



Notes on the Location of Happiness

By
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Where is your happy place? Where is that place on earth where you see yourself enjoying an easy and carefree life? A life without hardships and worries. Most of us have such a location in mind. Often, it is a place we have read about and seen images of but have not yet visited. While many such happy places may remain imagined, it seems to be important that they are, in fact, possible to reach; that your paradise on earth exists and that you someday might be able to travel to it.

For some, it is perhaps a lush, secluded garden; a garden of Eden. For others, a quiet cabin in the woods. But for many Europeans, the imagined happy place on earth is a remote tropical island. It entails a long, sun-drenched beach, a few wind-bent palm trees, a vast turquoise ocean, and lush and abundant nature within reach. The notion of tropical islands being earthly paradises has persisted for more than 250 years, ever since European explorers first wrote home about having found paradise on earth on the islands the midst of the South Pacific (cf. Bougainville 1772: 228-229).¹

In this article, I propose that the notion of an actually existing earthly paradise, where one can live a happy and idle, simple and good life, is a particularly tenacious one and that a reason for this may be because people throughout time have *wanted* to believe that there are paradises on earth that one can travel to. The article further suggests that the broad genre of travel writing, from the earliest examples to today, has played a key role in shaping and maintaining the notion of remote tropical islands as places on earth where happiness prevails.² To exemplify these propositions, I present three cases in point. I first highlight descriptions of two events that proved to be integral in establishing the persistent description of life on tropical islands as happy and paradisiacal during the 1700s. The two examples are from eighteenth century travel logs from France and England and describe life on islands in the South Pacific but serve as illustrative examples

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of portrayals of life on tropical islands in a more general sense. With those two examples fresh at hand, I then fast forward to contemporary Sweden and a third example of travel writing that, in order to attract the attention of today's readers longing for their happy place, mirrors and makes use of the centuries old and established accounts of blissful tropical island life.

The Making of Worlds

The premise here is, firstly, that literary products are key elements in the configuration of the world itself (Archetti 1994), and, secondly, that cosmopolitan writers, such as foreign correspondents and travel writers, translate and mediate the world to their readership at home (Clifford 1997, Hannerz 2004, Wulff 2016, 2017).

Scholars of travel writing concur in regarding it as an inherently evasive literary genre; one incessantly difficult to define and classify. If anything, travel writing is seen as an ever evolving and mixed genre; one that constantly adapts to its context and feeds off other genres (Borm 2004, Hooper & Youngs 2004, Hulmes & Youngs 2002, Pettinger & Youngs 2019, Youngs 2004, 2013). Yet, Tim Youngs, a prominent scholar of travel writing, has argued that it is the most socially important of all literary genres since it “reflects and influences the way we view the world and ourselves in relation to it” (Youngs 2013: 12).

The travel story is one of the world's oldest and most widely dispersed narrative forms. Already during the tenth century travel narratives were seen as an important and influential literary genre outside the western world (Borm 2004, Edmond 2002, Hulmes & Youngs 2002, Youngs 2013, Zumthor & Peebles 1994). And we know, not least from Edward Said's *Orientalism*, that travel writing does not consist simply of factual accounts but rather often furthers exoticism and domination through textual (mis)representation (Saïd 1978, Varisco 2007). In fact, travel narratives, claims Youngs: “reflect the conditions and attitudes that exist in the traveller's home culture” (2013: 165) and that: “travellers have already been influenced, before they travel, by previous cultural representations that they have encountered” (ibid.: 9). And so, it is necessary to take into consideration the agenda and interests with which a travel writer views—and, as it were, mediates—the world. There are filters by which events are mediated, at times distorted and not seldom amplified by subjective experiences, fantasies and preconceptions (Bolyanatz 2004, Douglas 1999, Hulmes and Youngs 2002). In other words, it matters both who accounts for the travel, as well as when, where and why he or she does so. It further matters who reads the travel narrative, and, equally, when, where and why he or she does so. That is to say, the worlds that travel writers make and convey to their readership back home can be situational and cultural as

well as written for political or economic reasons. In the case of describing remote tropical islands as actually existing paradisiacal places on earth, travel writings also mediate persistent tropes that, over time, have become taken-for-granted generalizations or even universalities based on the writers' preconceived notions and misrepresentations.

The reasoning above aligns with what Nelson Goodman has asserted with regard to the world-making ability of literature and other modes of expression. He writes: "Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking" (1978: 6). This is key when considering the world-making capability of travel literature. Because, as Peter Bishop, asserts: "Travel writing creates worlds, it does not simply discover them" (1985: 204). The worlds made by the travel writing in focus in this article, imply that paradise on earth exists and that it is situated on a tropical island.

Paradise on Earth

The resilient notion that the islands of the South Pacific, in particular, constitute earthly paradise was first presented in British and French travel-logs from journeys in the 1760s and 1770s. At that time, the South Pacific became the great frontier of romantic imagination as well as of modern science, and the allure of the "Great South Sea" acquired utopian connotations (Edmond 2002, Fernández-Armesto 2002, McMahon 2005). The European explorers marveled at their encounter with the islands of the South Pacific and with the people inhabiting them. As others have noted, with their travel-logs the European explorers of that era simultaneously "put an end to the mystery while multiplying the myths" (Fernández-Armesto 2002: 126).

But worlds in literature are, as stated above, made from worlds already on hand and, during the eighteenth century, the idea of an actually existing paradise somewhere on earth was not a new one. It has been proposed that, specifically, the South Pacific island of Tahiti was made to represent an already existing European fantasy of life on a remote tropical island as being one of pure bliss and bounty. Rod Edmund claims that: "Although Europe did not discover Tahiti until the 1760s the idea of it had been invented long before" (2002: 139). Edmund holds that remote tropical islands: "had been a glint in the eye of Europe for centuries before the arrival of Wallis at Tahiti. This dream of islands informed the terms in which Tahiti was first described ..." (2002: 139-140).

The conviction of an actually existing paradise on earth, with an exact-albeit at the time unreachable-location, was prevalent already in medieval times and through the Renaissance. Such descriptions were typically set on a tropical island just beyond the horizon; an idyllic elsewhere where people lived in happy

abundance and innocent bliss. Examples of such imaginations are, for instance, Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* (2003 [1308-1320]), where he places "The Earthly Paradise" on top of Mount Purgatory protruding as an island from the ocean. There is also John Mandeville who in his fourteenth century travel memoir, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (2005 [1357-1371]), place his descriptions of the earthly paradise on tropical islands (Delumeau 2000: 98). And there is, of course, Thomas More who with his *Utopia* (2007 [1516]) from 1516 famously located his perfect, good and happy Republic on the new island Utopia, thus setting the standard for most succeeding accounts of paradise on earth—imagined as well as observed (Delumeau 2000, Hulmes and Youngs 2002, McMahan 2005). In fact, Peter Hulmes and Tim Youngs assert that Thomas More's *Utopia* "became a foundation for subsequent travel writing, influencing the form of both expectations and reports" (Hulmes and Youngs 2002: 3).

When European explorers' circumnavigation expeditions in the eighteenth century disembarked on Tahiti, and other islands in the South Pacific, they seemed convinced that they had, in fact, discovered an actually existing paradise on earth. The detailed travel stories from captains and crew members were profusely popular readings in Europe at the time. Soon the vivid written accounts were accompanied by abundant illustrations from "draughtsmen"—the professional artists often brought along on the voyages and expeditions. The notion of paradisiacal life on distant, yet reachable, tropical islands was swiftly imprinted in minds back in Europe. Scholars have argued that Tahiti particularly came to be represented in eighteenth century travel writing as "the jewel in the crown" and that such accounts "derived from ready-made European discourses of happy isles and civil progress" (Edmond 2002: 143).

It is from the onset and most conspicuously the privileged, white, European male that observes, experiences, exaggerates and fantasizes about these remote happy isles. And who, then, reports back home to a readership much of the same kind as the authorship. The European explorers' erotic adventures of supposedly profuse and casual sex with beautiful young—in many cases obviously too young—girls and women of the South Pacific became significant elements in most accounts from the region, and remain, to this day, common components in contemporary travel writings from the area. Many scholars have already rigorously elucidated and analyzed the gendered, sexualized and exploitive aspects of European portrayal of life in South Pacific (cf. Bolyanatz 2004, Layton 2015, Sturma 2002). Suffice it to say, stories of free and casual sex have been an important part of many accounts reports from earth's happy places for the past 250 years. It is clear that the exoticized and romanticized portrayal of life on remote tropical islands in the South Pacific as particularly "innocent" and "happy" has remained remarkably consistent over the centuries. In fact, Alexander Bolyanatz notes that such a

romanticist way of seeing things “has changed very little between, say, 1767 and 2004” (2004: 109).

Locations of Happiness

Ideas of what happiness is and how such a blissful state can be found or achieved have altered throughout time. Notions of happiness have gone from being fatalistic, where people saw themselves as having no control over what happened to them (happiness, as well as misery and all other conditions, simply happened) to, in Ancient Greece, for instance, happiness was considered a virtue and a state that individuals could influence through their own actions, in contrast to forms of fatalism, in which fatalism was something that simply happened. The early European Christians regarded happiness as something that belonged to the afterlife, and during the Enlightenment happiness came to be seen as a natural right and something that could—even should, be sought out by everyone (McMahon 2005, 2007). But for a long time, happiness has been commonly thought of as a condition that individuals themselves must prepare for, cultivate and defend (Ahmed 2010, Csikszentmihályi 1992, Lear 2000, McMahon 2005, 2007).

In her critical account of the promise and possibility of happiness, Sara Ahmed pays specific attention to the notion of “happy objects” (Ahmed 2010). Ahmed writes that “happiness thus puts us into intimate contact with things” (ibid.: 22) and that “happy objects” are items “that affect us in the best way” (ibid.). Ahmed sees “happy objects” as gap-fillers, meaning that such objects hold the promise of happiness and that the desire for happiness sends these objects forth, “creating lines and pathways in their trail, as if we might find happiness by following these paths” (ibid.: 32, 160). She further suggests that: “A happy object accumulates positive value even in situations of unhappiness: we can live with disappointment by imagining the promise of happiness will be given to those that follow us.” (ibid.: 33).

I propose that places can also be seen as holding the promise of happiness, and that the notion of such locations brings positive value and well-being both to those who visit the actual places and to those who imagine they will someday be able to travel there. In what follows, I highlight three texts. The two first are examples of historical texts that laid the foundation, and cemented the notion, of the happy lives on remote tropical islands. The third example is a more contemporary one that takes the travel story of blissful island life, and the reception of such accounts, to another, even more fantastic, level.

The three examples presented in this article serve to illustrate the, quite literally, fantastic quality that over centuries has characterized descriptions, and depictions, of life lived on tropical islands. “Fantastic” is here used in the literal

sense of the word, that is “based on fantasy: conceived by unrestrained fancy: so extreme as to challenge belief” (Merriam-Webster.com). My point here is that the accounts did not challenge preexisting beliefs but, rather, confirmed prevailing ideas of an existing earthly paradise.

17°35’S 149°18’W

I thought I was transported into the garden of Eden; we crossed a turf, covered with fine fruit-trees, and intersected by little rivulets, which keep up a pleasant coolness in the air, without any of those inconveniences which humidity occasions. A numerous people there enjoy the blessing which nature showers liberally down upon them. We found companies of men and women sitting under the shade of their fruit-trees: they all greeted us with signs of friendship: those who met us upon the road stood aside to let us pass by; every where we found hospitality, ease, innocent joy, and every appearance of happiness amongst them. (Bougainville 1772: 228-229)

Louise-Antoine de Bougainville set sail on November 15, 1766. He was the commander of a large crew of several hundred men on board the two ships, *Boudeuse* and *Étoile*, and he was to become France’s first circumnavigator. Almost a year and a half later, in April 1768, Bougainville and his expedition anchored off the small island of *Mehetia* east of Tahiti in the South Pacific. According to Bougainville’s journal, they were immediately greeted by naked men in canoes and were offered bananas and a little pig. In return, the French gave them caps and handkerchiefs (Bolyanatz 2004, Bougainville 1772, Sturma 2002). In all, the reception was, according to the French accounts, very amicable. Next, the expeditions anchored off the main island, Tahiti, and were met by canoes full of naked women who wanted to trade iron and earrings for sex. Bougainville writes: “It was very difficult, amid such a sight, to keep at their work four hundred young French sailors, who had seen no woman for six months” Bougainville 1772: 219). Bougainville renamed Tahiti “La Nouvelle Cythere” after the Greek island where, according to the myth, Aphrodite, goddess of love and pleasure, rose from the sea. The expedition stayed for nine days and within a year they were back in France. Bougainville was unaware of the fact that an Englishman, Lieutenant Samuel Wallis of the *HMS Dolphin*, had already been in 1767 the first European to visit Tahiti. That encounter was not as friendly but involved aggressive and fatal attacks from both parts until the Tahitians, it was later presumed, realized that the intruders had items - for example, iron nails - that could be traded for the one thing they did not have: women. Hence, the “friendly” and ready-to-trade

reception when Bougainville and his men arrived a year later (Appleby 2013, Bolyanatz 2004, Layton 2015, Mathlein 2012, Smith 1985).

Still, Bougainville's report of "innocent joy," and "appearance of happiness" on the distant island, abundant with fresh fruit and free sex, was "like Paradise before the Fall of Man, and the people lived in a natural state of innocence enjoying its bounty" (Smith 1985: 42). Bougainville was a man of his time and as such prone to a romantic naturalism, while an audience back home waited "longingly for new and exotic accounts" (Bolyanatz 2004: 27). His travel log from the expedition was published in French in 1771 and translated into English the following year, but descriptions of life in the South Pacific reached Paris before Bougainville's ships had even returned. This was because also on board was Philibert de Commerson, who served as the expedition's naturalist and surgeon. Commerson was a devotee of Rousseau and decidedly even more of a romantic than Bougainville. Commerson stayed in Mauritius when the rest of the crew continued back to France, and from there, in 1769, he wrote a letter to the Paris journal *La Mercure*. Commerson's *Letter from Tahiti* was published in the September issue, weeks before Bougainville arrived and two years before Bougainville's own account was published (Bolyanatz 2004, Grove 1995, Sturma 2002). Commerson's text was the first account of Tahiti and it "hit Paris with an immediate splash" (Bolyanatz 2004: 43). "This island seemed such to me, that I had already given it the name Utopia or Fortunate, the name which Thomas More had given to his ideal Republic ... it was a good fit for a country, perhaps the only one on earth, inhabited by men without vices, without prejudices, without needs, without dissent" (Commerson 1769, quoted in Bolyanatz 2004: 46). This earliest, and overly romantic, description of Tahiti as an earthly paradise proved to be a lasting image which was picked up by others and constituted the basis for subsequent descriptions (Bolyanatz 2004: 50-51). By the early 1770s, a set of subjective and hyper-romanticized observations and mistaken interpretations had firmly established the Western view of the remote tropical islands in the South Pacific as an actually existing paradise on earth.

The geographical coordinates at the beginning of this segment mark the location of Taipahia Bay where Bougainville and his men, on April 6, 1768, were greeted by boats full of naked women and assumed they had discovered paradise on earth. Some 2,000 kilometers south east of there lies another, supposedly, happy isle.

25°04'S 130°06'W

It will very naturally be asked, what could be the reason for such a revolt? In answer to which I can only conjecture, that the mutineers had flattered themselves with the hopes of a more happy life among the

Otaheiteans, than they could possibly enjoy in England; and this, joined to some female connections, most probably occasioned the whole transaction. (Bligh 1792: 162)

Delayed due to bad weather, *HMS Bounty* under the command of Lieutenant William Bligh, finally left British waters on December 23, 1787. Bligh was the only commander on board the relatively small cutter. He was an experienced navigator and had, for example, been the sailing master on Captain James Cook's third and final voyage, where he also witnessed Cook's death on Hawaii. The specific mission of *Bounty's* journey was to fill the ship with breadfruit plants from Tahiti and bring them to the colonies in the West Indies. There, they would be replanted and breadfruit used as food for the slaves held by the British. That was the plan. Before departure, *Bounty* was reconstructed to accommodate 629 plant pots, Lieutenant Bligh, forty-three seamen and two botanists. After nine months at sea the crew anchored in the very same bay north off Tahiti that Bougainville described as paradise on earth from his visit just twenty years earlier. European ships, and their crews, were by now a familiar sight and experience to the Tahitians, and vice versa. The *Bounty* expedition stayed anchored for six months in order to ensure that the breadfruit plants had rooted properly and were ready to be transported. During this time the men did not have much work to do but lived an idle and promiscuous life on board and ashore. Several of the crew members soon lived in close relationships with local women (Alexander 2003, Bligh 1792, Hough 1972, Sturma 2002). *HMS Bounty* set sail and left Tahiti on April 5, 1789, but not all the men wanted to leave the island and many had had enough of Bligh himself. William Bligh is described as an excellent navigator but also as a capricious, and even cruel, commander who subjected crew members to severe punishments (Alexander 2003: 115-120). At dawn on April 28, at sea west of Tahiti, crew member Fletcher Christian led a small group of men that overpowered Bligh in his cabin and took charge of the ship. The mutineers forced Bligh and eighteen men loyal to him into a small launch and steered *Bounty* back to Tahiti (Alexander 2003, Bligh 1792, Guttridge 1992, Hough 1972).

The story of the mutiny gained momentum as soon as it reached Europe almost a year later and it was none other than Bligh himself who delivered the news in London when he and the eighteen men arrived in England on March 13, 1790. They had first traveled forty-eight days and more than 3,600 miles in a small open vessel to Timor, then across part of the Dutch East Indies, and from there they were eventually assisted back to England by the Dutch authorities (Alexander 2003, Hough 1972). Bligh himself was greeted as a hero and an expedition to search for the mutineers was swiftly sent to the South Pacific. Several of the *Bounty's* former crew were, in fact, found on Tahiti and were brought back to England

for trials. But the *HMS Bounty*, with Fletcher Christian, eight crew members, six Tahitian men and fourteen women on board, had sailed off and could not be found (Alexander 2003, Hough 1972).

Meanwhile, back in England, William Bligh published his travel log. In it he explains his failure and speculates on the reasons for the mutiny:

The women at Otaheite are handsome, mild and cheerful in their manners and conversation, possessed of great sensibility, and have sufficient delicacy to make them admired and beloved. The chiefs were so much attached to our people, that they rather encouraged their stay among them than otherwise, and even made them promises of large possessions. Under these, and many other attendant circumstances, equally desirable, it is now perhaps not so much to be wondered at, though scarcely possible to have been foreseen, that a set of sailors, most of them void of connections, should be led away; especially when, in addition to such powerful inducements, they imagined in their power to fix themselves in the middle of plenty, on one of the finest islands in the world, where they need not labour, and where the allurements of dissipation are beyond any thing that can be conceived. (Bligh 1792: 162)

Land of plenty, no work, friendly men, beautiful women and “the allurements of dissipation”—all on a remote tropical island. More than any other event, the mutiny on *HMS Bounty* confirmed existing stereotypes and cemented the romanticized notion of life in the South Pacific in general, and Tahiti specifically, with its claim that it is worth risking everything for a life on a tropical island (Edmond 2002, Mathlein 2012, Sturma 2002). The narrative was quickly established as a conflict between the brutal tyrant, William Bligh, and the romantic revolutionary, Fletcher Christian, where the latter chose a life in paradise, escaping violent and hard conditions both on board and back home in Europe. In several ways, the timing of the story of the mutiny could not have been better for mythmaking purposes. First of all, the news of the mutiny reached Europe towards the end of one of the worst winters in living memory and so, “tales from a tropical paradise were all the more enticing” (Sturma 2002: 35). And, when the mutiny trials took place in London 1792, it was against a background of political unrest at home and revolutionary violence abroad (Alexander 2003). It was also the dawn of the Romantic movement which “saw devotion to a code of duty and established authority as less honorable than celebration of individual passions and liberty (Alexander 2003: 345). It was, in other words, perfect soil for the myth of an earthly paradise on a remote tropical island, and the story of the mutiny and the escape in the South Pacific soon gained momentum. It was the age of the great romantics, and Fletcher Christian with “his

long hair loose, his shirt collar open” had soon “out Byroned Byron” (Alexander 2003: 375).

The mutiny at the *HMS Bounty* became a very well-travelled story (anonymized ref). It has been retold in dozens of books, several major motion pictures and television series. In the 1962 Hollywood production, filmed on location in Tahiti, Marlon Brando famously played Fletcher Christian. Brando himself pitched in to the romanticizing when, after having experienced life in the South Pacific during the lengthy filming, he bought himself an atoll and left Hollywood for a life on Tetiaroa, north of Tahiti.

Back in 1790, Fletcher Christian and his crew came upon the perfect hide out. The island of Pitcairn, 2,160 kilometers south east of Tahiti, had been incorrectly chartered in the 1760's and was therefore difficult to find (Stanley 2004: 288-296). Fletcher Christian, however, found it, sank the ship and settled down with the remaining mutineers and Tahitians. The coordinates above mark the correct geographical location of Pitcairn island where the British-Tahitian settlement lived undiscovered for almost twenty years.

With the next, and last, example I fast forward to 2001 and another fantastic account of earthly paradise on a tropical island.

44.235°N 14.83778°E

Graeme Zillun, a marine biologist from New Zealand, insures that it is not a hoax. He is Head of *Centre Marine d'Isola Lethe* and explains that the island's position in relation to the warm Molat-current provides a unique climate. That an absurdity such as a coral reef in the Adriatic Sea actually exists is due to the warm springs that temper the water from the bottom of the sea.³ (Mathlein 2001, 2012: 143-144)

Under the headlines “The island that is too good to be true” (2001) and “Finally in Paradise” (2012), Swedish travel writer Anders Mathlein vividly describes the “hidden and forgotten” tropical island Isola Lethe located off the Croatian coast Europe. Important here is that this tropical paradise is not remotely located on the other side of the earth but fantastically enough in the middle of Europe. The island, Mathlein claims, became a secret hideaway because it is not found on any maps. This is described not as a mistake but as a rather well-planned scheme to keep this paradise on earth unknown and hidden from the masses. The story Mathlein tells is of how a man born on Lethe purposely erased his native island from the archives of the reputable London map publishing company he worked at (Mathlein 2001, 2012: 141). After initially hesitating to reveal the island's location

to Swedish readers, Mathlein enthusiastically dove into romanticizing descriptions of the incredible qualities of Isola Lethe.

This tropical island has it all: quaint villages, charming locals, lush nature, perfect climate and everything is inexpensive and accessible. Lavish dinners and drinks are cheap, if not free, and tipping is, of course, discouraged and considered an insult. The locals are generous and very friendly. At night, the warm air fills up with music, laughter and flirtation. “The ripple of the nightingale’s song is heard through crickets’ chirps as the evening breeze gently rustle palm and chestnut leaves” (Mathlein 2001, 2012: 141). The island’s tropical south coast, *Plage Placide*, is especially attractive. Here we find white coral sand and coconut palms and, Mathlein raves: “to call the turquoise water crystal clear would be an understatement. Small boats carry visitors out to the reefs and the uninhabited Iles Corail” (2001, 2012: 143). Life on Isola Lethe “seems to be set up for pleasure, indulgence and tranquility” (ibid.).

An earthly paradise indeed, a well-kept secret hidden in the middle of Europe. Before Mathlein’s travel article, very little else had been written about this tropical island. Mathlein recommends a book that might be found in second hand book stores: *Isola Lethe, Island and Fantasy* (Soft Guides) by Brian Liar. Mathlein ends his travel piece with practical information of how to get to this happy isle. Readers learn that Lethe is best reached either with Joker Air, with flights coming in three times a week from Trieste in Italy, or with the reasonably priced package deals, with travel agency *Primo Aprile Tours*, directly from Sweden. The local Lethe tourist office very rarely answers their phone Mathlein warns, “but try their website www.nowhere.nu” (2001, 2012: 146).

The feature story about Isola Lethe was first published in the Sunday travel section of the largest Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*. It was given ample space in the paper and was accompanied by photographs of some of the beautiful beaches on the island. I remember reading the article that Sunday morning on the heel of a long and dark, albeit mild, winter. At first I was amazed and intrigued. I looked closely at the photo of the beach and turquoise ocean, I read the flowery descriptions one more time, and I checked the byline. Anders Mathlein is a well-known Swedish travel writer with the South Pacific as one of the destinations he frequently covers. He, if anyone, would know of tropical islands. Then I noticed the date. The truly fantastic story about Isola Lethe was published on April 1st, that is April’s Fools Day, 2001.⁴

Even though the story’s headline – “The island that is too good to be true” – was entirely accurate and the text was sprinkled with more or less obvious clues of the hoax, thousands of Swedes wanted to believe that there was an actually existing tropical island paradise just within reach. Everyone wanted to know more about the island and, since the travel agency, *Primo Aprile Tours*, did not seem to

have a phone number people soon began to line up outside the offices of Croatia's tourist agency in Stockholm. Some readers found Anders Mathlein's private e-mail and wrote to him for advice on how to move to Isola Lethe (from personal conversations 2017). And, in the middle of the night in Texas, a man's computer server crashed. Mathlein had forgotten to check if the website he invented for the tourist office at Isola Lethe, nowhere.nu, actually existed. It turns out it did. The domain belonged to Tony Fannin in Texas. Mr. Fannin woke up at night⁵ to find his server had overheated and collapsed after more than 40,000 escapist-prone Swedes suddenly connected to it (Mathlein 2012: 147 and personal conversations 2017).

Anders Mathlein clearly knows his readership. "It is not particularly strange" he writes, "that the tropical dream attracts and entices people from the chillier parts of the world" (2012: 85). Notably the exoticizing and eroticizing fantasies have, in Mathlein's contemporary piece aimed particularly at the Swedish audience, been exchanged for dreams of deals and bargains. At that, Mathlein expertly makes use of the most obvious and standardized tricks of his trade. The hyper-romantic language and over-the-top descriptions; Mathlein exploited them all in the Isola Lethe-story and it is therefore with mixed emotions he now reflects back at his text. "After having written travel stories for many years, I collected several of the genre's clichés and stereotypes into a thick stew—only to find that that text was the most noticed of my work" (Mathlein 2012: 147 and personal conversations 2017).

The coordinates above mark the geographical location of Otok Molat, a small island between Otok Premuda and Dugi Otok, 150 kilometers north east of Split in the Adriatic Sea, exactly where Mathlein placed Isola Lethe.

Happy Thoughts

The premise of this article is that literary products are key elements in the configuration of the world itself and that the genre of travel writing, specifically, makes and mediates worlds (Archetti 1994, Clifford 1997, Goodman 1978, Hannerz 2004, Wulff 2016, 2017, Youngs 2013). One such world is, as it were, the resilient description of the remote tropical island as being an actually existing paradise on earth.

With these three examples of travel writing past and present, my aim has been to shed light on the following three concerns. First, that the notion of an actually existing earthly paradise, where one can live a happy, idle and good life, is a particularly tenacious one. Second, that this may be so because people throughout time have *wanted* to believe this to be true. And third, that travel literature from early on through today has played a key role in shaping and maintaining the notion that there are places on earth where happiness prevails. The fact that the examples above contain certain analogous elements—such as descriptions of

idyllic bliss and carefree, happy lives in natural abundance—also suggests that the notion of paradise on earth being located on a tropical island may transcend both cultural differences and temporal divides and therefore prevail over time and in various contexts.

The examples brought forth in this article are meant to illuminate the fantastic quality that for more than 250 years have come to characterize descriptions of life lived on tropical islands. The accounts are all “conceived by unrestrained fancy” and, in various ways, “based on fantasy.” As such, they all both shape and confirm persistent ideas of the tropical island as paradise on earth, rather than to challenge such notions. The descriptions would not have been difficult to challenge; but, instead, accounts such as the one of Bougainville’s expedition and the *HMS Bounty*, fast and firmly established the notion of the South Pacific as an earthly paradise. As Michael Sturma holds: “These early impressions became the main points of reference for subsequent accounts of not only Tahiti, but the South Pacific generally” (Sturma 2002: 30).

The idea of a distant yet actually existing paradise on earth to where anyone, at least potentially, can relocate and live a blissful and carefree life is, indeed, a persistent and fantastic one. Fantastic because it is partly based on fancy and imagination and because it seems fueled by the will to believe in it. It appears as if Bougainville and his crew bought into the romanticized notion in 1768, when they failed to understand the friendly, to say the least, greetings of the Tahitians as a strategic trade opportunity and an exploitation of women. Consider also the immediately romanticized story of the mutiny on *HMS Bounty*. Here, even the overthrown commander himself understands the mutineers while society remains blind or forgiving of the violence both among the mutineers and towards the Tahitians. The British-Tahitian settlement at Pitcairn island did not live happily ever after. The women were treated badly, some tried to flee but failed, and within a few years on Pitcairn only two of the men were alive, all the others had killed each other (Alexander 2003, Guttridge 1992).

We want to believe in the fantastic notion of an actually existing paradise on earth; a happy isle in the sun where life is as light as the breeze. Swedish travel writer Anders Mathlein thinks there might be lessons to be learned from the reactions to his travel story about the fictive paradisiac island. The main lesson is, he writes, that “we are clearly susceptible to believe that which we want to believe in” (Mathlein 2012: 147). In earlier work he writes: “Maybe the notion of the tropical paradise is necessary for our mental well-being. That happiness is a place that one can travel to is a comforting thought” (1994: 13). I believe that he is right, and that the ultimate allurements are that the readers of such travel stories imagine themselves one day visiting, maybe even moving to, a tropical happy isle. The reasoning being that paradise on earth actually exists and, since

the days of the early explorers, we know of ways of traveling to such locations. Could it be that these notions are, in fact, drivers of the continuous production and reinforcement of the notion of the tropical island as paradise on earth? In other words, maybe the *need* to believe in the existence of these earthly paradises is so great that scrutiny of the fantastic accounts from such happy places is grossly overlooked. So, if dreaming about an easier, carefree and happier life on a tropical island brings you comfort and joy, then keep on dreaming. The travel writing, tourism, advertising and film industries will happily reap the commercial fruits of your happy thoughts.

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¹ It should be noted here that the literature on life in the vast area called the South Pacific is both complex and varied and not always as idealizing and romanticizing as accounts from the islands of Polynesia more often consistently were and are.

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³ Author’s translations of Mathlein’s Swedish texts throughout.

⁴ Before current political debates about “fake news” put an end to it, Swedish print and broadcast media typically snuck in amusing spoof stories in their news feed every April 1st.

⁵ Sweden is seven hours ahead of Texas.

Author Presentation:

Anette Nyqvist var docent och ställföreträdande prefekt på Socialantropologiska institutionen vid Stockholm universitet. Hon avled efter en längre tids sjukdom 2021. Bland hennes akademiska böcker märks *Ombudskapalisterna: Institutionella ägares röst och roll* (Liber, 2015) och *Reform and Responsibility in the Remaking of the Swedish National Pension: Opening the Orange Envelope* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Hon hade dessutom en längre karriär som journalist bakom sig med ett antal resereportage. Anette älskade att resa och hade själv bosatt sig på sin egen paradisö på den svenska västkusten. Vi hoppas att det finns andra paradisöar som skänker lycka där hon befinner sig nu.