

# *Affective Entropy: Cultural Difference and the Decline of Wonder on Ivu'ivu*

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*I say again that I stood looking at it, and thought that no land like it would ever be discovered in the whole world. . . . But today all that I then saw is overthrown and destroyed; nothing is left standing.*

—Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*

In a journal entry on October 21, 1492, nine days after his “discovery” of the New World, Christopher Columbus described a small Caribbean island in the following manner:

*If the [other islands] already seen are very beautiful and green and fertile, this one is much more so and with large and very green groves of trees. Here there are some big lakes and over and around them the groves are marvelous. And here and in all of the island the groves are all green. . . . And the singing of the small birds [is so marvelous] that it seems that a man would never want to leave this place. And [there are] flocks of parrots that obscure the sun; and birds of so many kinds and sizes, and so different from ours, that it is a marvel. And also there are trees of a thousand kinds and all [with] their own kinds of fruit and all smell so that it is a marvel. I am the most sorrowful man in the world, not being acquainted with them. Because I am quite certain that all of them are things of value; and I am bringing samples of them, and likewise of the plants. (105–7)*

At a semiotic level, this passage is typical of the literature of discovery. Confronted by a “marvelous” new world, Columbus struggles to convey precisely what it is that makes the place so wonderful. In his attempt to do so, in his attempt to delineate the excessive nature of this tropical paradise, he employs an excess of descriptive language; however, these descriptive sequences almost immediately descend into redundancy. The jungle is described as “very beautiful and green,” “large and very green,” and, once more, “green”—all within the space of three sentences (and he will return to the trees one last time, too, before this short passage concludes). He also refers to the island’s birds three times in rapid succession, as if a single reference would not do justice to their multiplicity. But the most obvious evidence of redundancy can be found in Columbus’s repeated use of “marvel” and “marvelous.” The groves of trees are marvelous; the singing of the birds is marvelous; the variety of the birds is a marvel; and finally, the diversity of the trees is also, inevitably, a marvel. So although there is an increase in the use of descriptive language here, it is a language that has lost much of its signifiatory force, frustrating Columbus’s attempt to give the reader some intimation of the wonders

he has witnessed. All we really learn from this passage is that the New World is “marvelous” and, at a secondary level of significance, that it is hard to describe. Or more accurately, perhaps, it tells us that the New World is marvelous and therefore hard to describe—the referential difficulties Columbus is experiencing, the obvious attenuation of his adjectival vocabulary, providing incontrovertible syntactical evidence of the wonders that defy representation at the literal or denotative level of the discourse.<sup>1</sup> In the end, one could argue, Columbus himself recognizes the failure or futility of his descriptive labor, and so he takes “samples” of the referent instead, samples of the very fruits and trees he is describing, thereby precluding the need for signification altogether.

Columbus’s “discovery” of the Americas in 1492 would have a profound influence on the European culture of his age, initiating what Stephen Greenblatt has called “a century of intense wonder” (*Marvelous* 14).<sup>2</sup> For Greenblatt, wonder represents “the central figure in the initial European response to the New World, the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference” (14). What distinguishes these chronicles of exploration from their predecessors in the early Middle Ages, he suggests, is their reliance on an anecdotal mode of representation that allows them to convey “the shock of the unfamiliar, the provocation of an intense curiosity, the local excitement of discontinuous wonders” (2). But what happens when this sense of wonder, this all-consuming fascination, dissipates? What happens when the “flocks of parrots that obscure the sun”

<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I shall be using the term *discourse* in its traditional narratological sense—and thus distinguishing between *discourse* (i.e., “the narrative statement, the oral or written [utterance] that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events” [Genette, *Narrative* 25]) and *story* (“the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse” [25]). As will become clear, I shall also be attributing a certain agency to the discourse of *The People in the Trees*, granting it an instinct for self-preservation, an autonomous superego, and even the ability to internalize a feeling of shame. But such “anthropomorphism” is not entirely unprecedented. In *S/Z*, for instance, Roland Barthes describes the discourse as a character like any other (179); and in *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks chooses to see “the text itself as a system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires” (xiv).

<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, wonder also has a long philosophical genealogy. Indeed, for Aristotle, it constitutes the very beginning of philosophy—obliging us to explore, in the first instance, the more “obvious difficulties,” before attending to “greater matters” such as “the genesis of the universe” (1.2, 1554). In his writings, Augustine distinguishes quite clearly between the sinful “disease” of curiosity (which drives people to “study the operations of nature . . . when there is no advantage in knowing and [they] simply desire knowledge for its own sake” [*Confessions*, 10.55, 211–12]) and the virtue of wonder (which encourages an appropriate degree of humility before the mysteries of creation and the omnipotence of God [*City*, 21.6, 976–79]). And finally, although by no means exhaustively, Descartes considers wonder to be the first of all the passions, for when we encounter a “wonderful” entity, we do not immediately know whether it should be regarded with fear or admiration, repulsion or desire. These emotions only come later, once the initial feeling of wonder has dissipated. “When the first encounter with some object surprises us,” Descartes writes, “and we judge it to be new, or very different from what we knew in the past or what we supposed it was going to be, this makes us wonder and be astonished at it. And since this can happen before we know in the least whether this object is suitable to us or not, it seems to me that Wonder is the first of all the passions” (52).

become commonplace (even irritating) and the “marvelous” tropical trees with their sweet-smelling fruit have been meticulously divided into classes, subclasses, and species?

Hanya Yanagihara's *The People in the Trees* (2013) encourages the reader to consider these very questions by tracing the impact that the dissipation of wonder can have on other people, other cultures, and other places. Our narrator is a scientist called Norton Perina, who in 1950, as a young man, travels to a remote Micronesian island with the anthropologist Paul Tallent and his assistant Esme Duff. Ivu'ivu, the fictional island in question, is part of an archipelago named for its most densely populated island, U'ivu. Once they arrive on the island, Norton and his colleagues discover a “lost tribe” that has managed to achieve extreme longevity (and possibly even immortality) by consuming the flesh of a rare and sacred turtle, the opa'ivu'eke. On his return to the United States, Norton achieves fame for having made this discovery, but several decades later, in 1995, he is arrested and charged with the molestation of one of the many children he has since adopted from U'ivu. The novel is Norton's autobiography, written in his jail cell and subsequently edited by one of his more sycophantic acolytes, Dr. Ronald Kubodera, who has also provided the narrative with an ample substructure of scholarly footnotes. As is often the case with such discovery narratives, the affective response of wonder initially dominates the discourse. Over time, however, this sense of wonder is transformed into the more durable feeling of curiosity, which in turn initiates a dialectical interplay of opposites—bringing together the familiar and the strange, the legible and the opaque, the boring and the fascinating. Although Norton does everything he can to sustain this dialectic, the attenuated form of wonder that drives his curiosity eventually dissipates, giving rise to a debilitating sense of apathy and indifference. And as we shall see, this is a process that occurs not once but three times within the narrative—under quite different circumstances in each case. In the first instance, the trajectory we follow belongs to the category of the ethnographic; in the second, it acquires a broader postcolonial significance; and finally, in the novel's tragic conclusion, we are exposed to its potential psychological consequences, as a displaced sense of “wonder” resurfaces in the pathological form of a pedophilic encounter.

Exploring these trajectories offers a more general insight into the negotiation (and representation) of cultural difference, underlining the importance of the aforementioned dialectic and the need to accommodate its various dichotomies. This applies to every intercultural encounter and to every academic discipline, yet it is particularly vital in a postcolonial setting and particularly relevant to the production of ethnographic knowledge. In *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford identifies two contrasting tendencies within modern anthropology. There is what he calls “anthropological humanism,” which “begins with the different and renders it—through naming, classifying, describing, interpreting—comprehensible”; and then there is “ethnographic surrealism,” which, by contrast, “attacks the familiar, provoking the irruption of otherness—the unexpected” (“On Ethnographic Surrealism” 145). According to Clifford, these tendencies should not be seen as mutually exclusive, for they are both “elements within a complex process that generates cultural meanings, definitions of self and other.” And by combining the two, the anthropologist should, in principle, be able to create “a permanent . . . play

of similarity and difference, the familiar and the strange, the here and the elsewhere" (145). A dialectic of this kind is at work in Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), for example, in which the author often struggles to make sense of the disparate particles of ethnographic knowledge that he has accumulated during his four years of fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands. Despite his comprehensive knowledge of Trobriand culture, Malinowski's synthesizing impulses are consistently frustrated, and he is forced to acknowledge those aspects of the culture that retain their opacity—the practices, both mundane and extraordinary, that defy his understanding. *The People in the Trees* features the same opacities and the same interplay of opposites. Only, in Yanagihara's novel, we witness the ultimate destruction of this dialectic, as the "radical difference" that first inspired a feeling of wonder gives way, on three separate occasions, to the radical indifference of boredom and apathy.

### Obscure Ceremonies and Strange Mythologies

As René Descartes has suggested, wonder is not a particularly durable emotion. It is the momentary rapture we feel when we first encounter something unique, something unanticipated, novel, or rare—something that challenges our understanding of the world or defies it altogether. But it is not an emotion that can be sustained for very long. Sooner or later, our analytical or interpretive faculties are deployed, and wonder—that "sudden surprise of the soul" (Descartes 56)—is transformed into a more enduring sense of curiosity. Such a transformation is only partial, though, for the state of curiosity still retains a residual sense of wonder. It is this latter feeling that animates our curiosity, providing it with its epistemophilic drive, compelling us to comprehend, to categorize, or at the very least to scrutinize more closely the object of our fascination. In English, the distinction I am making here is sometimes obscured by the fact that we can both wonder *at* something ("To feel or be affected with wonder; to be struck with surprise or astonishment, to marvel" [OED]) and wonder *about* something ("To ask oneself in wonderment; to feel some doubt or curiosity (*how, whether, why*, etc.); to be desirous to know or learn" [OED]). It is the second of these two types of "wonder" that I will be referring to as curiosity; and I will be doing so in order to distinguish between the kind of wonder that immobilizes the spectator—"draw[ing] a circle around itself," as Greenblatt writes, "from which everything but the object is excluded . . . block[ing] out all circumambient images, still[ing] all murmuring voices" ("Resonance" 237)—and the more durable, diluted, and affectively weaker form of wonder that we usually call curiosity.<sup>3</sup> In *The People in the Trees*, the wonder that

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Tindal Kareem also distinguishes between wonder *at* something (for which she uses the verb *marvel*) and wonder *about* it (which she describes as curiosity), yet she places these two affective states on the same "finely gradated spectrum that moves from astonishment through curiosity toward radical doubt" (8). "While wonder is frequently short-lived," she argues, "this is not to say that it has no temporal trajectory. On the contrary, wonder is a durational affect that more often responds to the passage from unknowing to knowing rather than to a single epiphanic moment" (8–9). I have found Kareem's discussion of the subject particularly useful; however, I prefer to register more clearly the point at which wonder becomes curiosity—moving

Norton experiences on the island of Ivu'ivu is very quickly transformed into precisely this kind of curiosity: a desire to make sense of the strange and disorienting world he has entered and a desire to assimilate the prodigies he encounters there into the scientific "order of things."

Despite his disdain for anthropology as a discipline, Norton goes to a great deal of trouble, when he first arrives on Ivu'ivu, to record "the minutiae of village life" (Yanagihara 217), whether it be the preparation of food (192) or the process by which palm leaves are braided into rope (196–97). Like Malinowski, he obviously believes that even the least "significant" aspects of a culture carry ethnographic value and are worthy of being recorded (in the form of detailed, novelistic "field notes").<sup>4</sup> It is important to remember, however, that Malinowski's well-known emphasis on the empirical observation of daily activities did not mean that the more "conspicuous acts of tribal life, such as ceremonies, rites, [or] festivities" should be neglected (20). Rather, he was advocating a holistic form of anthropology in which equal attention was paid to both the mundane and the extraordinary aspects of a culture, while also recognizing the interrelated nature of these two categories. "An ethnographic diary," Malinowski argues, "would be the ideal instrument for this sort of study. And if, side by side with the normal and typical, the ethnographer carefully notes the slight or the more pronounced deviations from it, he will be able to indicate *the two extremes within which the normal moves*" (21; emphasis added). For some time, driven by a strong sense of curiosity, Norton's own "ethnographic" writing manages to sustain a dialectic of this kind. On the one hand, he provides a full account of "daily life and ordinary behavior" (Malinowski 22) in the village, while on the other, when required to do so, he describes in considerable detail the more ritualistic and bizarre features of Ivu'ivuan culture. There is the ceremony that takes place each month "at the start of the women's menses," for instance, or the somewhat enigmatic one "in which four men and four women [dance] arrhythmically around [a] fire, holding up to their foreheads [some] grinning lizardy things . . . before tossing them into the flames while everyone else watche[s] solemnly" (Yanagihara 211).<sup>5</sup> But the ritual that Norton

from the somatic, one might say, to the cognitive, while still retaining traces of the "astonishment" out of which it emerged.

<sup>4</sup> "There is," Malinowski writes in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, "a series of [cultural] phenomena of great importance which cannot possibly be recorded by questioning or computing documents, but have to be observed in their full actuality. Let us call them *the imponderabilia of actual life*. Here belong such things as the routine of a man's working day, the details of his care of the body, of the manner of taking food and preparing it; the tone of conversational and social life around the village fires, the existence of strong friendships or hostilities, and of passing sympathies and dislikes between people; the subtle yet unmistakable manner in which personal vanities and ambitions are reflected in the behaviour of the individual and in the emotional reactions of those who surround him. . . . If we remember that these imponderable yet all important facts of actual life are part of the real substance of the social fabric, that in them are spun the innumerable threads which keep together the family, the clan, the village community, the tribe—their significance becomes clear" (18–19).

<sup>5</sup> Our "editor," Dr. Ronald Kubodera, provides us with a helpful footnote explaining this particular ritual. It is, he says, "a fairly obscure rite called tua'ina, which Norton was lucky to

finds most compelling, and most unsettling, is the a'ina'ina ceremony. One evening, as he is walking through the village, he notices that a large crowd of people have gathered around a particular hut, and "they [are] collectively emanating a low, almost metallic hum, like the throb of a generator" (212). The village chief is standing in the doorway, wearing a ceremonial crown of pale fern leaves. As Norton watches, one of the women gently pushes forward a young boy of eight o'anas (which means that he is "around ten by the Western calendar"), who accompanies the chief inside the hut. What follows is essentially a ritual of sexual initiation, whereby the boy is sodomized by nine different men from the village. Asked later to explain this ritual, the chief simply states that it is designed to instruct boys who have come of age "in the ways of lovemaking" (216). Girls, "being less sexually charged, [have] no equivalent ritual, but they [are] thought to need less sexual instruction than the boys" (217). Norton finds this explanation "perfectly reasonable" (217), and in a rather ominous aside (given what we know lies ahead), he declares that his "time on Ivu'ivu taught [him] that all ethics or morals are culturally relative" (219). It had never "occurred to [him] before . . . that children might enjoy sexual relations, but in the village it seemed wholly natural, as indeed it was" (215).

Although Norton establishes what Malinowski might have considered to be an ideal anthropological dialectic during his first few days in the village (bringing together the familiar and the strange, the banal and the extraordinary), he is incapable of sustaining this dialectic, this interplay of opposites, for very long. As his curiosity dissipates, so too does his residual sense of wonder, and he becomes increasingly bored by the place (his single-minded pursuit of immortality "eclips[ing]" [203] everything else). It is perhaps not surprising that Norton should feel "bored and a bit claustrophobic" (215) after spending so much time in the village, observing the mundane activities that, on Ivu'ivu, constitute everyday life. However, even when he is given the opportunity to observe a ritual of considerable ethnographic significance, something that takes place very rarely—if at all—within the villagers' lifetimes, he attaches only a minimal degree of value to the experience. The ritual in question is the vaka'ina ceremony, during which those villagers who have reached the (relatively advanced) age of sixty o'anas consume the flesh of the opa'ivu'eke turtle, thus attaining "eternal life" (304).<sup>6</sup> In this case, it is the chief himself who will be performing the ceremony, and Norton and his colleagues have been invited to attend. Although he does so quite willingly, and provides a meticulously detailed description of the ritual, Norton soon grows tired of what he is

observe, as it is performed only during a partial eclipse. . . . In U'ivuan culture, the lizard—in this case, a rare reptile called an e'olu'eke—is considered a sign of the moon, and the moon is considered to have eight stages. During a partial eclipse, a specially elected village quorum pays tribute to the moon by urging him to return to his proper state; the lizards are held to the head as a sign of respect and then sacrificed to the fire so that the smoke will travel upward and its fragrance will appease the gods of the skies" (211–12).

<sup>6</sup> In a footnote elsewhere in the novel, we are told that the U'ivuan o'ana (or year) is in fact four hundred days long, so "a sixty-year-old U'ivuan would actually be 65.7 by the Western calendar" (152). And according to Norton, this would be considered a particularly advanced age in a country where, in 1950, the average life expectancy was fifty-two years (154).

witnessing (and narrating). It seemed odd, he says, “given the participatory nature of many of the village’s other ceremonies, that this [one] was such a solo performance: a long and tedious night spent watching the chief dismember [and eat] the opa’ivu’eke”—something he does, we are told, in a “particularly bloody and laborious way” (225). The fact that Norton has dedicated four pages to describing the ritual would seem to indicate that it carries at least some aesthetic or ethnographic value, for as Roland Barthes observes, “what is noted is by definition notable” (“Introduction” 261). Yet as soon as the ceremony is over and the description complete, Norton disputes the tellability of the very scene he has just described.<sup>7</sup> It was, he decides, “a shoddy and somewhat pointless sort of event,” a “long and tedious” (Yanagihara 225) evening spent doing nothing of any real significance.

Norton does still maintain an interest in discovering the secret of immortality, but even the “dreamers”—those shuffling, imbecilic figures who appear to hold the answer to this mystery—come to be associated with monotonous and unstimulating labor, with time and energy wasted.<sup>8</sup> “[A] significant amount of time was spent bathing them,” Norton remembers, “feeding them, observing them, and interviewing them, all of which rapidly grew very dull” (220). One could regard the dreamers as a kind of objective correlative for the dialectic we have been discussing here—combining, as they do, both the mundane (“their stupid flat faces, their unintelligent eyes, their clumpy hair [and] bulbous figures” [248]) and the extraordinary (“eternal life” [304], “imaginable immortality” [307]). But in this instance, too, one half of that dialectic collapses, and Norton comes to see them as being irredeemably dull and “boring” (220). They are, he concludes, no more interesting than the laboratory mice he had once taken such pleasure in killing. And with this observation, we arrive at the conclusion of the trajectory I described earlier: a declining arc that originates in the “sudden surprise” of wonder, continues for some time in the guise of curiosity, but ultimately dissolves into the radical indifference of boredom, fatigue, and apathy—the inability to feel anything much at all.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> By “tellability” I mean, very simply, the quality that makes stories worth telling, the “prolonged deviance from the quiescence of the ‘normal’” (Brooks 103) that characterizes all successful narratives. For a useful summary of this concept, see Ryan.

<sup>8</sup> Having participated in the vaka’ina ceremony, the dreamers are able to exceed the average human life expectancy by many decades—even centuries. Yet we are told that their condition is “a parody of immortality, because while the afflicted did in fact remain physically frozen at the age at which [they] had eaten the turtle, [their] mind did not. Bit by bit it disintegrated—first the memory, then the social nuances, then the senses, and finally speech—until all that was left was the body. The mind was gone, worn down by the years, its fissures and byways exhausted by having to perform for far more decades than it was organically equipped to do” (259).

<sup>9</sup> Although it may be easy to confuse the two, the dysphoric nature of such apathy distinguishes it quite clearly from the philosophical notion of *apathia*, particularly as it relates to the Kantian sublime (see Kant 132–33). While *apathia* signifies the complete absence of emotion, and is therefore experienced by the subject as neither “pleasurable nor unpleasurable,” Norton’s state of disaffection “involves a deficiency of affect that is reflexively felt to be dysphoric—stultifying, tedious, irritating, fatiguing, or dulling” (Ngai 269). And it is this combination of minor dysphoric feelings that ultimately induces him to look elsewhere for affective release.

It is at this point, when Norton has lost almost all feeling for the island and the village (aside from the odd display of “petulance” [249]), that he encounters the boy again, the one whose initiation ceremony he had witnessed not long before. It is nighttime, and Norton has awoken to find Tallent and Esme missing. He is out searching in the jungle for them when he first sees the boy: “He was, as I have said, an exceptionally beautiful boy, slim and well assembled, with unusually good posture, although what was most striking about him was the steadiness of his gaze, which I could feel upon me, even if I could barely see it in the poor light” (251). After a brief, one-sided conversation, there is silence between the two; then the boy takes Norton’s hand, “very gently, like a seducer, and beg[ins] to move it across his body” (252–53). Norton removes his hand several times, but on each occasion (or so he says) the boy “patiently replace[s] it.” Suddenly, all the wonder Norton has renounced, all the curiosity he is no longer capable of feeling, rises to the surface once more, only this time it assumes the perverse and pathological form of a “bewitching” desire for a ten-year-old boy:

I am being bewitched, *I thought as we went back and forth, my hand now feeling almost disconnected from my body, a floating white bird moving on its own accord through the darkness. The boy shifted position then, to lie down against the base of the tree. . . .*

Oh, Tallent, *I thought.* Oh, Esme, save me. I am being held captive. I am being spellbound. *I may even have said this aloud. But they didn’t come, of course, and the forest remained quiet, the only sound the boy’s breath, his face blurring in and out of focus as the moon revealed and concealed itself in an endless flirtation with some unseen lover.* (253)

Tallent and Esme do not appear; they do not come to save Norton or to release him from his “captivity,” but something else does, something else intervenes to ensure that what takes place here will be concealed from the reader. I am referring, in short, to the discourse itself, for just as Norton is about to surrender to the “enchantment” of this prepubescent boy, just as his sense of wonder resurfaces, in a pathological and displaced form, and just as the narrative reaches its highest level of tellability and intensity, the chapter we are reading comes to an abrupt conclusion. What follows is a centimeter or two of empty space containing only the Roman numeral IV. This is what Gérard Genette would describe as a “mute” chapter heading (*Paratexts* 306), one that tells us nothing at all about the narrative we are reading, and whose inability to do so, in this particular case, guarantees its absolute discretion. After this brief pause, this strategic interlude, the narrative resumes. Yet we are now somewhere else altogether (is it the following day?), and Norton’s encounter with the boy seems to have been completely forgotten. Instead of describing this encounter or exploring its consequences, the discourse has decided to focus its attention on an entirely different subject, one that immediately reestablishes the novel’s affective status quo. After an episode of rising intensity, that is to say, we move on to a period of relative quiescence as the discourse once more emphasizes just how “boring” the dreamers can be and then diligently compiles “a list of [their] approximate ages” (Yanagihara 253).



But why would the discourse have chosen to respond in this way? Why in a novel where so much has been said about so little—where obscure ceremonies and strange mythologies have been described in such laborious detail—would it decline to describe something that really does matter, something that has significant consequences for the narrative as a whole? Or to use Barthes’s terminology, why would the discourse expend so much energy describing inessential catalyzers (those occurrences that merely “fill in” or substantiate empty space) only to ignore one of the novel’s critical nuclei?<sup>10</sup> The answer lies in the apathy that we have been discussing. In Norton’s case, the affective entropy he experiences on Ivu’ivu leaves him feeling increasingly bored and apathetic, “immune” (122) to the miraculous qualities of the island. Such disaffectation serves as a defense mechanism, as a way of eliminating or diminishing phases of highly charged affectivity. This is not only true of people; we see it in certain narratives, too, which respond in precisely the same way to a dangerous upsurge of intradiegetic emotion. When such narratives find themselves confronting an emotional event that may be potentially destabilizing or may represent a threat to the legibility of the discourse, they will often respond by turning away from the affective source of this generic or discursive instability. A similar thing would appear to be happening in the scene just described, as Norton prepares to lower himself to the jungle floor. In order to avoid an affective overload, in order to dispel a threatened upsurge of emotion, the discourse actively represses these pathological feelings and instead becomes “disaffected”—safely insulated from its own psychic and libidinal reality. So complete is this state of apathy that the discourse briefly stops narrating altogether; it simply refuses to carry on and thus brings the chapter to a premature conclusion. When the narration resumes, after the reassuring interposition of a “mute” chapter heading, this fever, this delirium has passed, and we are able to proceed in a manner that could be said to resemble the “affectless” (166) shuffle of the dreamers themselves.

### A Land of Mysteries

Not long after his encounter with the boy, Norton leaves Ivu’ivu, taking with him some preserved opa’ivu’eke and four of the dreamers. On his return to the United States, he immediately sets about proving his “imaginable immortality” hypothesis: the theory that the “ingestion of the opa’ivu’eke was responsible for the dreamers’ superannuated lives and eventual decline” (Yanagihara 298). This he does by experimenting on mice in the “albinic landscape” (297) of a medical laboratory at Stanford. “As I watched the mice live on and on,” he later remembers, “I felt no excitement of discovery; in fact, the whole thing seemed a bit anticlimactic. My theory had always made sense to me, and I had never doubted it, but now I would have to go through the necessary (and tedious) steps of proving it to everyone else” (303). Several years later, in an attempt to provide such evidence, he publishes a brief postulative paper entitled “Observations on Prolonged Human Longevity among the Ivu’ivu People” in the *Annals of Nutritional Epidemiology*

<sup>10</sup> For more on this distinction between catalyzers and nuclei, see Barthes, “Introduction” 265.

(December 1953). Once his findings have been replicated by another, more respected scientist in the field, and published in *The Lancet*, Norton becomes “something of a god” (313) in scientific circles and is eventually awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1974. In the intervening years, however, on subsequent trips to Ivu’ivu, he witnesses the gradual destruction of the island and its culture, a fate for which he is primarily responsible. By the early sixties, the place has changed completely: a runway of “perfectly planed dirt” (354) has been constructed on the neighboring island of U’ivu, the jungle on Ivu’ivu has been largely decimated, and the village itself has been inundated with scientific researchers and representatives from all the major pharmaceutical companies. Once every last turtle on Ivu’ivu has been collected, these visitors turn their attention elsewhere in the hope that the opa’ivu’eke might not be the only thing on the island to possess such miraculous properties. Within a decade or so, they succeed in stripping Ivu’ivu of all its “wonders” (371), of “every animal, every plant, every fungus, that could be harvested” (365). And when the pharmaceutical companies finally leave, they are replaced by missionaries who manage to convert a large number of the villagers, depriving the men of their spears and obliging the women to wear “plain, prim, long-sleeved cotton dresses” (358). As Norton himself observes, this is an old story, full of sad and familiar ironies. Rather than offering us a detailed account of Ivu’ivu’s decline, he prefers to tell the story in the form of an anaphoric litany. “Shall I tell you,” he says,

*how the king’s son, Crown Prince Tui’uvo’uvo, now the king himself, was whispered to be a puppet of some foreign military and how he took to strutting about in an epaulet-trimmed wool jacket that he wore atop a sarong, his face vivid with sweat? Shall I tell you how there are really no new stories in cases like these: how the men turned to alcohol, how the women neglected their handiwork, how they all grew fatter and coarser and lazier, how the missionaries plucked them from their houses as one would pluck an overripe apple from a branch? Shall I tell you of the venereal diseases that seemed to come from nowhere but, once introduced, never left? Shall I tell you how I witnessed these things myself, how I kept returning and returning, long after the grant money had disappeared, long after people had lost interest, long after the island had gone from being an Eden to becoming what it was, what it is: just another Micronesian ruin, once so full of hope, now somehow distasteful and embarrassing, like a beautiful woman who has grown fleshy and sparse-haired and mustached? (370–71)<sup>11</sup>*

<sup>11</sup> As James Clifford notes, the “theme of the vanishing primitive, of the end of traditional society (the very act of naming it ‘traditional’ implies a rupture), is [also] pervasive in ethnographic writing” (“On Ethnographic Allegory” 112). It can be found on almost every page of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques*, that masterpiece of pessimistic “entropology” (414), and in the foreword to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, where Malinowski acknowledges the inevitable dissolution of the very culture he is studying: “Ethnology is in the sadly ludicrous, not to say tragic, position, that in the very moment when it begins to put its workshop in order, to forge its proper tools, to start . . . work on its appointed task, the material of its study melts away with hopeless rapidity. Just now, when the methods and aims of scientific field ethnology have taken shape, when men fully trained for the work have begun to travel into savage countries and

Given the sad, degraded nature of the place, one may wonder why Norton keeps “returning and returning,” as if driven to do so by an obscure compulsion that he cannot quite bring himself to acknowledge. As this litany continues, however, his underlying motivation gradually emerges. He is not there to conduct further research, it turns out, or to look for more turtles. He is there to adopt children—and not just one or two, either. By the time of his arrest in 1995, he will have acquired a “brood” (17) of over forty U’ivuan children, all of whom he has raised in the United States. The litany continues:

*Shall I tell you of what a sweet boy [the first child] was and what joy he brought me, and how the dream I had on Ivu’ivu of carrying a sleeping child to bed was just as satisfying as I had hoped it might be, so satisfying in fact that I wanted to repeat it again and again? Shall I tell you of how I began to adopt other children—how once I began to pay attention, I found there were dozens, scores, who were parentless or as good as, their parents were so useless, so lost to alcohol and God—initially only boys, because I thought I could relate to them more easily, but then girls as well? . . . Shall I tell you how with each new child I acquired, I would irrationally think, This is the one. This is the one who will make me happy. This is the one who will complete my life. This is the one who will repay me for years of looking. (373)*

The compulsive, repetitive nature of Norton’s behavior is mirrored by the anaphoric structure of the passage itself and by the use of other forms of repetition at the level of the individual sentence: “Shall I tell you how I was always wrong—eighteen, nineteen, twenty times wrong—and how although I was always wrong, I didn’t stop, I couldn’t stop, I was searching, searching, searching” (373). In this particular case, we encounter both epistrophic repetition (. . . *wrong*, . . . *wrong*, . . . *wrong*, . . . *stop*, . . . *stop*) and palillogic repetition (*searching*, *searching*, *searching*). This recursive use of language reveals the conflicted nature of Norton’s behavior. On the one hand, we have the phobic reaction that is subliminally articulated by the epistrophic repetition (*wrong*, *wrong*, *wrong*, etc.), while on the other hand, we have the uncontrollable “phobic” impulse, which surfaces in the form of palillogic repetition (*searching*, *searching*, *searching*). Unfortunately, judging by this sentence alone, it would seem that the more concentrated and pronounced form of repetition with which the sentence concludes (the palillogic) will have sufficient force to overrule the subliminal interdiction offered by the other, more dispersed—and therefore “weaker”—form of repetition (the epistrophic). The broader pattern of anaphoric

study their inhabitants—these die away under our very eyes” (xv). In a particularly incisive essay on the subject, Renato Rosaldo has drawn a connection between this classic anthropological trope and the tendency, among “agents of colonialism,” to “display nostalgia for the colonized culture as it was ‘traditionally’ (that is, when they first encountered it),” thus “mourn[ing] the passing of what they themselves have transformed [or destroyed]” (107). At a more attenuated level, such nostalgia may also involve “someone deliberately alter[ing] a form of life and then regret[ing] that things have not remained as they were prior to his or her intervention” (108). Yet in either case, Rosaldo argues, this “sentimental discourse” (120) uses “a pose of ‘innocent yearning’ both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination” (107–8).

repetition (*Shall I tell you . . .*), which is sustained for over eight pages, is also of some significance, for it serves to unify what, on the face of it, would appear to be two quite distinct narratives: the story of U'ivu's rapid decline and the story of Norton's compulsion to adopt such a large number of children. Although the first story clearly enables the second (given the fact that the children are only made available for adoption because their parents are "so useless, so lost to alcohol and God"), Norton would prefer us to see them as being otherwise unrelated, or even opposed, to each other. The story of U'ivu is narrated in the familiar mode of (post)colonial tragedy, while Norton's story is presented as a more personal narrative, one that describes his potentially redemptive longing for fulfilment and "love." Yet the anaphoric repetition he uses to tell both stories ultimately undermines this distinction, creating an implicit connection between the two and situating each of them on the same narrative trajectory, so that we eventually come to see Norton's story not as an "antidote" to the first narrative, not as a humanitarian response to the suffering he witnesses on U'ivu, but as an echo or reiteration of that original tragedy. In other words, the localized repetitions that can be identified at the level of the sentence (epistrophic and palillogic), and at the more general level of the passage itself (anaphoric), all point to the existence of a much deeper, "narratological" repetition—namely, the fact that the second half of this narrative trajectory is, in many ways, a repetition of the first. Once we recognize this recursive quality, once we understand that these are not two separate stories but two halves of the same story, we are given some intimation of how the second half, Norton's half, will conclude. For if his story really is a repetition of what happened on U'ivu—only on a smaller, more personal scale—then it too will be a story of degradation and corruption, it too will trace the gradual dissolution of "wonder," and it too will have an ending that is not just distasteful or embarrassing or ironic, but genuinely tragic, like that of U'ivu itself.

Over the following two decades, Norton raises a grand total of forty-three U'ivuan children, and for some time, he finds the experience both fulfilling and fascinating. By the late 1980s, however, he has grown tired of this domestic life, tired of raising children, and tired of the children themselves. There are some people who are able to find "pleasure in the everyday" (Yanagihara 303)—people for whom the quotidian is to be valued precisely because of its "ordinariness"—but Norton is not one of those people. "I began to realize that I was bored," he says, "or rather, that I had lost my taste for the whole occupation of child-raising." When he had adopted his first child, in 1968, "the prospect of raising [the boy] had seemed both tantalizing and rich with wonder: to have as one's charge something both knowable and not, at once predictable and full of startling surprises, seemed to promise unimaginable adventure, dozens of daily revelations wrought in miniature." For many years, "for decades even, it had. But then . . . things began, inevitably, to change" (400–401). Norton's choice of adverb in this last sentence is particularly appropriate, for there is a certain tragic inevitability about the transformation he has undergone. As readers, we are familiar by now with the dialectic he is describing here—one that combines the known and the unknown, the predictable and the surprising—and we understand as well that he is ultimately

incapable of sustaining such an interplay of opposites. Sooner or later, it is bound to collapse, leaving him trapped in a “land whose mysteries [have] long since failed to move [him] with wonder” (425). In this case, that land is the land of parenthood, of child-rearing, and it is a place—an activity, a way of life—that no longer moves him as it once did. When he watches his children now, he does so “dispassionately . . . as if they were monkeys in a lab and [he] would be able to leave them at the end of the day” (423). But of course he cannot leave, and this growing sense of apathy, alleviated only by the odd dysphoric twinge of irritation or impatience, assumes an increasingly ominous quality (given what we know took place on Ivu’ivu under similar circumstances). Indeed, as Norton’s enthusiasm for child-rearing steadily diminishes, he begins to reminisce, ever more frequently, about the boy in the jungle. “Recently,” he says,

*I had found my thoughts returning, again and again, to the boy, and how I had felt when I was with him, and how fervently I had hoped and tried to recapture that sensation, to make that joy part of my daily life—that was why I had brought [the children] here. That was what I had wanted from them. And yet with each one, the feeling of pleasure I craved was ever-briefer, more elusive, more difficult to conjure, and I was lonelier and lonelier, and finally they were evidence only of my losses, of my unanswerable sorrows. (423)*

As Norton himself recognizes, this longing for the boy, and for the feelings he inspired, is a “troubling development” (423). But the moment of transgressive “joy”—the pedophilic encounter that, by now, we may be expecting—never quite arrives. Or more precisely, I should say, it does eventually arrive (on page 437 of the Anchor paperback edition), but we do not recognize this fact until it is far too late, until the moment has passed and the narrative itself has reached its conclusion.

On page 437 of the novel, at the end of a section, we encounter a curious footnote. “There is,” Dr. Ronald Kubodera tells us, “a section following this [one] that I have, as an editor, elected to excise.” The fact that he has chosen to excise material is not, in itself, strange. In his preface to the novel, Kubodera has been quite candid about his editorial decision to “cut—judiciously—passages that [he] felt did not enrich the narrative or were not otherwise of any particular relevance” (19). What is strange about this particular omission is that Kubodera draws our attention to it, for nowhere else in the novel does he elect to do so. As a consequence, this footnote serves an oddly apophatic function, focusing our attention on the very material that we are not being allowed to read (as if, in some obscure way, it does matter after all). But we must wait for another twenty-four pages before we finally learn, in a post-script to the novel, precisely what happened on page 437 and why this passage was deleted in the first place.

Around this time, Norton is having difficulties controlling one of his adopted children, a thirteen-year-old boy by the name of Victor. Yet after page 437, the tension between the two suddenly evaporates, or at least it undergoes a change in quality that would seem to suggest acquiescence on the part of the boy. “He would look at me with those flat eyes,” Norton remembers, “but where once had been challenge and obstinance now there was nothing, just a dull black like a shallow

puddle of oily water" (438). After five years of this uneasy coexistence, Victor leaves for college, and shortly thereafter Norton is arrested and charged with various counts of rape, statutory rape, sexual assault, and endangering a minor. All of these charges, it transpires, relate to Victor. Following a brief trial, much to his surprise and indignation, Norton is found guilty: "Against the charges," he says ruefully, "my Nobel could have been a plastic trophy I won for bowling, so little did it matter" (447). Norton's account of his life concludes with our narrator still incarcerated, serving a two-year jail sentence. In an attached newspaper article and "editorial" epilogue, however, we learn that he was released from jail in January 2000, and that he and Kubodera have subsequently disappeared, thus violating the conditions of his parole. We are not told where they are now living (as "anything more candid could lead to unpleasant consequences" [453]), but we are offered one last piece of information, one last confessional utterance: the deleted section from page 437. It is, our editor says, "the missing fragment from Norton's account of his difficulties with Victor" (461), and it is only with "great ambivalence" (455) that he has decided to share it with us.

The episode this fragment describes is as follows. It is 1990, and Norton has come home one night to find that Victor has deliberately shattered a crystal bowl that had once belonged to Norton's brother. Enraged, he goes directly to Victor's room, where he finds the boy sleeping. For some time, Norton watches him in silence, and as he does so, his anger gradually becomes something else, a kind of quiet reverence, a kind of rapture, a kind of wonder:

*[Victor] was sleeping on his back, his arms above his head, and his pajama top was unbuttoned at the bottom, so I could see a band of his dark, satiny skin, the sad protruding whorl of his navel. . . . I noticed a faint sickle-shaped scar just above the bone of his ankle. It glowed there, white against the wood of his skin . . . and I all at once felt very sad for him and overcome with emotion. (465)*

Norton approaches the bed and slowly lowers himself onto the sleeping boy, pressing a pillow against his face. As he "force[s] [him]self" into Victor, who struggles beneath him, he experiences a feeling of such "pure simple joy that [he] cannot adequately describe it" (466). "I wondered," he later says, "if [Victor] felt as I did, as if my very insides were being scooped out and held aloft, the harsh, cold wind rushing through the cavity of my poor, filthy body, cleansing it and carrying away its impurities, scattering them to the night air" (466). Once more, then, we have the reemergence of "wonder" in the pathological form of a pedophilic act—an act that "draws a circle around itself from which everything but the [erotic] object is excluded," an act that inspires "an intensity of regard [that] blocks out all circumambient images, [that] stills all murmuring voices" (Greenblatt, "Resonance" 237). And this, too, is the affective consequence, in Norton's case, of a kind of apathy that disallows the possibility of *non*-pathological wonder. From the extreme quiescence of disaffectation, in other words, he is plunged suddenly into the "hyperbolic intensity" (Greenblatt, *Marvelous* 76) of the wonderful. Only, the "wonder" he experiences here (and with the boy on Ivu'ivu) has undergone a process of

psychological displacement, attaching itself to his repressed pedophilic impulses so that the libidinal drive of one becomes intertwined with that of the other—and together they are able to overcome both the self-regulatory strategies of the superego and the dissociative influence of pathological disaffectation.

Yet the reemergence of these repressed philic impulses is not quite that simple, for as soon as Norton's mechanisms of psychological repression fail, the discourse itself intervenes in order to impose its own form of disaffectation, its own form of radical indifference. We have seen this textual repression before, when Norton encountered the boy on Ivu'ivu; but this time the act of repression is complete. In the earlier case, we were well aware of what was taking place out there in the jungle, even if this act had escaped the ignominy of direct, mimetic representation. Yet on page 437, we are offered no such clues. The fictive allographic footnote indicates that something has been deleted, but we are not given any indication of what that material might be.<sup>12</sup> Every footnote involves at least some degree of repression, creating a subordinate level of discourse that often goes unread; yet in this case, the repression is particularly pronounced, for although the footnote acknowledges the decision to excise the material, it refuses to provide a reason for this editorial intervention or to divulge anything at all regarding the content of what has been removed. Once more, the act itself is consigned to the interstices of the narrative, taking place in the centimeter or two of empty space that divides one section from another. On page 437, however, there is no section heading (such as the *IV* we encountered earlier). Instead, we find a typographical symbol, a fleur-de-lis, whose sole function is to divide the two sections from each other. It is, one could argue, a perfect example of "filling," the ne plus ultra of the catalyzer: something that is quite literally there to fill empty space. The irony in this case is that this ultimate filler—this "totally mute" symbol whose only purpose is to provide the narrative with a kind of "respiratory scansion" (Genette, *Paratexts* 308–9)—is standing in for, or replacing, the moment of greatest intensity in the novel, the plot nucleus on which the entire structure hinges, the occurrence that does in fact change everything. What do we get instead of this occurrence? A superscriptural footnote indicator, a bland and evasive footnote, a mute typographical symbol, and the off-white, slightly fibrous texture of the page itself.

At this point, we may ask ourselves why the discourse should go to so much trouble to repress this particular episode, and why, if our editor has decided to replace the excised material, he should have done so at the end of the novel rather than on page 437, where it belongs. Ultimately, this is a matter of discursive survival. All narratives follow a trajectory of alternating quiescence and intensity. In the former case, we have very little narrative energy expended, while in the latter, we tend to see a great deal more discharged. As long as it maintains a certain equilibrium between these two categories, the narrative itself is secure; but if it moves too far in either direction (or stays there for too long), the stability, and even

<sup>12</sup> I am using Genette's terminology here to describe a footnote written by a (fictional) figure other than the author or one of the intradiegetic characters (although at the very end of the novel Kubodera does enter the narrative, thus becoming "actorial"). For more on this type of footnote, see Genette, *Paratexts* 341–42.

the continuity, of the discourse is immediately endangered. If we have too much quiescence, that is to say, then the narrative could easily stall, losing the energy it requires to move forward, to attach one signifier to another, until it achieves the full and final predication of meaning that traditionally accompanies narrative closure. But if it advances too far in the opposite direction, if it generates too much intensity, then the narrative faces the possibility of a premature conclusion. As Peter Brooks writes,

*It is characteristic of textual energy in narrative that it should always be on the verge of premature discharge, of short-circuit. . . . The possibility of short-circuit can, of course, be represented in all manner of threats to the protagonist or to any of the functional logics that demand completion; [yet] it most commonly takes the form of . . . the mistaken erotic object choice. . . . Incest [in particular can give rise to a] short-circuit from which the protagonist and the text must be led away, into detour, into the cure that prolongs narrative. (109)*

On page 437 of *The People in the Trees*, then, the narrative is not only repressing Norton's (transgressive) libidinal energies but also repressing its own. This repression preserves the energy the narrative requires to move forward, to follow the chain of signification, until it achieves the closure it ultimately desires. Too much intensity, in this case, would not only destabilize the discourse and disrupt its generic affinities, but also raise the possibility of a premature and "improper" conclusion to the narrative. And if Norton is incapable of repressing his pedophilic impulses at the intradiegetic level, where these infamies occur, then the discourse must do so on his behalf by activating its own superego, its own "reality principle," before such a catastrophic discharge of energy can take place.<sup>13</sup>

### What Speaks to the Soul

On February 14, 1800, some three hundred years after the "discovery" of the New World, the Prussian naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt arrived on the shores of Lake Valencia, having traveled inland from the Venezuelan city of Caracas. For many years now, Humboldt learned, the level of the lake had been declining, a phenomenon that immediately stimulated his curiosity. "What are the causes of the diminution of the waters of the lake?" he wondered. "Is this

<sup>13</sup> One could argue that, by intervening in this way, the discourse has internalized the shame that Norton, its central focalizing figure, simply refuses to feel. In *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*, Timothy Bewes draws a distinction between two different varieties of shame: a named, instantiated shame that is "predicated on the category of the ego" and "preserves its own substance . . . precisely to the degree that it is able to instantiate itself," and an unnamed, illimitable shame from which "every subjective component [has been] progressively erased" (188). It is this second kind of shame that we can identify in *The People in the Trees*—the kind that defies the traditional "distinction between literature's formal and representational qualities"; the kind whose asignifying, subjectless character allows it to infiltrate the very structure of the narrative it occupies; and the kind that can only be registered as "a gap, an absence, an experience that is incongruous with its own acknowledgement" (Bewes 2).



diminution more rapid now than in former ages? Can we presume that an equilibrium between the waters flowing in and the [waters lost] will be shortly re-established, or may we apprehend that the lake will entirely disappear?" (134–35). In order to answer these questions, Humboldt conducted a number of experiments, one of which involved estimating the size of the lake (ten leagues from end to end, with an unequal breadth that "nowhere surpass[e]d 2.3 leagues" [135]), while another required the use of a hygrometer to calculate the precise rate at which it was evaporating (0.36 milliliters per hour [146]). Eventually, having spent several days studying the lake from every conceivable angle, he was able to offer the following explanation for its steady decline: "The changes which the destruction of forests, the clearing of plains, and the cultivation of indigo have produced . . . in the quantity of water flowing [into the lake]," along with "the evaporation of the soil, and the dryness of the atmosphere, present causes sufficiently powerful to explain [its] progressive diminution" (142). Any other scientist of his age would have been satisfied with such a conclusion, but Humboldt had more to say. Before moving on, he felt it necessary to mention the beauty of Lake Valencia and its surrounding landscape and to acknowledge that the wonder inspired by such a place could be neither quantified by science nor conveyed by language. "On the banks of a lake," he writes, "in a vast forest, at the foot of summits covered with eternal snows, it is not the simple magnitude of the objects that penetrates us with secret admiration. What speaks to the soul, what causes such profound and various emotions, escapes our measurements, as it does the forms of language" (134). Here, as elsewhere, Humboldt is celebrating the irreducible and ineffable qualities of the natural world—those qualities that confound science, that defy representation, and must therefore be experienced directly in the affective form of wonder. In other words, despite his overwhelming urge to measure, to classify, and ultimately to understand the natural world, Humboldt was also able to sustain, indefinitely, the residual traces of wonder that drove his curiosity. "Nature," he argued in a letter to Goethe in 1810, "must be experienced through feeling." Those who engage with the world solely by quantifying and classifying it, by dividing it into species and subspecies, "will never get close to it" (qtd. in Wulf 41).

As we have seen, the narrator of *The People in the Trees* is incapable of sustaining such a feeling. When he encounters the kind of radical alterity that typically inspires wonder, he does everything he can to assimilate, and thus destroy, the very *difference* that made this person, object, or practice "wonderful" in the first place. In *Marvelous Possessions*, Stephen Greenblatt describes two different types of wonder. There is, he suggests, the kind that leads to "a sense of dispossession, a disclaimer of dogmatic certainty, a self-estrangement in the face of the strangeness, diversity, and opacity of the world" (74); and then there is the kind that generates an appropriative impulse, "a particularly intense dream of possession" (121). Needless to say, Norton's response to the island of Ivu'ivu falls under the latter category. Once his longing for possession (whether it be epistemological, material, or "familial") has been satisfied, the sense of wonder that originally stimulated his curiosity, his desire, almost immediately dissipates, giving rise to a vaguely dysphoric feeling of apathy and indifference. We see this when he first arrives in the

village and, after initially finding the place fascinating, soon becomes “bored and a bit claustrophobic” (Yanagihara 215). We also see it when the feeling of wonder that had compelled him to adopt forty-three U’ivuan children eventually disappears (“I began to realize that I was bored,” he confesses, “or rather, that I had lost my taste for the whole occupation of child-raising” [400]). In each case, we are privy to the personal consequences of such affective entropy, as the wonder that Norton is no longer capable of feeling rises to the surface again in the pathological form of a pedophilic encounter; yet a similar trajectory can be traced at the macrocosmic level of the island itself. “[F]or those readers unfamiliar with it,” we are told at the beginning of the novel, Ivu’ivu possesses “a daunting landscape, as beautiful as it is intimidating. Everything there is larger and purer and more awesome than imaginable” (17). But once the existence of the tribe (and the secret of its longevity) is revealed, the place is quickly overrun by scientists, researchers, and the representatives of various multinational companies. Together, they strip the island of all its wonders, decimating its natural resources (including the opa’ivu’eke) and destroying its unique culture. “[N]ever,” our editor says, “ha[s] such a wonderful promise slipped away so quickly: a secret found, a secret lost, all within the space of a decade” (16). As Norton himself acknowledges, the fate suffered by this small Micronesian island is entirely predictable; but if predictability could be considered the opposite of wonder, that “sudden surprise of the soul,” then it is only fitting—indeed, only to be expected—that the story of Ivu’ivu should end in this way.

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