

Interspecies Entanglements. Plant History and Racial Theory in Georg Forster's *Essay Vom Brodbaum (On The Breadtree, 1784)*

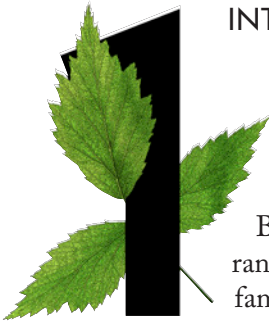


ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the strained legacy of colonial botany and plant trafficking in the context of European expansion and colonisation. ‘Interspecies entanglements’ refers to the relationships of power, knowledge, accumulation, commodification and desire that are perceptible when humans talk about plants in the framework of colonialism. The example I take is the breadfruit tree (*Artocarpus altilis*), a member of the mulberry family dispersed widely across the Pacific, which was famously transplanted from Tahiti to the Caribbean in the 1790s. After elaborating its journey through cultural discourse (first as ‘bread of the Gods’, then as ‘food for slaves’), I focus on German naturalist Georg Forster’s essay, titled *Vom Brodbaum (On the Breadtree, 1784)*. My underlying contention is that, while Forster redresses some damning stereotypes and misconceptions relating to the Pacific cultures, his interest in race and the attendant hierarchies places a question mark over the integrity of his scientific engagement with human and plant knowledge alike.

KEYWORDS

breadfruit, colonial botany, Pacific, Georg Forster, race



INTRODUCTION

A dazzling, large-scale floor installation, consisting of a mirrored floor punctuated by thousands of tiny stars, awaits the visitor to Daniel Boyd’s exhibition *Rainbow Serpent (Version)* (2023) at Berlin’s Gropius Bau. Inside the exhibition, 45 paintings drawing on a range of visual source materials, from Joshua Reynolds’ famous *Portrait of Mai* of 1777 to ethnographic images and family photographs, interweave a complex semantic and semiotic web, connecting themes of indigenous spirituality, the natural world and the impact of settler colonialism in Australia and the wider Pacific region. One of the paintings, rendered in Boyd’s signature style of overlaying dots on the surface using archival glue, depicts a Polynesian man carrying a branch of breadfruit. In the same room, a portrait satirically titled ‘Sir No Beard’ (2009) casts British botanist Joseph Banks as a pirate (complete with token eye-patch); just beyond that, a doorway leads to an image of the *Bounty*, the ship that under Banks’ auspices attempted – albeit unsuccessfully – to transport breadfruit tree

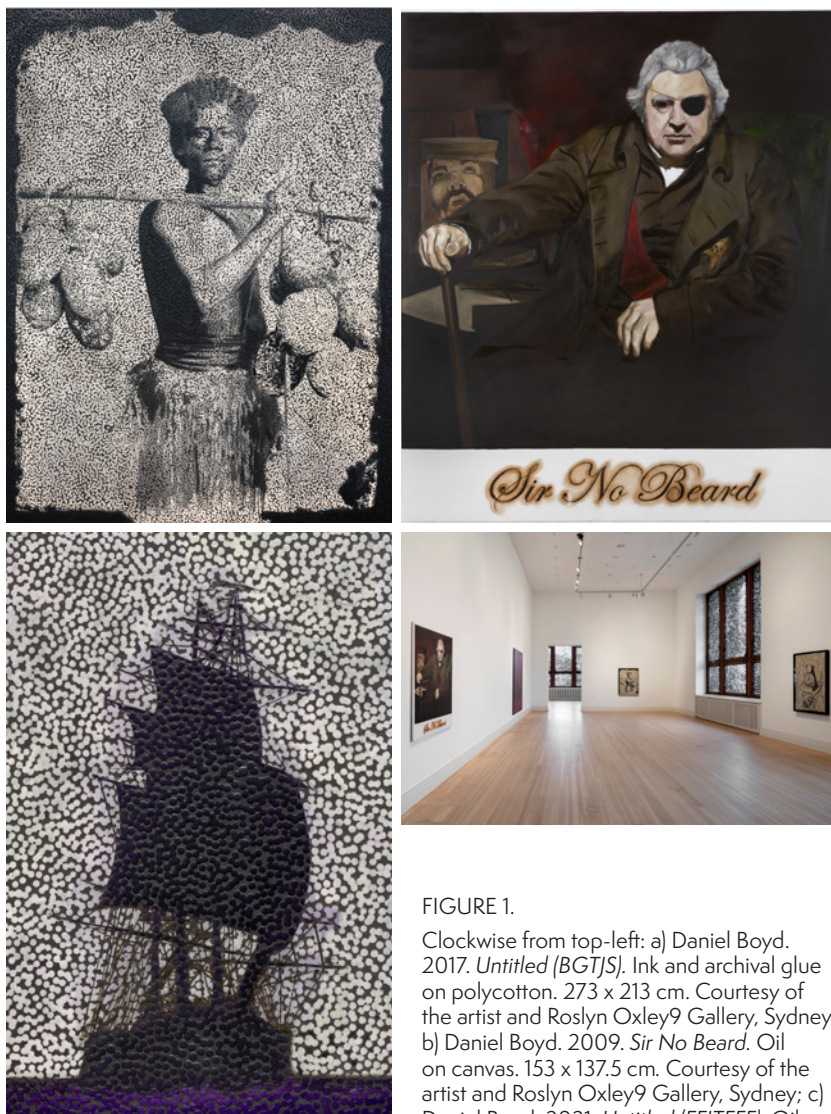


FIGURE 1.

Clockwise from top-left: a) Daniel Boyd. 2017. *Untitled (BGTJS)*. Ink and archival glue on polycotton. 273 x 213 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney; b) Daniel Boyd. 2009. *Sir No Beard*. Oil on canvas. 153 x 137.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney; c) Daniel Boyd. 2021. *Untitled (FFITFFF)*. Oil, acrylic and archival glue on canvas. 76 x 61cm. Photo: Chunho An. Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery, Korea; d) Daniel Boyd: *RAINBOW SERPENT (VERSION)*. 2023. Installation view, Gropius Bau © Gropius Bau. Photo: Luca Girardini.

specimens from Polynesia to the Caribbean in the 1780s.¹ Together, the three works invoke a distant, yet defining moment in history when ‘botanical colonisation’ (Mastnak et al. 2015) through plant trafficking and colonial botany represented a potent technological apparatus that displaced people, as well as biota, and radically altered ecosystems and societies in the process.²

In the context of the growing interest of literary and cultural studies in the potential for greater ‘resonance’ between plants and humans, this article explores the complex interplays between science, culture and power in Europe’s imperial expansion and colonial botany that has without doubt been the source of great *dissonance* in interspecies and intercultural relations for centuries. In doing so, I am inspired by feminist and indigenous scholars working in the field of science who have elucidated some of these historical dissonances, showing, for example, how colonial empires systematically relied on appropriating Indigenous peoples’ botanical knowledge and transferring plant specimens to Europe (Brockway 1979, Schiebinger 2004), while at the same time ‘the natives’ were marginalised as ‘savages’ who had no significant impact on pre-Columbian and pre-Cook ecosystems (Kay and Simmons 2002: xi). Engaging with this complex and contested terrain, my focus is on the plant that Boyd’s recent Berlin exhibition featured for good reason, as it in many ways typified the European enterprise of colonial botany and bioprospecting: the breadfruit tree. Europeans crossed oceans, defied climatic odds and orchestrated complex schemes in an effort to reap the economic benefits of this tree (known scientifically as *Artocarpus altilis*), a member of the mulberry family. Yet, beyond economics, my interest lies in the *interspecies entanglements* between human and plant – that is, in the relationships of power, knowledge, accumulation, commodification and desire (Sandilands 2016: 227) – that accompanied the breadfruit’s migration from one side of the globe to another. Transgressing cultural as much as geographical boundaries, so-called ‘migrant’ and ‘invasive species’ rarely conform to their culturally ascribed ontology as ‘natural things’, instead becoming eminently cultural and political and, as

1 The *Bounty* did not complete its voyage and, following the mutiny instigated by the ship’s crew, was burned in January 1790 at Pitcairn.

2 See Crosby 1986, 2003; Grove 1996; Drayton 2000; from a literary perspective, see Bewell 2007.

researchers have shown, oftentimes instrumental to hierarchies based on gender, indigeneity, race, sexuality and nation (Harding 2008, Philip 2004, Shiva 1997). What does the breadfruit's unique, yet also all-too-familiar, story have to say about the politics of colonial botany and planting, and what lessons might be gleaned towards recuperating a language and culture of human-plant resonance in the twenty-first century?

At the centre of my analysis of the breadfruit's journey through cultural discourse is the work of German writer and naturalist Georg Forster (1754–1794). Known for his involvement in Captain Cook's second circumnavigation of the globe (1772–1775), Forster was not so much involved in the activities of imperial trafficking as in studying the breadfruit tree, transforming it from a curiosity into a fully-fledged object of scientific inquiry. Forster authored a lengthy essay specifically devoted to the breadfruit, titled *Vom Brodbaum (On The Breadtree, 1784)*, in which he attempted to level with some of the misconceptions and stereotypes that pervaded and muddled the European South Sea imagination. However, as I shall argue, his essay also conceals a more problematic side in its engagement of early racial theory and, ultimately, hierarchical Eurocentric thinking. My underlying contention is that, even though Forster's position may appear more benevolent when compared to that of his other, more imperially minded, European counterparts, it is still necessary to probe the underlying power structures, especially the naturalist's gaze which seeks to transform the world into knowledge through a particular kind of observation, classification and ordering (Cooper 2005).

2. 'BREAD OF THE GODS'. BREADFRUIT IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SOUTH SEA DISCOURSE

Numerous signs and signifiers echo the deep connection between the Pacific cultures and a vital dietary staple. Indigenous designations, including *beta*, *bia* and *kapiak* in Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea respectively, as well as *'ulu*, *'uru* and *buco* in Samoa, the Society Islands and Fiji, uniquely signify the breadfruit within each region (NTBG n.d.). Throughout the Pacific, diversity thrives both in language and in the narratives woven into each nomenclature, shaped by differing languages, histories, ecologies and cultural traditions. Yet,

in the records of European travellers and explorers, a singular term, 'breadfruit', predominates, reflecting at once the plant's exotic allure and the commonplace familiarity that facilitated its assimilation into the European cognitive landscape.

Known for its starchy and satiating properties, the breadfruit almost immediately became associated with the Garden of Eden in the literature of European 'discovery' and expansion. Its large, glossy leaves and abundant, nutritious fruit were compared to the bountiful vegetation, but also the 'forbidden fruit', described in the Garden of Eden, connecting it with humanity's origins, the allure of a lush, pristine garden, as well as humankind's ultimate 'expulsion' and the postlapsarian toil for 'daily bread'. Writing about the island of Guam as observed in the 1770s, French explorer Julien Crozet described the breadfruit as tasting 'exactly like bread' and having 'the same nutritive properties'. He concluded by saying:

It is consequently very pleasant for the fortunate inhabitant of these islands, to be assured of his daily bread; to nourish himself he has only to cull it and eat it, and that too without any of the troubles attaching to ploughing the field, sowing the grain, hoeing, harvesting, threshing, winnowing, grinding, kneading or baking (Crozet 1891, 87).

The tendency to apprehend life in the Pacific in these quasi-Edenic terms was a dominant feature of the South Sea discourse. By the time of the Cook and Bougainville voyages of the 1760s and 1770s, the island of Tahiti (one of the islands in the archipelago known as the Society Islands) occupied a central place in the European consciousness, fueling belief in the existence of a timeless Edenic paradise in the Pacific. As the food at the heart of that society, the breadfruit condensed many of the idealising tendencies, but also the disavowal and the fantasies of appropriation, exchange and transculturation that accompanied Tahiti's cult status. Botanist Joseph Banks, one of the main protagonists of this history, suggested that the fruit be called *Sitodium* or 'bread of the Gods' to reflect the luxuriant lifestyle that reigned on Tahiti as well as the ideal character of its inhabitants (Thunberg and Banks 1779: 474). He also wrote upon visiting Tahiti in 1768:

[I]n this article of food these happy people may almost be said to be exempt from the curse of our forefathers. Scarcely can it be said that they earn their bread with the sweat of their brow when their chiefest substance Breadfruit is



FIGURE 2.

John Sebastian Miller (after Sydney Parkinson). 1769? A branch of the bread fruit tree with fruit. Engraving. 36.6 x 31.0 cm. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

procur'd with no more trouble than that of climbing a tree and pulling it down
(Banks 1962: I, 341).

These comments largely echo those made later by his French colleague Crozet in that they both perpetuate the trope of breadfruit as 'bread without the effort' (Casid 2004: 23) and emphasise the Tahitians' good fortune in being in possession of such a foodstuff. But, by stressing the aspect of labour and expertise, they also belie a latent, much more modern gesture of denigration. European idealisation of Tahiti as a reification of paradise concealed a darker side: namely, the devalorisation of Polynesians as people supposedly without skill, civilisation and history. What Sylvia Hallam has written about Australia is equally true of the South Pacific cultures: unable to conceive of indigenous Australians as agents, the first colonisers confounded the managed anthropogenic environment they encountered for the land 'as God made it' (1975: vii). Tropical plants and products like the breadfruit would simply 'grow on their own' without any need for attendant care and cultivation.³

3. 'FOOD FOR SLAVES'. THE BREADFRUIT VOYAGES OF THE 1780S AND 1790S

The best-known chapter in the history of the breadfruit, intricately tied to this context of denigration and the assertion of European cultural superiority, is the voyages led by Captain Bligh in the late 1780s and early 1790s. The infamous mutiny aboard the *Bounty* instigated by rogue lieutenant Fletcher Christian, the subject of a 1962-film starring Marlon Brando and a 1984-remake starring Anthony Hopkins and Mel Gibson, has somewhat obscured the imperial mission underscoring the expeditions. Heralded not only for its easy procurement, but also for its

- 3 Common to Crozet and Banks is their invocation of climatic thinking and a trope of 'tropical bounty' that informed European perceptions of tropical island cultures at this time. According to David Arnold, since around the fifteenth century, identifying a part of the world as 'tropical' became synonymous with drawing an imaginary line dividing it from a northern temperate zone, the imagined centre of occidental civilisation (Arnold 2000: 7). As Clayton and Bowd point out, climatic thinking and the concurrent views of nature, culture and landscape are 'endowed with great moral significance' (2003: 2). In the case of eighteenth-century Tahiti, with its profusion of breadfruit, this reflects in Banks' suggestion that the Tahitians do not 'earn' their subsistence through the 'sweat of their brow' as Europeans do.

satiating qualities, and thus touted by Banks and even Captain Cook as the perfect ‘food for mankind’,⁴ the breadfruit became, as Emma Spary points out, ‘the ultimate desideratum of improving acclimatizers’ (Spary 2000: 129–30). Though Bligh was memorialised as the hero of the whole affair, it was Banks who masterminded and coordinated the effort to transport breadfruit tree specimens from Tahiti to the British West Indies with the aim of feeding enslaved Africans labouring on British plantations more cheaply. If the mission were a success, it would be a testament to the ingenuity of European science, and to the moment in which Europeans and Tahitians united towards a common goal that, it was argued, would benefit all mankind (Newell: 2010). But, in order to fulfil its new role as a superfood, the breadfruit first had to be reinvented in discourse. John Ellis, an English naturalist friend of Banks, described the breadfruit as ‘very satisfying, therefore proper for hard-working people ...’ (Ellis 1775:13). This drastic semantic shift from ‘bread of the Gods’ to ‘food for slaves’ (Mackay 1985) demonstrated the ideological effort science was prepared to undertake in the service of nation and empire. Banks could not imagine ‘an undertaking really replete with more benevolence ... than that of transporting useful vegetables from one part of the earth to another where they do not exist’ (qtd in Bewell 2007: 95). Incidentally, the breadfruit did flourish in its new home of the West Indies, but, by the nineteenth century, had become a food so hated by the enslaved of St Vincent and Jamaica that it was reserved exclusively for animal fodder (Mackay 1985: 123–43).

The breadfruit voyages of the 1780s and 1790s exemplify the argument Londa Schiebinger advances in her study *Plants and Empire* – that imperial botany was not only a highly politically and ideologically charged venture about ‘national wealth, and hence power’ (2004:

4 As Banks would write in an article for the *Philosophical Transactions* in 1779: ‘Fructus autem praeprimis est, qui generi humano tantae utilitatis est, vel sterilis vel feminibus factus’ (‘but above all it is the fruit that imparts full thighs in place of meagre ones, hence its utility to mankind’) (Thunberg, Banks 1779: 474). Cook may have been the first to describe the breadfruit as the perfect food for mankind: ‘[I]f a man plants ten of them [breadfruit trees] in his life-time, which he may do in about an hour, he will as completely fulfil his duty to his own and future generations as the native of our less temperate climate can do by ploughing in the cold winter, and reaping in the summer’s heat, as often as these seasons return’ (Cook 1773: Vol. 2, 12). This citation, however, has been attributed by other authors to Banks or Hawkesworth.



FIGURE 3.
Thomas Gosse. 1796. *Transplanting of the Bread-Fruit Trees from Otaheite*. Mezzotint, coloured. 49.2 x 60.6 cm. Courtesy of the State Library of NSW.

5), but also one where ‘agnotology’ or ‘culturally induced ignorance’ was prevalent (Ibid.: 3). Settled in Polynesia since sometime between 300 and 800 CE, the Tahitians were without doubt skilled and intelligible masters of the environment in which they lived. Yet, in the interest of his own status as a European ‘improver’, Banks cast the Polynesians as fundamentally incapable of such ingenuity in order to legitimise the privilege of his own interests and epistemology over that of local indigenous knowledge systems.

4. MIGRATIONS, TRANSPLANTATIONS. PLANT-HUMAN ENTANGLEMENTS IN GEORG FORSTER'S ESSAY ON THE BREADTREE (1784)

Probably the most proactive person in this context of combatting misconceptions and stereotypes around the South Sea cultures, both negative and positive, was Georg Forster. Through his participation in Cook's second circumnavigation of 1772 to 1775 and the direct insight he gained into life in the Pacific, Forster advanced to the leading authority on the South Seas in the German-speaking world. At just 23 years of age, he penned what has been deemed by modern scholarship as 'the most readable of all accounts of Cook's voyages' (Smith 1985: 55), *A Voyage Round the World* (1777). Alexander von Humboldt, himself a pioneering travel writer and life scientist, would even credit Forster as being the founder of a new, distinctly German form of comparative ethnology (Humboldt 1847: 72).

As a professional naturalist or *Naturforscher*, Forster was also the first to author a lengthy essay specifically devoted to the breadfruit, entitled *Vom Brodbaum* (*On The Breadtree*, 1784),⁵ to which I now turn my attention. Forster's essay is noteworthy, in my opinion, for two reasons. For one, the historicisation that the breadfruit undergoes through Forster, its inscription into a several-centuries-long history of migration, engenders a major shift in thinking about Pacific cultures at a time when the discourse is otherwise heavily saturated with the colonial language of disavowal, dependence and dominance. From the outset of the essay, the breadfruit is introduced as a plant whose destiny was always influenced to a considerable degree by movement and displacement: 'The breadtree belongs to a small number of plants which have spread over a large portion of the earth' (Forster 1784: 4); in the South Seas, where it is native, the breadfruit can be encountered 'at almost every coast and on every island' (Ibid.). And yet, already as a sign of an encroaching presence of the human, Forster hastens to add: 'That nature allowed it [the plant] to

5 Georg Forster (1784). No English version of the essay exists in the public domain. All translations from the German are my own. Any German-language terms have been cited using original eighteenth-century spelling (e.g. *Brodbaum*, *Perfectibilität*, *Cultur*, etc.), as they appear in Forster's text.

sprout in this entire region all by itself and without any human interference, is not at all what I am claiming' (Ibid.).

What Forster is attempting to do here is to make the history of the breadfruit understandable as a history of its mobilisation through people. Speculating on how this larger evolutionary event unfolded, the German is one of the first to advance a theory of Austronesian expansion – that is, the hypothesis that, over a period of many thousands of years, a people of south-east Asian provenance migrated eastwards, spreading their culture, language and customs throughout much of south-east Asia and the Indo-Pacific (Douglas 2008). As he reasons:

We know of periods in which an uncontainable urge pushed the inhabitants of western Asia and those of Europe to leave their homes; periods where numerous hordes wandered half the world before they were able to find calm again. Why should we not venture to postulate a similar epoch of migration for the original Asian ancestors of our islanders ...? (Forster 1784: 6)

Shedding the exotic aura previously assigned to it as 'bread of the Gods', the breadfruit tree is rationalised in the pragmatic role it played as 'hand luggage' within this history of migration and transplantation:

[W]hat could be more natural than to take all their mobile belongings with them and to load their vessels with the most useful domestic animals, namely pigs, dogs and chickens, and with those plants from which the greatest utility could be expected, whose roots promised to fair the longest, and the cultivation of which would require the least effort? (Forster 1784: 6–7)

Forster's claim here, in other words, is that calculated human intervention and cultural techniques, rather than accidental influences, had substantively shaped the breadfruit's history – and indeed long before Banks' and Bligh's attempt at transplanting the breadfruit from Polynesia to the West Indies (Forster 1784: 2–3). This insight into an entangled human-plant evolutionary history represents a major departure from Crozet, Banks et al., and a first step towards the erosion of the myth of a ready-made Edenic South Sea paradise, where the Pacific islanders are denied any sense of historical agency and anthropogenic impact.

However, just as this claim had substantive potential to decentre the idea of European exceptionalism, it is also necessary to consider the possible distortion that may result from such a perspective. As Barbara Maria Stafford has argued, Forster's work 'serves as a guide' (1984: 349)

to expose the scientific gaze that undergirds European travel accounts – ‘the ability to see in order to acquire knowledge’ (Ibid.: 52–53). In Forster’s case, conflating different ways of seeing and ‘limiting the scope of the visible’ (Foucault 1973: 147) allow him to posit what he can otherwise only conjecture – a history of improvement, refinement or ‘perfectibility’ (*Perfectibilität*) (Forster 1784: 17), where all roads seem to lead to Tahiti. Building on his hypothesis of an Asian provenance of the Pacific Islanders, Forster believes it reasonable to consider the ‘spiky, seeded variety of the breadfruit’ (Forster 1784: 16) found on ‘the coast of Celebes [today Sulawesi], in Banda, Ambon and in the Maluku Islands in general’ the original, ‘wild’ variety of the plant (Ibid.: 8). The lack of spikes and seeds in the variety observable ‘in the eastern groups of the Society and Marquesas Islands’ (Ibid.), on the other hand, Forster takes to be a sign of ‘culture’ (Ibid.: 17), whereby a calculated act of intervention, the ‘mutilation of the fruit’ (*Verstümmelung der Frucht*), is classed as an improvement:

At last, in the Society Islands people learnt that a cropped branch of the fully-grown tree could be committed to the earth and raised with considerable success to produce progeny. Soon the sharp edges and knobby outgrowths started to disappear; the stem became smooth and shot up straight and daintily into the sky; the foliage, which was otherwise coarse to touch and covered with thick hair, assumed a more delicate, proper and smooth appearance (Forster 1784: 18).

But, just as Forster’s argument summons the almost irreducible materialising quality of the breadfruit to mediate a history, so too does it appear to evoke the power of place, and ultimately landscape. Interchanging between the microscopic and the cartographic, the discerning anatomising eye of Linnaean botany and a more sweeping panoramic perspective anticipating Humboldt, Forster’s text navigates a diverse range of terrains and topographies, all of which in turn fabricate a map – a geography that documents not a fact, so much as an envisaged order to be undertaken (Rachwal 1999). ‘And yet I caution a glance at the chart of that region of the world, I oversee the great Pacific ocean ...’ (Forster 1784: 5) – through this ‘I’ Forster invokes the authority of imperial vision, an instance of what Pratt has theorised as ‘the monarch of all I survey’ (Pratt 1999). It is this same ‘I’, the knowing Western subject, that in effect renders a binary vision of the Pacific as a series of diversified landscapes fundamentally at odds with each other.

In the end, this all works towards mapping a divide between supposedly more dominant and deficient cultures, implicitly serving a structure of 'dependence and disavowal' on which Western anthropology is centrally predicated (Mignolo 2003: 441–42). 'Wild,' 'overgrown' landscapes, just like the 'spiky' and 'pithy' variety of breadfruit imply that the 'sluggish, indifferent' Indonesian (Forster 1784: 16–17) is invariably in need of tutelage, whereas the 'smooth,' 'hairless' and 'seedless' variety of breadfruit present in Tahiti and the island's overall more 'cultivated' and domesticated appearance attract Forster's greater admiration and sympathy as a symbol of its more advanced culture. Throughout his essay, Forster continually draws parallels between the cultural techniques employed by the Tahitians and those exercised by Europeans on the breadfruit's German and European equivalents. Just like the Tahitians succeeded in taming and domesticating the breadfruit, 'roughly in the same way the hard work and art of our ancestors prevailed, transforming crab apples into Borsdörfer apples, russet apples and calvilles, and wild cherries into sweet Spanish and juicy morello cherries' (Ibid.: 18), he writes. While these comparisons ostensibly serve to translate what must have been foreign into the experiential horizon of the European reader, what they really suggest is that Europeans and Tahitians share a common cause and commitment. In their obvious aptitude for agriculture, that is, toiling Europeans and improving Tahitians invariably passed through similar states, or stages of material development – and perhaps will continue to do so. Both inhabiting a hybridised landscape of man-made fruits – some, like the cherry, literally a spoil of empire⁶ – the far-removed peoples of provincial Germany and Tahiti are, if but momentarily, made to 'mix'.

5. 'CHASTE BEAUTY': RACIAL THEORY IN FORSTER'S ESSAY ON THE BREADTREE

But in Forster's case, the felt affinity, or 'common ancestry', between Germans and Tahitians may be more than just rooted in a shared history of gardening and agricultural labour. It may also be of a more erotic,

6 Pliny's *Natural History* documents that the cherry was imported to Italy by Lucius Lucullus in 74 BC in the wake of the victory against King Mithridates VI of Pontus and within 120 years had found its way as far as Britain.

and ultimately racial character, reflecting Forster's interest in engaging with the late-eighteenth century science, or pseudo-science rather, of 'race' centred around figures like Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Samuel Thomas von Sömmerring and Immanuel Kant. It is well known that, in the mid-1780s, Forster and Kant became embroiled in a public tit for tat that played out in a series of publications, notably Kant's 1785 essay *Determination of the Concept of a Human Race* and Forster's rebuttal of 1786 *Something More on the Human Races* (Kleingeld 2013: 92–123). It is also well documented that eighteenth-century theories of race often invoked stereotypes of the sexual behaviour of different racial groups (e.g. Africans as hypersexual) in order to support ideas of racial hierarchy (e.g. sexually restrained white Europeans as racially superior) and even early eugenic theories. However, as Robert Young has argued, what these early European racial theories and constructions of others ultimately belie is an obsession with racial hybridisation. According to Young (1995), the colonial discourse's fascination with racial intermixture and miscegenation displays, even at its most hierarchical and denunciatory, an underlying subconscious fascination for the other, or what Young calls 'colonial desire' (8).

As is generally known, the model function that Tahitian society came to assume for British, French and German audiences in the wake of the Cook voyages derived substantially from its supposed resemblance to the great patriarchal societies of ancient Greece and Rome (Despoix 2005: 131–57). Yet, arguably the main reason why Tahiti became such a source of fascination for European audiences was because it condensed the whole scene of sensuality and interracial sexual encounter. Heralded by Bougainville as *La nouvelle Cythère* (Bougainville 1771: 209), 'the New Cythera' after the claimed birthplace of Aphrodite, Tahiti attracted the reputation as a pleasure playground where European male sexual fantasies were free to play out. As a young man on board of Captain Cook's ship, Georg Forster had intimate first-hand knowledge of the realities of interracial sexual union and concubinage 'in the contact zone'. In his philosophical travel account *A Voyage Round the World*, Forster even discusses these topics at length and, unsurprisingly, it is Tahiti, the uncontested island of *eros*, that draws most of his attention. But, like the cartographically minded Cook, who adamantly condemns

the fraternisation of his sailors with the Tahitian women⁷, Forster – the son of a German Protestant pastor – often takes the moral highroad, invoking his commitment to science as a precept for (his own) erotic and sexual abstinence (May 2008, Küchler-Williams 2004).⁸

Robert Young has nevertheless observed a strategy by which the European discursive *othering* of foreign landscapes often reverts to representations of sexualised and feminised corporeality to naturalise hierarchies of dominance and dependence and to frame colonial expansion as the adventurous appropriation of ‘virginal’ territories (Young 1995). In Forster’s case, the strategy is slightly different: feminisation of the landscape as a means of pivoting from one model of paternalism based on colonial domination and conquest to another one more aligned with the humanitarian goals of the scientific Enlightenment. This juxtaposition is apparent, for instance, in Forster’s reference to the breadfruit as a ‘chaste beauty’ (*sittsame Schöne*) (Forster 1784: 2), whereby the fruit’s ‘chastity’ supposedly derives from it having remained ‘unknown to European commerce for so long’ (Ibid.). Furthermore, by invoking botanists like ‘the honest Rumph’ (Georg Eberhard Rumph, author of the *Herbarium Amboinense*, 1741–1755) (Forster 1784: 25) or the tradition of ‘naturalists’ (*Naturforscher*) (Forster 1784: 23), Forster’s essay attempts to place science in a figurative bond of paternity with the Pacific cultures: scientists like himself are cast as the natural protectors of colonised, or not-yet colonised peoples against the commercial interests of the ‘European thief’ (Forster 1784: 27) of imperial trading and plant trafficking.

Acknowledging Forster’s trenchant commitment to science over commerce and his sustained attempts to manage the taboo realities of European ‘commerce’ in Tahiti, his apparent nostalgia for a paradise lost does nevertheless complicate the essay’s otherwise protracted message

7 ‘We had not been here many days before some of our people got this [venereal] disease ... I ... did all in my power to prevent its progress, but all I could do was to little purpose for I may safely say that I was not assisted by any one person in ye Ship’ (Cook 1968: 99). For a discussion see Bridget Orr (1994: 225–31).

8 Forster’s commitment to science over commerce seems to validate the argument Nicholas Thomas makes in his book *Entangled Objects*, namely that ‘the natural scientists and philosophers [who commented and theorised the Pacific] ... asserted the privilege of their own interests in specimens and regarded the acquisitive and commercially motivated behaviour of common sailors as illegitimate’ (Thomas 1991: 140).

of austere, professional objectivity. One may even argue that, in the anthropomorphising language of the Tahitian variant of the breadfruit as both 'chaste' and 'beautiful', what is ultimately being articulated is desire for the Tahitian body itself. Being a 'meal' (*Speise*) as much as a plant, in the conclusion of his essay Forster considers the influence of nutrition on the body's constitution and, in turn, the superlative visual beauty of the Tahitian men, supposedly unequalled by any of their neighbours in the Pacific:

Indeed, their generation (*Geschlecht*) can claim a marked advantage over their neighbours. Of large and noble stature with open countenance and disarming traits it verges on the model of real Asian beauty and even threatens to take precedence (Forster 1784: 27).

What Forster is arguably invoking here are not the effects of consumption, as he claims, so much as an inferred history of racial 'refinement', engendered by many years of meticulous cultivation and improvement. Through a turn to the anatomising optics of Classical aesthetics and physiognomy, Tahitians are conceived in analogous terms to the seedless, spikeless, smooth and thus 'beautiful' breadfruit variety, engendered by an intervention of 'culture'. A passage of the *Voyage Around the World* only underscores this glorification of the Tahitian male form:

This climate, and its salubrious productions, contribute to the strength and the elegance of their [the Tahitian males'] form. They are all well-proportioned, and some would have been selected by *Phidias* or *Praxiteles*, as models of masculine beauty. Their features are sweet, and unruffled by violent passions. Their large eyes, their arched eyebrows, and high forehead, give a noble air to their heads, which are adorned by strong beards, and a comely growth of hair. These, as well as their beautiful teeth, are the proofs of vigour, and of a sound habit of body (Forster 1958: 598).

Of Tahitian women, by contrast, Forster holds:

The other sex is not any less well-formed. Certainly, it is not possible to say they are beautiful, though they still know how to win men's hearts, and their unaffected smiles, and a wish to please, insure them mutual esteem and love from our sex (Ibid.).

In Chunjie Zhang's reading of this passage, the function of Forster's detailed description of the Tahitian male body is to invite identification on behalf of European '(male) readers' who may imagine themselves 'transformed into these beautiful and healthy Tahitian male bodies ...

accompanied by an agreeable and devoted female sex' (Zhang 2013: 271). Nevertheless, just as Forster's praise suggests emulation for the purposes of the heterosexual copulation, it is important to recognise the passage's latent homoerotic undercurrent and the objectification that the Tahitian male himself undergoes. Arguably, Forster's gaze betrays an underlying gesture of domination, rendering of the Tahitian male a modest, feminised object of aesthetic and intellectual appreciation: much like the breadfruit a 'chaste beauty', to be seen yet not to be touched.

Most accounts of race 'in the West' would direct us to the Atlantic economy, explaining race as the ideology that facilitated slavery and, therefore, enabled capitalism. Forster's conceptualisation of a hierarchical Pacific garnered through a conjectured plant-human co-evolution serve to decentre and complicate this historiography. In a period when German intellectuals were contemplating the mysteries of the botanical *Urpflanze* (Goethe) and the human *Stammrassen* (Blumenbach, Kant) at the same time as they were heaping encomium on the 'ideal forms' of Hellenistic sculpture, art and literature in the context of Weimar Classicism (Winckelmann, Goethe, Schiller) (Bindman 2002), Forster's essay *Vom Brodbaum* unconsciously speaks the language of racial superiority, ascribing to the Tahitian 'of large and noble stature' a model function for the German people of northern Europe. The correlation between this idealisation of Tahitian plasticity and the attempt to valorise the 'chaste' German eye, capable of recognising, appreciating and theorising such beauty, is not accidental and perhaps evidence for Philippe Despoix's claim that German intellectuals attempt to steer against the predominance of the established imperial powers through the medium of science, the arts and learning (Despoix 2009: 183).

6. CONCLUSION

This article has examined the intricate and discordant relationships between humans and plants, focusing on the breadfruit tree within the context of European colonial botany. Drawing inspiration from feminist and indigenous scholars, the analysis uncovered the appropriation and marginalisation inherent in colonial enterprises, where indigenous botanical knowledge was exploited while native populations were

dehumanised. The breadfruit, emblematic of these practices, highlights the broader themes of power, knowledge, and commodification that defined its transcontinental journey.

Georg Forster's work on the breadfruit, both as a scientific curiosity and a symbol of cultural encounters, serves as a lens to explore these dynamics. His essay *Vom Brodbaum* attempts to reconcile European misconceptions and stereotypes about the South Pacific but ultimately reveals the limitations and biases of the colonial gaze. While Forster's recognition of the breadfruit's role in Austronesian migration challenges the myth of an untouched Edenic paradise, his approach still reflects Eurocentric hierarchical thinking. The broader historical context, including the breadfruit voyages of the late eighteenth century led by Captain Bligh, underscores how imperial botany served national wealth and power while fostering culturally induced ignorance. The breadfruit's transformation from 'bread of the gods' to 'food for slaves' epitomises the ideological shifts and exploitative practices of the period.

By dissecting the intersections of botany, colonialism and racial theory, this article calls for a re-evaluation of human-plant relationships. It suggests that moving beyond the legacy of dissonance and towards a language of resonance can provide valuable insights for contemporary discussions on interspecies and intercultural connections. The breadfruit's story, thus, offers a critical perspective on the politics of colonial botany and the potential for fostering a more equitable and respectful engagement with the natural world in the twenty-first century.

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