



Where From, Why Us, Where To?: Visiting Tahiti and Life Itself

Rollan McCleary

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Despite being only dots in a vast Pacific, Tahiti and its islands have managed to arouse unusual levels of admiration and controversy in equal degrees from the outset. Amid the arguments of culture, colonialism, sex and religion that have swirled around it, one thing is certain. Tahiti is beautiful ...because as Voltaire observed, if the French and the British could for once agree on something it was necessarily true. Yet even while the likes of Matisse would arrive to declare Tahiti is “beautiful, beautiful, beautiful”, it is less agreed just what kind of perfection this entails and what it might signify for perceptions of our world and beyond it. Is this symbolically the place of Bougainville’s Venus or Gauguin’s Moon goddess or the Christian’s, not to say the modern and secular tourist’s, paradise and why? What are the spirits real or imagined of this region with its deserted marae? What if any is the dark side? This essay is an intuitive, visceral, wholly personal response to visiting Tahiti and a more philosophical one to the images, true and false, with which especially the artist Gauguin fixed Tahiti in the public imagination. It is also an attempt within a short space to render a personal and original response to the questions of his most famous work: “Where do we come from, What are we for, Where are we going?”.

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