Chapter 6

In the Event: Indigenous Countersigns and the Ethnohistory of Voyaging

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Introduction

This chapter combines an ethnohistory of French voyagers' representations of indigenous people in Oceania¹ with an ethnohistory of cross-cultural encounters in which those representations were generated and about which they speak. It does so for both epistemological and pragmatic reasons: to illustrate the entanglement of discourse, text and event that underpins historical writing; and to construct a comparative history of specific cross-cultural interactions in the Pacific Islands and Van Diemen's Land during one exemplary voyage in the classic era of European scientific voyaging (1766–1840) – the expedition of *La Recherche* and *L'Espérance* (1791–94) led by Antoine-Raymond-Joseph de Bruni d'Entrecasteaux (1737–93) (see figure 6.1). The chapter foregrounds embodied ethnohistorical moments and moves inductively from them to anticipate aspects of the wider intellectual context of an emerging science of race, which is merely outlined in the introduction. I not only problematise the assumed centrality of European actors in actual cross-cultural encounters but argue for an ongoing, mobile dialectic of discourse and *expériences*² – that the presence and agency of indigenous people infiltrated the writings and pictures produced by sailors, naturalists and artists in the course of scientific voyages and left ambiguous countersigns in the very language, tone and content of their representations. Indigenous countersigns permeate voyagers' representations but are often camouflaged in the ignorance, prejudices and ethnocentric perceptual processes of European observers. They can be identified through critical attention to disparities and correspondences between particular representations and their different genres or media (see also Douglas 1999a, 1999b, 2003, 2006, 2007). Such countersigns are a key resource for ethnohistorians.

The political backdrop to d'Entrecasteaux's voyage was revolution in France; the intellectual context of the voyage comprised the unstable scientific discourses or artistic conventions which programmed European modes of seeing and representing exotic people. Violent political ferment at the end of the eighteenth century paralleled dramatic flux in anthropological ideas and vocabularies. This

intellectual and semantic volatility registered an analogous series of discursive shifts which in some respects were embodied or prefigured in the written and pictorial legacy of d'Entrecasteaux's voyage. In art, empirical naturalism supplanted neoclassicism. In literature, Romanticism displaced classical Enlightenment values including idealisation of the primitive. In the natural history of man, holistic humanism gave way to the rigid physical differentiations of the science of race and in the process the modern biological conception of race was distilled out of the term's older, ambiguous, environmentally-determined connotations of "variety," "nation," "tribe," "kind," "class" or, sometimes, "species."

Eighteenth-century discourses on human similarity and differences were always ethnocentric and often racially obnoxious with respect to "Negroes" and other non-white people. Yet racial discriminations were rarely categorical while most savants in principle attributed a common origin and the possibility of development toward "civilisation" to all human beings. Nineteenth-century discourses varied widely but moved steadily toward a consensus that racial differences were permanent, hereditary, formative and, possibly, primordial. This transition was epitomised with respect to Oceania in the writings of d'Entrecasteaux's celebrated successor, the multiple circumnavigator Jules-Sébastien-César Dumont d'Urville (1790–1842), whose hierarchical division of the indigenous people of Oceania into "two distinct races" used race in its modern biologised sense and reviled the "black race" of "Melanesia" (1832, 3, 19).

Tale of a Voyage

This chapter refers to cross-cultural encounters during the visits of d'Entrecasteaux to the Admiralty Islands (in what is now Papua New Guinea), Van Diemen's Land (later Tasmania), Tongatapu and New Caledonia. I draw on a range of texts both published and unpublished at the time: the *Voyage* (1808) of d'Entrecasteaux; the *Relation du voyage* (1800a) of the naturalist Jacques-Julien Houtou de La Billardière (1755–1834); the shipboard journal of one of the officers (Richard 1986b); original drawings by the artist Piron; and the forty-six plates engraved by Jacques-Louis Copia (1764–99) for the *Atlas* to La Billardière's *Relation* (1800a; 1800b).³ Like its French and English precursors and successors, this expedition combined patriotic and scientific goals "in the name of humanity, the arts and the sciences." Its "double mission" was to search for the missing French navigator Jean-François de Galaup de La Pérouse (1741–88), whose ships had vanished in 1788 after leaving Botany Bay, and "simultaneously to undertake research relative to the sciences and to commerce."⁴ The quest for La Pérouse was unsuccessful, but the voyage made significant contributions to the sciences, including the natural history of man.

Figure 6.1 Map of d'Entrecasteaux's voyage, 1791–94.

Map courtesy ANU Cartographic Services, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra.

The narrative trajectory of d'Entrecasteaux's *Voyage* is one of dissolution – literally so in its conclusion with the death of the commander but also metaphorically, in Anthony Pagden's sense: "The spaces that separated the European from those 'others' he was eventually to encounter were spaces of dissolution, menacing areas where civility could so easily dissolve into barbarism" (1993, 3). This *Voyage* is a synecdoche for the era's dawning disenchantment with primitivist idealisation of the noble savage (*le bon sauvage*) and its supplanting by negative, ultimately racialised attitudes better aligned with a new age of intensifying European imperialism. In his seminal work on the impact of Oceania in European art and science, the Australian art historian Bernard Smith argued that the transformation in the weight of European opinion about "savages" from sentimental approval to disgust owed much to "the death of famous navigators" at indigenous hands in Oceania (1960, 86–7, 99–105). In France, a specific trigger was the disappearance of La Pérouse and the publication of his *Voyage* in 1797 with its shocking climax in the apparently unprovoked killing of twelve crew members by Samoans. These people had seemed to La Pérouse to be "the most fortunate inhabitants of the globe," but their inexplicable actions forced him to the bleak conclusion that "man living in anarchy in a nearly savage state is a more vicious being than the most ferocious animals" (1798 [1797], 3: 223–63, 238).

However, neither *le bon sauvage* nor *le mauvais sauvage* ("the ignoble savage") was *sui generis* in European art and literature or merely a matter of imaging. Both positive and negative representations of indigenous people took initial shape on the ground, in particular equations of discourse, authorship and located

encounter which saw voyagers' words and pictures colonised by countersigns of indigenous agency – their demeanour, actions and desires. Indigenous countersigns were filtered through distorting screens of European preconception, precedent, perception, fantasy and phobia, and cloaked in loaded epithets, such as welcome, friendship, indifference, hypocrisy, treachery, rejection, or hostility. The narrative transition in d'Entrecasteaux's *Voyage* from initially rapturous approval of "natural man" to eventual bitter disillusionment with "ferocious savages" is thus a *signifiant* "signifier" of this author's unsettling experience of a variety of unpredictable indigenous behaviours (1808, 1: 230, 359). Yet d'Entrecasteaux's descriptive shifts do not denote the logical unfolding of a deductive racial scheme that was yet to be conceived. In this chapter, I juxtapose samples of the emotive idealism of d'Entrecasteaux's *Voyage* with the more pragmatic, republican optimism evinced in La Billardière's *Relation* and the unsentimental "hard" primitivism of Piron's neoclassical portraits.⁵ This interior contrast between varied narrativisations of d'Entrecasteaux's expedition foreshadows an inductive comparison of shifting discourses in the science of man, epitomised in Dumont d'Urville's theory of "two distinct races."

"By Their Conduct Toward Us"⁶ – Admiralty Islands, July–August 1792

At the end of July 1792, a false rumour about a possible relic of La Pérouse's passage sent d'Entrecasteaux on a long detour through the Admiralty Islands, north of the island of New Guinea, where the expedition had its first significant interactions with indigenous people (d'Entrecasteaux 1808, 1: 133–42; La Billardière 1800a, 1: 249–69). The negative precedent set by Hawkesworth's account of the "perfidy of the inhabitants of the southern Admiralty Islands towards [the English navigator] Carteret" in 1767 had inspired "misgivings" in the French, who did not land (Hawkesworth 1773, 1: 382–5; La Billardière 1800a, 1: 251). In the event, however, they were generally impressed by the behaviour of the men who came out to the boats or the ships seeking nails, axes or "bits of iron" in exchange for their foodstuffs, weapons, ornaments and implements. "Only iron," said d'Entrecasteaux, "seemed to have some value in their eyes" (1808, 1: 138, see also 134–5). The naturalist La Billardière enthused that, by and large, "the exchanges took place with the greatest good faith imaginable," notwithstanding some early instances of theft (1800a, 1: 260–1, 252–4).

For the naturalist, the only shadow on this idyllic setting of "a fine climate in a fertile island" was the affront dealt to his republican and primitivist sensibilities by acts of violence and cupidity committed by supposed "chiefs" toward their underlings: "We did not expect to see man treated in this way in a tribe which had seemed to us to be so close to the state of nature" (1800a, 1: 255, 252–3, see also 262).⁷ Forty years later, Dumont d'Urville, a republican of far more conservative hue, appropriated this story approvingly in his popular

semi-fictional work, *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde*, as a sign that “a certain social hierarchy existed on these islands” (1834–35, 2: 171). By this stage, the relative level of hierarchy was taken as an unproblematic index of the “degree of [political] perfection” achieved and was one of the complex of “numerous and essential traits ... as much moral as physical” by which “races” were presumptively characterised (1832, 3). Each of these judgements is a version of the “uniformitarianism” that has variously but consistently informed European evaluations of alien mores since classical times, but together they exemplify the different moral valences with which such judgments were historically inflected (Porter 1990; Rousseau and Porter 1990, 2). The complacent, racially-based assumption of European superiority evident in the nineteenth-century equation contrasts with the more circumstantial and ambiguous – if no less ethnocentric – eighteenth-century linkages, as will be seen again with respect to Tonga.

I have previously identified a common motif in first-hand Oceanic voyage texts: a rhetorical sequence from relief at approved indigenous conduct or demeanour to positive depictions not only of the character of local people but also of their physical appearance, notwithstanding skin colour or hair type that was often seen as unappealing (Douglas 1999a: 70–3, 2003). These textual elements are indigenous countersigns, oblique reflexes of indigenous strategies and behaviour that have infiltrated voyagers’ representations after being processed in European perception via the unstable dialectic between discourse and experience: “This arduous voyage,” as La Billardière put it, “through seas strewn with reefs, and amongst Savages against whom we had to be continually on guard” (1800a, 1:x). The rhetorical sequence recurs in the d’Entrecasteaux voyage literature, beginning in the Admiralty Islands. It is explicit in La Billardière’s declaration: “If we can judge the character of these inhabitants by their conduct towards us they are extremely mild: a look of goodness was stamped on their features” (1800a, 1: 262). Somewhat earlier in the *Relation*, the following verbal portrait succeeds several pages of mostly positive description of Islanders’ actions: “These islanders have skin of a not very deep black: their physiognomy is agreeable and differs little from that of Europeans. ... they seem happy, if one is to judge by the air of satisfaction imprinted on all their features: they have frizzy hair” (255).

The sequence is equally clear in d’Entrecasteaux’s *Voyage*: his report of the initially pacific reception received by the French in the Admiralty Islands is followed by the pronouncement that “all displayed an assured air, an open, confident countenance which betokened nothing sinister.” He recounted a similar series of reactions by de Rossel, a lieutenant on the *Recherche*, who had taken a boat close inshore and been surrounded by a crowd of apparently well-disposed men: “He thought they had a trusting nature; their faces seemed agreeable to him; there is nothing hard in their features; they have a fine stature” (1808, 1: 134–5). Both authors maintained the comforting fiction of welcome by configuring

thefts committed during the initial encounter as individual acts of opportunism by certain older men who lacked the “honesty and candour” of the young (d’Entrecasteaux 1808, 1: 135; La Billardièrre 1800a, 1: 254–6). However, La Billardièrre’s idealism was consistently more empirical and pragmatic than that of d’Entrecasteaux (see Douglas 1999a, 73–83). His delight in the “marks of great probity” subsequently shown to the French by men at another island in the group was doubly qualified: by astonishment “at encountering so great a difference in the manners of Savages so little separated from each other and with the same arts”; and by a realistic acknowledgment that variations in indigenous conduct might have been strategic since the men the French met initially “had had to deal only with ship’s boats, whereas the others dealt with ships which inspired respect” (1800a, 1: 262).

The overt moral and physical approval of the word portraits was implicitly rehearsed in Piron’s flattering rendition of a *Man of the Admiralty Islands* in the neoclassical guise of a Greek warrior.⁸ Piron’s drawing was engraved by Copia (figure 6.2) and published in La Billardièrre’s *Atlas as Savage of the Admiralty Islands* (La Billardièrre 1800b, pl. 3; Smith 1960, 110–1). In the introduction to his *Relation*, La Billardièrre assured his readers that Piron’s drawings were “strikingly truthful.” The apparent lack of naturalism of this and Piron’s other portraits might sit oddly with the author’s assertion, except that the compliment referred directly to “drawings of *costumes* ... made in the course of the campaign” (1800a, 1:x; my emphasis). Piron’s Admiralty Islander, then, is an example of the venerable classical mode of portraying foreigners that Smith labelled the “ethnographic convention,” which “defines by means of costume and adornment” and represents people “as type specimens, accompanied by detailed verbal descriptions” (Smith 1992, 80–1; Joppien and Smith 1985–87, 1: 8). Indigenous dress and accoutrements, rather than actual physiognomies, were the prime objects of Piron’s artistic endeavours and were understood as such by his shipmates, but so too was his generalised compliment to these particular indigenous subjects.

Figure 6.2 “*Sauvage des îles de l’Amirauté*” (engraving).

Artist, Piron; Engraver, Jacques-Louis Copia. Source: La Billardière 1800b: pl. 3. Photograph: Bronwen Douglas.

The “Man/Savage of the Admiralty Islands” is undoubtedly objectified by a Eurocentric aesthetic – a “spirit of heroic humanism,” Smith called it (1960, 111). Yet neither Piron’s picture nor the accompanying text is demeaning to Islanders, racially or otherwise. In sharp contrast, racial preoccupations suffused Dumont d’Urville’s reinscription of La Billardière’s text in *Voyage pittoresque* to characterise the Admiralty Islanders whom he had not personally seen. “Assuredly,” Dumont d’Urville concluded, “they are one of the finest varieties of the Melanesian race” (1834–35, 2: 171). But this was faint praise given his opinion and ranking of “the Melanesians.” As citizens of Papua New Guinea, Admiralty Islanders are today often classed collectively as Melanesians and identify themselves as such regionally. In these modern indigenised usages, the term has largely shed (or sometimes reversed) the racialised connotations of its ugly history. The term *Espèce Mélanienne* “Melanian species” was invented in 1825 by the polygenist French soldier-biologist Jean-Baptiste-Geneviève-Marcellin Bory de Saint-Vincent (1778–1846) to designate the “penultimate” of the fifteen separate species into which he divided the human genus (1827 [1825], 1: 82; 2: 104–13). Dumont d’Urville (1826) adopted *Mélaniens*, “from the dark colour of their skin,” to label one of the “three great divisions” into which he initially classified Oceanian people.⁹ He subsequently reworked *Mélaniens* into *Mélanésiens* to name the so-called “black Oceanian race” and characterised them in highly derogatory terms: “disagreeable features”; “often very thin and rarely well-shaped limbs”; “women ... hideous”; “far more debased toward the state of Barbarism than the Polynesians and the Micronesians”; “institutions ... still in their infancy”; “dispositions and intelligence ... very inferior to those of the copper-coloured race”; “natural enemies of the whites” (1832, 6, 11).

“Men So Close to Nature”¹⁰ – Van Diemen’s Land, February 1793

Such a priori racial differentiation of Oceanian people was unknown in 1792–93. D’Entrecasteaux referred in passing to the fluid, circumstantial classification of “two great varieties of people in the South Seas” that the German Johann Reinhold Forster (1729–98), senior naturalist on the second voyage of James Cook (1728–79), had initially mapped in 1778 (1996 [1778], 153). But for d’Entrecasteaux, it was a possibly useful hypothesis rather than fact – “if, as Mr Forster thinks, ... [the Pacific Islands] are peopled only by two races of men ...” The reference occurs in the context of a comparison between the Tongans, whom d’Entrecasteaux saw as the most “beautiful race of men” imaginable, and a single “native of Fiji,” who was less handsome but had “an equally fine stature” and “seemed endowed with more intelligence, and had more desire to educate himself” (1808, 1: 312–3). Like Forster, d’Entrecasteaux used race in the loose, mutable sense of “variety.”

Unlike Dumont d'Urville, the ethnological discriminations made by La Billardière and d'Entrecasteaux were flexible and contextual. They were shaped by cumulative particular experiences of indigenous reception and actions, which each author tried to correlate with his general values and preconceptions, desires and place-specific expectations derived from reading voyage literature. The terms of these overlapping equations were discourse and precedent on the one hand, experience and indigenous agency on the other; the products were representations infused with indigenous countersigns. The Admiralty Islands vignette suggests particular permutations of these relationships: here, perceived experience of indigenous actions redefined precedents but confirmed the discourse of primitivism to which d'Entrecasteaux, especially, was ambivalently attracted. Relieved and charmed by the behaviour of Admiralty Islanders, at the end of his stay d'Entrecasteaux remarked on the lessons of experience, reporting that the "ferocity" and "hostile attitudes" of these people had been "exaggerated" (1808, 1: 140). From this point on, the voyage added its own precedents to those learned from earlier literature.

After a break in Ambon, d'Entrecasteaux headed for Van Diemen's Land, where in February 1793 the French found uncorrupted, natural man:¹¹ "so good and so different from the idea that one forms of savages from the accounts of different voyagers" – specifically from accounts of the visit to Van Diemen's Land in 1772 of his compatriot Marc-Joseph Marion du Fresne (1724–72), who had clashed violently with the inhabitants and thought them "wicked." "On the contrary," for d'Entrecasteaux, the "peaceable dispositions" of the Tasmanians with whom his crews enjoyed amicable relations over ten days in Recherche Bay and Bruny Island proved to him "that they are good and trusting" – indigenous actions and demeanour here determined the voyager's evaluation of their character.¹² He delighted in these "simple and good men," "so close to nature, whose candour and goodness contrast so strongly with the vices of the state of civilisation," and who seemed to him also to lack the "vices" – especially the "disposition to theft" – that he attributed to the more "advanced" but also often more "ferocious" Pacific Islanders (1808, 1: 230–6, 241–3, 287–8, 307).

The Van Diemen's Land section of d'Entrecasteaux's *Voyage* is almost irresistibly quotable for examples of the ethnocentric, infantilising universalism of Enlightenment primitivism, with tropes like "this first natural affection" and "this school of nature" (1808, 1: 234). There is little realism in his ecstatic, self-indulgent prose portraits – perhaps unsurprisingly since, by La Billardière's report, the commander did not have "the pleasure of seeing" any Tasmanian until the final day of the stay in Recherche Bay (1800a, 2: 57). Yet, at least as much as its more empirical counterparts, d'Entrecasteaux's narrative bears the imprint of Tasmanian actions and demeanour toward their visitors. Indigenous countersigns inflected the tone and content of the narrative from its opening scene of "the first meeting" which "established such confidence that it was

followed by several others, all just as friendly, and giving the most favourable idea of the inhabitants of this country" (d'Entrecasteaux 1808, 1: 230). During this first meeting, a Tasmanian man made it clear "by unequivocal signs" (La Billardire 1800a, 2: 32) that he had inspected the four-man French party as they slept in the open the previous night, providing d'Entrecasteaux with further evidence that Tasmanians "are not evil-minded," because they had not molested the Frenchmen (1808, 1: 232).¹³ His near-to-final passage on the Tasmanians of Recherche Bay paid tribute to "their open and cheerful countenance" but infantilised it as the "reflection of a happiness untroubled by upsetting thoughts or impotent desires" (243). I argue, by contrast, that indigenous demeanours toward newcomers, however they were experienced, were always strategic – even if I cannot begin to fathom the reasons – and that their textual inscription is yet another enigmatic countersign of indigenous agency.

At this stage of the rhetorical sequence, local conduct encouraged positive evaluations of indigenous appearance as well as character: a single man agreed to go to the ship where his "confidence" delighted d'Entrecasteaux and gave "the most favourable impression of this tribe, but especially of this man," who was still more "remarkable" for his "fine physique and his intelligence" (1808, 1: 238, 243). The sequence is patent in the contemporary journal of the first officer of the *Recherche*, Alexandre d'Hesmivy d'Auribeau, who was usually more empirical and pragmatic than d'Entrecasteaux: the natives' unaggressive behaviour toward the sleeping Frenchmen was "an infinitely interesting deed," which at the outset established their "goodness and humanity"; their general lack of suspicion or fear of the French showed "a nature as good as it is trustful"; finally, he remarked, their "agreeable physiognomy" and "mild gaze" (Richard 1986b, 308, 312). D'Entrecasteaux's largely vicarious experience of indigenous actions in Van Diemen's Land confirmed the recent precedent set by Admiralty Islanders, further reinforced the discourse of primitivism, and refuelled his expectations for future encounters.

"Hypocritical and Treacherous"/ A "Fine Race of Men"¹⁴ – Tongatapu, March–April 1793

D'Entrecasteaux concluded the narrative of his stay in Van Diemen's Land with a burst of heavily gendered primitivist enthusiasm for this "most perfect image of the first state of society, when men are not yet troubled by the passions or corrupted by the vices which civilisation sometimes brings in its wake," had "no cause for dissension" because their only property consisted of "their wives and children," and enjoyed the "mutual affection" of a simple, family-based patriarchy (1808, 1: 242–3). This echo of La Billardire's ambivalence about assumed chiefly abuses in the Admiralty Islands also anticipated d'Entrecasteaux's own deep misgivings about the "much more advanced" Tongans whom he encountered in Tongatapu in March and April 1793 (1808,

1: 343). He likened their political situation to “the old feudal regime,” reduced to “general anarchy” by the “weakness of the principal chief” and the fractionating effect of the “division of two things which ought to be inseparable” – those “who exercise power from those to whom honours are paid.”¹⁵ The resultant “factions between the family possessing the sovereignty and that which only exercises it” meant that the government was “powerless,” the people were out of control and “the warrior class” seemingly “recognised no authority” (1808, 1: 305–6, 309).

Supposedly guileless “natural” man in Van Diemen’s Land and devious “warrior chief” in Tonga are visually juxtaposed in an unattributed plate in La Billardière’s *Atlas* (1800b, pl. 8) (figure 6.3):

Figure 6.3 “Homme du Cap de Diemen; Finau, chef des guerriers de Tongatabu” (engraving).

Engraver, Jacques-Louis Copia; Artist, anon. Source: La Billardière 1800b: pl. 8. Photograph: Bronwen Douglas.

Though the Tasmanian is a nameless, idealised neoclassical type rather than an individual, La Billardière insisted that the portrait “provides a much more exact idea of the characteristics of their face than everything I could teach about them by [writing] lengthy details” (1800a, 2: 33–4). The aristocratic d’Auribeau similarly endorsed the “truth” and “naturalness” of the classical depiction of Tasmanian figures by “this clever artist” (Richard 1986b, 313). The cursory attention paid to physical appearance in the written texts of d’Entrecasteaux’s voyage was an eighteenth-century norm in sharp contrast to the obsessive primacy of physical differences in the naturalised racial agenda of Dumont

d'Urville and his naturalists.¹⁶ In contrast to the generalised Tasmanian, the Tongan portrayed was an actual individual known to the French as Finau, a "chief of the warriors." La Billardière described him as being "of middling height and very fat" and as having, like his compatriots, "all the features of a European." The naturalist approved this likeness also as "extremely truthful" (1800a, 2: 95).

I see no invidious racial comparison in these portraits, though their juxtaposition implies an ethnological agenda and there is some differentiation of skin colouring. Textually, any implied moral comparison is mainly to the Tasmanians' advantage, though La Billardière did take exception to aspects of their gender relations. He pitied the "poor women condemned" to the "arduous labour" of diving for shellfish while their husbands dined by the fire, heedless of sanctimonious French suggestions to "share their toil at least" (1800a, 2: 54). By contrast, in Tonga d'Entrecasteaux "noted with pleasure that the women are better treated" than in the most westerly Pacific islands, where they did all the hard work, because they were "here destined uniquely for housework and child rearing" (1808, 1: 310). On the other hand, contrasting indigenous actions saw the weight of French censure bear more heavily on Tongans with respect to female chastity: two young girls in Van Diemen's Land won La Billardière's approval by fleeing the sexual advances of several sailors (1800a, 2: 46), whereas d'Entrecasteaux was disgusted at the Tongan "market ... in prostituted girls, ... whom the chiefs offered with a licence which is not seen even among the most corrupt peoples" (1808, 1: 288).

Class- and culture-bound conceptions of propriety in gender relations apart, the voyagers were consistently disconcerted by the behaviour of Tongan men who seemed all too well-endowed with "the passions" and "the vices" supposedly consequent on a degree of "civilisation" (1808, 1: 242).¹⁷ D'Entrecasteaux expressed affront and apprehension at the repeated "turbulent" and "insulting" conduct of "badly-intentioned" men who displayed an "irresistible proclivity ... for theft" (1808, 1: 279–81, 299, 287; see also 294–5, 297). The seemingly arbitrary brutality of Finau's public treatment of ordinary Islanders inspired "horror" in d'Entrecasteaux and offended the ethnocentric humanism he shared with La Billardière, producing the global assertion that Tongans "are not, it is true, naturally ferocious; but ... sentiments of humanity are unknown to them" and they "attach no value to human life" (d'Entrecasteaux 1808, 1: 283–4, 308; La Billardière 1800a, 2: 96, 115, 174–5).¹⁸ D'Entrecasteaux attributed this dismal state of affairs to "the nature of government" in the Pacific Islands, where the "abuse of force" by chiefs toward "the inferiors" provoked their "disposition to theft," which in turn rendered "their character ... hypocritical and treacherous, especially toward strangers, whose goodwill they seek in order to have a better chance to rob them" – though here he did acknowledge a strategic element in friendly indigenous reception of visitors (1808, 1: 307–8).

Nonetheless, disapproval of Tongan conduct did not deter voyagers from aesthetic appreciation of their looks. La Billardière praised their “fine shape” and the “very agreeable and very animated physiognomy” of the women (1800a, 2: 175, 176–7). D’Entrecasteaux applied the same phrase – “a very agreeable physiognomy” – to “most women belonging to the chiefly *class*” and professed himself unable to envisage “a finer *race* of men ... especially that of the chiefs” (1808, 1: 310, 313; my emphasis). Race here signified in its Enlightenment sense as a synonym for “class” or “kind,” a usage confirmed in d’Entrecasteaux’s subsequent speculation that “the people” belonged to “a different race,” though still enjoying a healthy and comfortable existence (320).¹⁹

Yet, general Pacific precedents, notably in La Pérouse’s journal,²⁰ and specifically Tongan precedents in the Cook voyage narratives meant that d’Entrecasteaux had not expected to find “uncorrupted, natural man” in Tonga. From the outset he took precautions because he knew that “in these countries, ... the inhabitants’ dispositions must always be regarded as very suspect” (1808, 1: 277). Forewarning, though, did not forearm against fear consequent on the vulnerability of isolated expeditions or a sense of betrayal at frustrated good intentions: “I attached very great value to finishing this campaign without shedding blood,” he wrote in the wake of a lethal clash with Tongan warriors,²¹ and “so I am acutely affected by this unfortunate event: but I could wait no longer [before firing on them]” because of “the danger threatening some of our people” (1808, 1: 298; see also 308). Of course there was self-exculpation here. D’Entrecasteaux’s official instructions cautioned against using arms against native people except “as a last extremity,” and significant sections of his audience would be expected to deplore the necessity.²² There is no reason, though, to doubt the sincerity of his regrets or the extent to which his pre-emptive strike and the manner of its textual inscription were compelled by indigenous agency: by Tongans’ desire for European property and use of violence to obtain it – a material motivation that d’Entrecasteaux morally reconfigured as “this passion for theft” (1808, 1: 290).

“Ferocious Savages”²³ – New Caledonia, April–May 1793

I have previously published detailed ethnohistorical critiques of the narratives of d’Entrecasteaux’s subsequent sojourn in New Caledonia and shall not rehearse the details (Douglas 1970, 1999a: 73–83). Enough to say that Kanak actions – attacking and stealing from the French; and providing “incontestable proofs” that they were “anthropophagous: [that] they are avid for human flesh and do not hide it” – quickly pushed the authors of both narratives into angry disenchantment with the favourable accounts of Kanak behaviour, character and appearance published by Cook and Georg Forster (1754–94). The Kanak practice of cannibalism particularly appalled d’Entrecasteaux and drove him to “reclassify [them] amongst the most ferocious of peoples,” reconstituting Cook’s

“good-natured” Kanak as “barbarous men” and “ferocious savages” (Cook 1777, 2: 114; d’Entrecasteaux 1808, 1: 332–4, 358–9; La Billardière 1800a, 2: 191).

Piron’s neoclassical pencil drawing of a “Man of Balade”²⁴ was engraved by Copia (figure 6.4) for La Billardière’s *Atlas* as “Savage of New Caledonia hurling a spear” (1800b: pl. 35). Copia’s figure is at once as rampant as the original, but more ferocious in expression. “Hard” primitivist in style, neither figure is at all naturalistic – though the bodily proportions of the engraving are somewhat more realistic – since the classical ideal precluded depiction of the drought-induced emaciation of the people described in the texts. “They have little corpulence,” said d’Entrecasteaux, “their arms and legs are very spindly: an excessive thinness betrays their wretchedness. ... [T]heir means of subsistence are very insufficient” (1808, 1: 330). In an earlier paper I argued that the symbolic significance of the “Savage of New Caledonia” is considerably more than ethnographic (Douglas 1999a, 73–83). It is the only engraving out of forty-six in La Billardière’s *Atlas*, which represents an indigenous person in aggressive pose and one of only two in which male genitals are prominently displayed – the other being the Admiralty Islander. The “Savage” is an intensely confrontational representation, surely intended to be so by the artist, the engraver, the publisher and, presumably, the author. I maintain, moreover, that the drawing is also a countersign of confrontational collective agency on the part of many of the Kanak of whom this figure was meant to be an ideal type. This case is sustained by a parallel scrutiny of the written texts.

La Billardière’s *Atlas* conveys strongly discordant visual messages about Kanak and Tongans, which might be seen to oppose New Caledonian cannibalism and violence to Tongan beauty and sociality, thereby anticipating Dumont d’Urville’s categorical opposition of Melanesians and Polynesians (Thomas 1997, 139–41). Forty-two percent (11 out of 24) of the objects representing “Effects of the *Savages* of New Caledonia” are weapons or things associated by the Europeans with war and cannibalism; in contrast, only 15 percent (6 out of 41) of the “Effects of the *Inhabitants* of the Friendly Islands” are weapons. The *Atlas* also contains several portraits of Tongan individuals as well as three elaborate scenes of Tongan social interactions (La Billardière 1800b, plates 8, 26–33, 37–8; my emphasis). On the other hand, any such disjunction is far less marked in the written texts which express profound ambivalence about Tongan actions and recount repeated instances of cross-cultural friction and violence during the French visit – as exemplified above. D’Entrecasteaux called Tongans “less wicked” than Kanak, but that was hardly strong approval given his opinion of Kanak (1808, 1: 359).

Figure 6.4 “*Sauvage de la Nouvelle-Calédonie lançant une zagaie*” (engraving)

Artist, Piron; Engraver, Jacques-Louis Copia. Source: La Billardière 1800b: pl. 35. Photograph: Bronwen Douglas.

Within the total textual corpus of this voyage, visual and verbal, the apparent polarity in visual representations of Tongans and Kanak clearly did not signify the racialisation of observed human differences in the Pacific Islands and should not be taken as a precursor to Dumont d'Urville's named racial types. It was not pro-"Polynesian" prejudice that inspired these eighteenth-century voyagers to represent Tongans as less violent than Kanak. Rather, their antithetical representations are countersigns of dominant motifs in the collective self-presentations of significant numbers of Tongans and Kanak respectively. As d'Entrecasteaux (1808, 1: 308) acknowledged, Tongans generally dissimulated their intentions the better to plunder the visitors, using force as required, while many Kanak endeavoured openly to intimidate and control them. Indeed, what prejudice there was favoured Kanak, thanks to the precedents set by Cook and Forster, and inflected the d'Entrecasteaux voyage narratives with the added bitterness of thwarted expectations. In contrast, ambivalence was the norm in European voyagers' accounts of meetings with Tongans, a countersign of Tongan unpredictability as judged by European standards of propriety, consistency and order. Years later, de Rossel, who had sailed with d'Entrecasteaux and edited his dead captain's journal for publication, wrote an official report on Dumont d'Urville's voyage of 1826–29. He found Dumont d'Urville's relations with Tongans painfully familiar:

These men, in appearance so sociable, and in actual fact so seductive, are never more to be feared than when one believes one can abandon oneself to live among them with the most complete confidence; it is then they indulge in acts of violence that one is obliged rigorously to repress. ... [Like Cook and d'Entrecasteaux,] M. d'Urville was in turn forced to punish the audaciousness and guile of these islanders (Rossel 1830, lxxxii–lxxxiii).

Nearing the end of his voyage and, indeed, his life, d'Entrecasteaux's optimistic curiosity to engage with natural man on a friendly, mutually beneficial basis had dissolved into despair in the face of cumulative indigenous intransigence, unpredictability, seemingly unprovoked violence, or cannibalism in Tonga, New Caledonia and, subsequently, in islands further north toward New Guinea. By this stage rumour alone sufficed for him to damn whole groups as "cannibals" and to deplore "the excesses in which the human species can indulge when customs are not moderated and softened by civilisation" (1808, 1: 422–3). It was a far cry from d'Entrecasteaux's "simple and good," "natural" Tasmanians and his early strictures against the corrupting "vices of the state of civilisation" (1808, 1: 242). Indigenous agency – their largely inscrutable demeanour, actions and desires – forced d'Entrecasteaux to confront the paradox and the dilemma of the Enlightenment vision of peaceful, philanthropic, scientific encounters with so-called "savages" who were also regarded as fellow human beings: that

ethnocentric, hierarchical, paternalist, prescriptive and acquisitive strands in Enlightenment humanism would not accommodate other people's assessments and exercise of their rights, desires and autonomy. "[I]t seems certain to me," he wrote on leaving New Caledonia, "that [either] we must renounce visiting [Pacific Islanders] ... , or we must inspire respect in them by very great severity" (1808, 1: 359). This was a chilling portent.

Race

In the course of his extensive voyaging in Oceania, Dumont d'Urville never met the indigenous people of New Caledonia. He nonetheless classed them with Tasmanians on the basis of previous voyage literature: "It appears that in New Caledonia ... the Melanesian essence has undergone scarcely perceptible modifications: so La Billardière *naturally* approximated the New Caledonians to the Tasmanians" (Dumont d'Urville 1832, 15; my emphasis). La Billardière had, indeed, noted a physical resemblance: "The black colour of ... [Kanak] skin is almost as deep as that of the natives of ... [Van Diemen's Land], whose characteristic physiognomy much resembles theirs" (1800a, 2: 186). D'Entrecasteaux remarked not only a physical likeness between Kanak and Tasmanians but explicitly distinguished both from Tongans: "[Kanak] have the same physique and adopt the same postures as the inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land. This tells us that their height is much inferior to that of the natives of the Friendly Islands" (1808, 1: 330). Yet, as has been seen, La Billardière and his shipmates had unstintingly admired Tasmanian behaviour, sociality and appearance, whereas they were revolted by Kanak cannibalism, dismayed by their aggression toward the French, and represented them accordingly (Richard 1986b, 308–23; La Billardière 1800a, 2: 28–79, 182–248). D'Entrecasteaux himself compared the physical appearance of the Tasmanians and the Maori (later to be Dumont d'Urville's favourite Polynesians) to Maori disadvantage: "[Maori] are less black; their limbs are more muscular and their height greater: but their physiognomy proclaims much less goodness; it even has in it something dark and ferocious" (1808, 1: 271). For Dumont d'Urville, La Billardière's analogy between Tasmanians and Kanak was *ipso facto* damning and literally naturalised his own low racial ranking of Kanak, but he had to wrench the physical comparison out of textual and experiential contexts and construe it in terms of an anachronistic racial grammar. The descriptions of skin colour, hair type and facial features in La Billardière's *Relation* are incidental and empirical rather than systemically ethnological or biological, as was the nineteenth-century norm. Neither he nor d'Entrecasteaux argued for a broad differentiation or hierarchisation of Oceanian people on the basis of race or even Forster's flexible "varieties."

Both d'Entrecasteaux and his naturalist were Enlightenment men – La Billardière was a committed republican – whose evaluations of indigenous people

were muted, fluid, mainly aesthetic and at least as significantly shaped by experience of native actions and demeanours as by their own preconceptions. Both undoubtedly took for granted the reality of an environmentally-determined developmental hierarchy of humanity ranging from “natural” man in a state of “savagery” to “civilisation,” within which the different indigenous groups encountered were implicitly located on the basis of experience; but no fixed evolutionary trajectory was implied and neither author was uncritical of “advance” or “civilisation” as he knew it. D’Entrecasteaux remarked that while the Tasmanians were “undoubtedly less advanced in civilisation than the peoples of New Zealand, neither do they have their ferocious temperament.” Elsewhere he opined that “the inhabitants of the Friendly Islands [Tonga] are ... much more advanced than the inhabitants of New Caledonia” (1808, 1: 243, 343). It is clear from the foregoing, however, that he regarded “advance” as an equivocal blessing, which in Tonga had produced a “feudal”-style government with “weak,” “effeminate” chiefs, whose “voluptuous” lifestyle and arbitrary “abuses” led to a “state of anarchy” and forced the ordinary people into dissimulation and theft (298, 305–12). For his part, La Billardière conceived social and material progress as strongly influenced by environment and did not doubt that Aborigines were ultimately civilisable – he hoped that a pregnant female goat and a young male left by d’Entrecasteaux at Adventure Bay in Van Diemen’s Land might multiply and “occasion total change in the lifestyle of the inhabitants, who, able to become a pastoral people, would abandon the coast without regret and enjoy the pleasure of no longer having to dive for their food, at risk of being devoured by sharks.” The women, “condemned to this arduous labour,” would benefit most, though he feared that the goats would be killed before they could reproduce (1800a, 2: 79). An ethnocentric, quixotic vision perhaps, but in stark contrast to Dumont d’Urville’s bleak, racially-determined prognostication thirty-five years later: “Everything suggests that the Tasmanian, and later the Australian, incapable of ever being civilised, will end up disappearing entirely” (1830–33, 5: 96).

Conclusions

The details of indigenous motivations, the content of their strategies, the meanings of their words and actions reported in long-ago encounters with European voyagers are now difficult, if not impossible, to recover, even where rich local traditions subsist (but cf. Salmond 1991, 1997). For example, we cannot now know, though we can speculate, what “one of the chiefs” standing on the platform of a canoe in the Admiralty Islands said in his “speech” to the French, or why he made “signs” which “did not allow us to doubt that he wished to induce us to land,” or what his actual relations were with the “paddlers” who “probably did not have permission to speak, but joined their signs of invitation to the chief’s” (La Billardière 1800a, 1: 258). But I am convinced not only that

there was – obviously – always a range of local strategies and motivations, conscious and unconscious, in play in every situation of encounter but also that what indigenous people wanted, meant and did – and how they looked – profoundly influenced European reactions, expectations and representations in the always fraught and vulnerable settings of voyaging in frail, wooden sailing ships in unknown or little-known waters (see Douglas 2003).

The theory of indigenous countersigns developed in this chapter decentres – though it does not discount – European authors and their “pre-programmed” systems of knowledge and language which are assumed by most scholars to determine travellers’ “perceptions, consequent interpretations, and consequent actions” (Porter 1990, 122; Strack 1996, 286 n. 4). This is notably the case in text-focused disciplines, like literary studies, cultural studies, art history and the history of ideas (e.g. Guest 1992; Pagden 1993; Porter 1990; Strack 1996). The historical strategy implemented here, in contrast, takes seriously the complex interplay of discourse, presupposition, personality, experience, action and indigenous countersigns, which is encoded in voyagers’ representations of Oceanian people and particular encounters with them. In the late eighteenth century and much of the nineteenth, travellers’ narratives, drawings and ethnographies provided important raw material for the emergent anthropological science of race. The indigenous countersigns that permeate voyagers’ written and visual representations were usually vitiated in the process of appropriation of such knowledge by metropolitan savants, but they remain key building blocks for the construction of modern ethnohistorical narratives.

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Notes

¹ In modern usage, the term *Oceania* is often limited to the Pacific Islands, but I give it its inclusive nineteenth-century sense, which encompassed Australia, the Pacific Islands, Aotearoa New Zealand, New Guinea, and adjacent islands in eastern Indonesia. All translations are my own.

² The French term *expérience* retains the dual meaning of “experience” and “experiment,” whereas English has lost the second sense since the mid-seventeenth century; “empirical” can connote either or both meanings (*Oxford English Dictionary*, online). Both apply to the ethos of scientific voyaging.

³ Following d’Entrecasteaux’s death in New Guinea waters in the latter stages of the voyage, the expedition disintegrated in the East Indies under the multiple pressures of external war, national political divisions and disease. On La Billardière’s departure from Batavia, Piron had “begged” him to accept a duplicate set of “the drawings of costumes and landscape, which he had made in the course of the campaign” (La Billardière 1800a, x). La Billardière’s *Relation* was duly illustrated by Copia’s engravings of Piron’s drawings. Two separate English translations appeared the following year, testimony to the huge popularity of voyage literature. A collection of Piron’s drawings, long held by the Musée de l’Homme, is now in the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. None is included in this chapter because the fee charged for reproduction rights is exorbitant. D’Entrecasteaux’s narrative was edited belatedly by a surviving officer, Elisabeth-Paul-Edouard de Rossel (1765–1829) and finally published in 1808 accompanied by a magnificent collection of charts, but without pictures.

⁴ “Décret de l’assemblée nationale,” Feb. 9, 1791 (La Pérouse 1798 [1797], 1: 1–3). See also “Mémoire du roi, pour servir d’Instruction particulière au sieur Bruny-Dentrecasteaux, chef de division des Armées navales, commandant les frégates la Recherche et l’Espérance” (d’Entrecasteaux 1808, 1: xliii–xliv; Richard 1986a, 21–82, 133–48).

⁵ “Hard” primitivism was Smith’s term for a discourse which extolled “the harsh but virtuous primitive life” in counterpoint to expressions of distaste for “the luxuries and excesses of civilization” (1960, 126–27).

⁶ La Billardière (1800a, 1: 262).

⁷ In their historical reconstruction of early colonial political relations in Ponam – a small island north of Manus, the largest of the Admiralty Islands – Achsah and James Carrier discussed the position of *lapan* “leader, rich man,” who sought to strengthen his own and his group’s position by dominating ceremonial exchanges and recruiting new members to the group. The Carriers’ argument that “economic success and political prestige” depended on the ability to “manage trade intelligently” and “control” people, together with their production and labour, has suggestive implications for the actions of “chiefs” described in the d’Entrecasteaux voyage texts (Carrier and Carrier 1991, 55–72).

⁸ Piron, “Homme des îles de l’amirauté,” pencil drawing, 34 x 43 cm. MQB ICONO PP0154838 (Paris: Musée du Quai Branly). Online <<http://www.quaibranly.fr/fr/documentation/le-catalogue-de-l-iconeotheque/index.html>>.

⁹ In 1826, following his initial voyage in Oceania as first officer on the *Coquille* but before his return to the Pacific in command of that vessel, renamed *Astrolabe*, Dumont d’Urville wrote a long, unfinished essay in response to the offer by the Société de Géographie of one of its annual prizes for work on “the peoples of Oceania, revealing their differences and their similarities to other peoples, with regard to their form and physical constitution, ... their morals, customs, civil and religious institutions and languages.” His “three great divisions” were: (1) “Australians,” “Blacks,” or “Melanians”; (2) “peoples of Tonga,” the “true Polynesians,” “adherents of *tabou*”; (3) “Carolines.” The “Malay race properly speaking” remained outside the classification (Dumont d’Urville 1826). This manuscript anticipated the

well-known, far more pithy and schematic paper on the same theme that he read to the Société in January 1832 and published in its *Bulletin* (Dumont d'Urville 1832).

¹⁰ D'Entrecasteaux (1808, 1: 230).

¹¹ See Stephanie Anderson's (2000) recent interpretation of cross-cultural encounters during d'Entrecasteaux's visit to Van Diemen's Land.

¹² The French were evidently able to do a careful census of the people they met in Recherche Bay – another marker of the cross-cultural intimacy of this episode. D'Entrecasteaux enumerated, as follows, the “forty-eight individuals” comprising “the tribe we saw”: ten old or young men, fourteen women of various ages, and twenty-four children from 1 to 12 years divided equally between girls and boys (1808, 1: 245; see also Richard 1986b, 311–2).

¹³ The meeting and its gratifying antecedent event were described in detail by La Billardière, who was a participant along with the expedition's gardener and two armed seamen. He counted forty-two “savages,” amongst whom were seven men and eight women, while “the others appeared to be their children” (1800a, 2: 27–40).

¹⁴ D'Entrecasteaux (1808, 1: 308, 313).

¹⁵ In Tonga, the highest-ranking titleholder was the deeply sacred Tu'i Tonga, while the pragmatic exercise of power was the domain of the *hau* or paramount ruler. Niel Gunson has discussed the relationship between sacred and secular leadership, Tu'i Tonga and *hau*, both in general terms and historically, at the end of the eighteenth-century when contending chiefs engaged in lethal competition for the position of *hau* and local leaders rejected the authority of the *hau* over their districts, with resultant violent conflict and political fragmentation (1979, 28–43).

¹⁶ See, for example, Dumont d'Urville (1832); Quoy and Gaimard (1830, 15–59); see also Douglas (1999a: 86, 1999b).

¹⁷ For accounts of the French stay in Tonga see d'Entrecasteaux (1808, 1: 276–99); La Billardière (1800a, 2: 92–177). For the commander's ethnographic reflections on Tongans, see d'Entrecasteaux (1808, 1: 300–23).

¹⁸ The stark variation in the cultural construction of punishment was graphically displayed in La Billardière's report that a chief who advocated the execution of a captured thief nonetheless “begged that he be pardoned” and “seemed to be extremely affected” when the man was flogged (1800a, 2: 140).

¹⁹ D'Entrecasteaux's predecessor Louis-Antoine de Bougainville (1729–1814) had applied the term *race* to Tahiti in a similarly ambiguous sense, when he discerned “two very different races of men, yet with the same language, the same customs and seeming to mix together without distinction” (1771, 214). He did not correlate colour difference with class, whereas Joseph Banks (1743–1820), the naturalist on Cook's first voyage, linked class, climate and lifestyle to account for “the colours of different Nations.” In “the South sea Islands,” he wrote, “many of the Better sort of people who keep themselves close at home are nearly as white as Europeans, while the poorer sort, obligd in their business of fishing &c. to expose their naked bodies to all the inclemencies of the Climate, have some among them but little lighter than the New Hollanders” (Banks 1962, 2: 124). For his part, La Billardière attributed an analogous difference in the colour of Tongans to gendered behaviours rather than class: whereas men “have swarthy skin because they very often expose themselves to the ardour of the sun; ... the women, who stay fairly constantly in their houses or in the shade of trees, have a very white complexion” (1800a, 2: 176–7).

²⁰ D'Entrecasteaux's expedition was provided with a very well-equipped library, including a copy of La Pérouse's manuscript journal (Richard 1986a, 70).

²¹ The blacksmith of the *Recherche* was seriously wounded while in pursuit of a thief, and in reprisal at least two Tongans died, one reportedly a chief, and two high-ranking chiefs were taken hostage (d'Entrecasteaux 1808, 1: 294–8; La Billardière 1800a, 2: 155–61).

²² D'Entrecasteaux's orders here replicated those of La Pérouse (Dunmore 1995, 1: cxlviii). Published reports of Cook's use of violence against Pacific Islanders had inspired widespread controversy (Smith 1992, 199–202). Both d'Entrecasteaux (1808, 1: 359–60) and La Billardière (1800a, 2: 175) reported that many Tongans complained of “the harsh treatment he had inflicted on them.”

²³ D'Entrecasteaux (1808, 1: 359).

²⁴ Piron, “Homme de Balade,” pencil drawing, 41 x 46 cm. MQB ICONO PP01544787. (Paris: Musée du Quai Branly). Online <<http://www.quai Branly.fr/fr/documentation/le-catalogue-de-l-icone theque/index.html>>.