most of these nymphs were naked; for the men and the old women that accompanied them, had stripped them of the garments which they generally dress themselves in. The glances which they gave us from their pirogues, seemed to discover some degree of uneasiness, notwithstanding the innocent manner in which they were given; perhaps, because nature has everywhere embellished their sex with a natural timidity; or because

even in those countries, where the ease of the golden age is still in use, women seem least to desire what they most wish for. The men, who were more plain, or rather more free, soon explained their meaning very clearly. They pressed us to choose a woman, and to come on shore with her; and their gestures, which were nothing less than equivocal, denoted in what manner we should form an acquaintance with her. It was very difficult, amidst such a spectacle, to keep at their work four hundred young French sailors, who had seen no women for six months. In spite of all our precautions, a young girl came on board ... The girl carelessly let drop a cloth, which covered her, and appeared to the eyes of all beholders, such as Venus showed herself to the Phrygian shepherd, having, indeed, the celestial form of that goddess (Bougainville 1772: 218–19).

From these lines, the myth of Tahiti as the land of eroticism, love and natural *jouissance* was created. Bougainville wanted all the more to communicate such feelings with the chosen name New Cytherea, before he learned that the Tahitian people called their island ‘Tahiti’. The ethnographic descriptions that Rousseau expected from the philosopher-traveller that would confront the French society with its outside, in a process of distancing and mirroring, were not to be found in Bougainville’s *Voyage Around the World* and Commerson’s short text. All that emerged was a mystified and idealised picture of the island as the land of plenty.

From this first description, Bougainville’s entire discourse on Tahiti follows: ‘the houses are open ... there seems to be in the island no civil war, no particular hate’ (Bougainville 1966: 212). It is ‘the best place in the universe’ because Tahitians have ‘the habit of living continuously in pleasure’ (Bougainville 1966: 220, 216). This generalised pleasure is also manifested by the lack of obligation: ‘It would seem that for the things

absolutely necessary to life, there is no property and everything belongs to everyone’ (Bougainville 1966: 213), and there is neither the presence of venomous animal nor tropical insects. Tahiti embodies a dream of the perfect place, an Eden on earth, where there is an abundance of natural wealth (plants, fruits, as well as women), where ‘Venus is the goddess of hospitality, her worship does not admit of any mysteries, and every *jouissance* is a celebration for the whole nation’ (Bougainville 1772: 228, translation modified). Problematic and discriminatory as it stands, these overtly feminised and sexualised depictions by Bougainville of Tahiti certainly fuelled its myth, and the desire to travel overseas. This is exactly what was aimed at in choosing to name the island the New Cytherea, to remind Europeans that there is a place where the inhabitants ‘know no other god than love’ (Commerson in Bougainville 1966: 392).¹²

Yet, this picture depicted by Bougainville is an entirely ahistorical spectacle, idealised, and uprooted from its time, the Enlightenment. This has led Jacques Proust to ask about the political consequences of Bougainville’s travel accounts:

Does this *rêverie* bear a ‘philosophical’ message? It certainly does, since dreaming of a golden age probably implies a condemnation of the century in which one lives. But this ‘philosophy’ is entirely out of touch with the current ideas of Bougainville’s times (Proust 1982: 25).

By ‘current ideas’ Proust refers to Diderot and the project of the Encyclopaedia, and while Bougainville disagreed with much of Rousseau’s theory of the origin of man, he decided to borrow its ideas to embellish his narrative to give an appeal to his travel accounts.¹³

Diderot

The ambiguity of Bougainville's text that Andrew Martin diagnosed is certainly challenged by Denis Diderot's *Supplément*, as the philosopher's response to and interpretation of Bougainville's 'ethnographic' materials. In spite of the contested quality of the account, the significance of Bougainville's text is the ethnographic evidence it presents about the existence of many worlds and other social organisations (Waggaman 1992: 125). But this challenge is intensified in Diderot's own *Supplément* since it is a rewriting of his 1771 review of Bougainville's text as a dialogue between characters A and B, allowing the movement of the dialectic to produce new meanings between the contradictions and before the synthesis (or sublation):

A. ... So what should we do – go back to the state of nature or obey the laws?

B. We should speak out against foolish laws until they get reformed, and meanwhile we should obey them as they are. Anyone who takes it upon himself, on his private authority, to break a bad law, thereby authorizes everyone else to break the good ones. There is less harm to be suffered in being mad among madmen than in being sane all by oneself (Diderot 2001: 227).

The sublation (*Aufhebung*) is not entirely clear in Diderot's text, yet each element of the dialectic offers a multitude of arguments that do not simply oppose themselves. In fact, Diderot's *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* is a polemical piece, and it is organised as a dialogue, comparable to the Socratic dialogues. Diderot attempted to write an accessible piece that was intended for a mass readership, and this certainly motivated his use of the dialogic form for this text. But here the dialogic form exceeds the objective of reaching a specific audience to 'supplement', that is, to transform and re-write, Bougainville's text with his own ideas. Although it starts off by praising Bougainville's

voyage and the possible scientific findings following from the French expedition, it soon turns to a harsh critique of French society and more broadly a critique of moralism.¹⁴

In a first movement, Diderot attempts to confirm the hypothesis of Rousseau concerning 'natural man' through the empirical and lyrical observations of Bougainville. But in a second movement, it is clear that he does not want to praise the state of nature that he reads in Bougainville's account of Tahiti, but rather present a criticism of France's interference in Tahiti's moral, political and social life:

Do you want man to be happy and free? Then keep your nose out of his affairs – then he will be drawn toward enlightenment and depravity, depending on all sorts of unforeseeable circumstances ... I call to witness all our political, civil and religious institutions – examine them thoroughly ... Watch out for the fellow who talks about putting things in order (Diderot 2001: 225)!

Yet, Diderot refers at the beginning to a point that he also expressed in his early review, that before reading Bougainville's *Voyage* he thought that: '[u]p to now, I had always thought that a person was never so well off as when at home. Consequently I thought [before reading this book] that everyone in the world must feel the same' (Diderot 2001: 185).

In fact the dialogic form of the *Supplement* is explained not simply by comparing it to Socratic dialogues, but by seeing that it introduces exoticism in philosophy, generating the dialogue between the self and the other, between Europe and its outside. In fact, Diderot continues Rousseau's work in many respects, while presenting a different political programme. While Rousseau opts for the social contract that establishes a founding moment, through the transcendence of the state of nature, Diderot privileges a materialist

and immanent construction of norms. However, I agree with Henri Joly when he writes: ‘Rousseau largely contributed to educate [*instruire*] the anthropological gaze [*regard*] in teaching travellers to consider the “savage” not under the angle of “barbarity” but under that of “nature”’ (Joly 1987: 130, my translation).

This confirms Lévi-Strauss’s emphasis on Rousseau’s role in founding anthropology and the distinction between nature and culture, but this nevertheless is also the result of the influence of other Enlightenment thinkers, such as Buffon, on Rousseau.¹⁵ Diderot takes Tahitian society very seriously and imagines what contemporary anthropologists have now observed, a complex system of contracts, an economic programme (through the economic exchange of women), a non-religious symbolic order and a regulation of social life, all radically different from French society. By using Bougainville’s ‘empirical’ observations, Diderot writes the ethnographic study – using not unproblematically many complex literary devices (for instance, a *mise en abyme* structure where the characters in dialogue refer to the *Supplément* in the text itself) and fictional characters – that Bougainville’s travel should have produced. Diderot rewrites Bougainville’s *Voyage* to contest French society, not by idealising Tahiti as Commerson and Bougainville all too easily did, but by writing an intricate philosophical dialogue, where polyphony is the general rule in imagining an alter-*anthropos*. This alter-*anthropos* is presented by taking the question of ‘natural utopia’ – the ideal society where only good morals rule – very seriously because of its fabulated character. It is through fiction that Diderot manages to raise Tahitian society to an intelligibility comparable to that of French society, while Bougainville, by using his supposedly empirical credentials, remained in idealism and the mythical world of the possibility of transcendence (an earthly paradise). By inverting European customs with Tahitian ones, or mixing them around, Diderot is careful in ruling out any kind of simple dualism but instead uses the argument of the

paradox to show that Tahiti should be considered under a European term (the fictive Tahitian character Orou is a *philosophe*), so that a true comparison can be established. The problem of language and translation, for instance, is mentioned but quickly overcome by letting other customs speak (Diderot 2001: 186).

Also, Tahiti should not merely be seen as a hypothetical idealised society, living in the state of nature, but as Diderot notes, ‘it would be easier for savages to get rid of some of their rustic ways than for us to turn the clock back and reform our abuses’ (Diderot 2001: 219). This sentence however comes after claiming that Tahitian society is ‘backward’, hence closer to a ‘good legislation’ than any ‘civilised nation’. For Diderot, the ethnographic experience does not mean conserving or admiring a perfect society, but learning that other societies are governed by other rules, and that every society can change its laws and reform its politics according to ideas of justice. In writing that he thought every nation felt that no other place is like home, Diderot introduces two arguments: the first is that there are different gradients of morality and ethics, and in writing these short dialogues, his project was to write a treatise on morality;¹⁶ and the second argument is an explicitly political one. Diderot formulates a revolutionary argument that claims the possibility of changing the arbitrary and authoritarian laws, and the ethnographic experience shows that this revolutionary movement can be successful.

In sum, Diderot’s text is not a work of Utopian thought in the way that the fabulations of Commerson and Bougainville were (in the tradition of More), but it grounds an immanent critique of norms that anticipates Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Ernst Bloch, Karl Mannheim and the critical theory tradition. It is a dialogue aimed at finding the correspondence of moral ideas to physical actions, as the full title reads: *Supplement to Bougainville’s “Voyage”, or, a dialogue between A and B on the undesirability of attaching moral values to certain physical acts which carry no such implications*. The

‘discovery’ of Tahiti by Bougainville gives Diderot a reason to ground its practical immanent critique of modernity.

Conclusion

The limit of the Rousseau-Bougainville-Diderot case is the lack of rigorous ethnographic study. The reconstructed dialogue between these three authors demonstrates that they allowed for the development of anthropology and ethnology, but they lacked the empirical methods to gather data. Other philosophers-travellers need to be referred to in order to complete the picture of travel in the age of Enlightenment. In fact, Nicole Hafid-Martin’s remarkable study examines comte de Volney (Constantin-François Chassebœuf, 1757-1820), Jan Potocki (1761–1815) and Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859). She notes that the first two not only gathered detailed observations on fauna, geography and local customs, but also analysed social and political structures:

[S]o few Europeans before them were interested in political structures and their influence on social and cultural behaviours. Yet, how can we understand the mind [*l’esprit*] of a people without examining it through its institutions? From the provinces of the Turkish empire or in the United States, Volney remarks the adaptation of men to their environment, but against Montesquieu, he affirms that the climatic factors are less meaningful than the effect of the regime that governs them. In Morocco or in Caucasus, Potocki observes patiently regional particularisms and cleavages between ethnic groups. Travelling becomes the art of understanding people; travelling leads to a political commitment [*voyager conduit à s’engager*] (Hafid-Martin 1995: 4).¹⁷

Contrary to these philosophers-travellers who were more focused on empirical methods, Rousseau, Bougainville and Diderot reflected on the finitude of knowledge and the modes of existence, anticipating modern forms of anthropological problematisation.¹⁸ Diderot used dialogue as a device to allow for the diversity and the multiplicity of voices to be heard, he imagines a Tahitian philosopher in order to warn against Europe's abuses and slavery to-come. In presenting a materialist immanent critique of French society, he also demonstrates that Enlightenment's other side: to study the nature of man did not mean for Diderot to find an eternal substance, or even qualities, but that diversity is the only rule. Hence when anthropology and finitude were born, they were born with respect to multiplicity.

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¹ Diderot is said to have rewritten most of *The History of the Two Indias* by Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, see Duchet 1978.

² Mircea Eliade argues that far from being an invention of the 18th century, the myth of the noble savage is in fact the myth of origins. According to Atkinson (1924: 63), Chinard also drew a genealogy of the figure of the noble savage before the 18th century and found that ‘exotic books used the term the “noble savage” long before 1600’.

³ Atkinson (1924: 47) continues: ‘And there is more. The public, who was reading the travels, asked for novelties. The traveller who could witness [*voyait*] abroad only kings, magistrates, priests, inferior to those of Europe, was not an interesting author. The public only bought travels to learn new things [*des nouveautés*]’.

⁴ See the section ‘On Travel’ (Rousseau 1979: 450-480), together with the excellent commentary by Georges Van Den Abbeele (1992: 85-108).

⁵ ‘Today... [travel makes up] the most important part of the education of youth and make a part of the experience of the elderly.... Travels extend the mind [*étendent l’esprit*], raise it, enrich it in knowledges [*connoissances*] and cure it from the national prejudices’ (de Jaucourt, 2013).

⁶ ‘Let us suppose a Montesquieu, a Buffon, a Diderot, a Duclos, a d’Alembert, a Condillac, or men of that ilk traveling in order to inform their compatriots’ (Rousseau 1987: 100).

⁷ Rousseau writes in his *Confessions*, ‘I spent my entire life reading relations of voyage’ (Dunmore 1981: 163).

⁸ This argument is made by Jean Starobinski (1976: 388), see also Fellows 1960. The first sentence of Rousseau’s preface to the *Discourse on Inequality* explicitly states his debt to Buffon for formulating his anthropological question: ‘Of all the branches of human knowledge, the most useful and the least advanced seems to me to be that of man’ (Rousseau 1987: 33). This should be compared with Buffon’s first sentence of *Natural History of Man*: ‘*Quelqu’intérêt que nous ayions à nous connoître nous-mêmes, je ne sçais si nous ne connoissons pas mieux tout ce qui n’est pas nous*’ [Whatever interest we have in knowing ourselves, I think that we know better what is not us] (Buffon 1749: 429).

⁹ However, Lévi-Strauss’s commemoration of Rousseau is controversial for anthropologists even today, since Lévi-Strauss rejected fieldwork from holding a prominent role in anthropology. This argument is formulated for instance by Alban Bensa (2010) who calls for a return to the real, anthropologists today have to nonetheless establish their work in a positive or negative relation to Lévi-Strauss’ magistral work.

¹⁰ Béatrice Waggaman’s study is remarkable and many of the arguments in this chapter are influenced by this small book. See also the excellent anthology on the poetics of travel edited by Susan L. Roberson (2007).

¹¹ The New Cytherea in English; Cytherea is another name for Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty, fertility and sexual love.

¹² Andrew Martin (2008) presents an interesting argument regarding this disproportionate eroticisation and the romanticisation by Bougainville in a recent article. The first part of his argument is illuminating, while the second part seems exaggerated. Martin first argues that Bougainville has an internal dialogue where he draws a general and timeless picture of an earthly erotic paradise which he contrasts with the struggles of actual life (while collecting empirical evidence), this dual position is always in tension in Bougainville and complicates any simplistic reading. Up to this point,

I agree with Martin, and Bougainville explicitly enters a phase of self-criticism in the text regretting his first ‘optimistic judgements’ (Bougainville 1966: 227-9), but his second argument that in fact Tahitians adopted different behaviours as a way to protect themselves from massacres and ‘constructed New Cythera like a Hollywood filmset on the backdrop of Tahiti in accordance with French fantasy’ (Martin 2008: 212) seems rather far-fetched. To argue that the depiction of Tahiti as an erotic paradise (New Cytherea) is a dual process ‘almost an artistic collaboration’ (Martin 2008: 213) is unconvincing.

¹³ Bougainville’s diary was more factual, noting observations and first thoughts, whereas the rewriting of this text for his *Voyage Round the World* was decidedly idealising and fabulating, referring to the garden of Eden and the land of plenty. See Bougainville 2003.

¹⁴ See the excellent discussion of this theme in Sharon A. Stanley (2009).

¹⁵ In terms of the nature/culture divide, the relation between Diderot’s writings on nature and his critique of moralism needs to be interrogated, but this lies beyond the scope of my study.

¹⁶ Michèle Duchet describes the context to the *Supplément*:

At the time of the *Supplément*, the thought of Diderot is still in an experimental stage; the text of the *History [of the Two Indias]*, on the contrary, gives the impression of a thought that is forged in its own certainties. Without taking the dimensions of a ‘treaty of morals’ that Diderot dreamt of writing, he nonetheless offers its theoretical grounding, the ‘practical’ aspects of a provisional morality that was introduced in parallel in conjectural writings [*écrits de circonstances*] such as the *Observations*, the *Refutation of Helvétius* or the *Essay on the Reigns of Claude and de Néron*. (Duchet 1961: 181).

¹⁷ While the first two philosopher-travellers attentively wrote in a rational and objective manner, Humboldt also travelled but he developed an empirical method so original that Hafid-Martin refers to him as ‘the father of ecology’ (Hafid-Martin 1995: 233). They repudiated all kinds of fabulation and embellishment in order to study societies and not just their ‘feelings’ and experiences of the foreign. This erudite study is not of primary concern to us here as it is too much of a specialist approach, but it needs to be taken into account when assessing discoveries and world travels, how the quest for experimental knowledge was shaping and feeding rational thought.

¹⁸ I am thinking especially of Foucault’s own definition of anthropology as ‘this properly philosophical structure that conditions the problems of philosophy and makes them inhabit [*logés*] this domain that we can call human finitude’ (Foucault 2001: 467).