

COLONIAL DESIRE

Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race

Robert J.C. Young

Preface: South Pacific

Coconut palms, banyan trees, golden beaches, rolling surf. A famous musical, set during the Second World War, in the exotic South Seas, with lush songs to match: 'Some Enchanted Evening', 'I'm Going to Wash That Man Right Out My Hair', 'Honey Bun', 'Younger Than Springtime'.... A typical, untroubled Orientalist fantasy. I had seen the film as a child but not understood that its plot turned around the question of children.

The film shows us two romances that go wrong. Ensign Nellie Forbush, the nurse from Little Rock, is wooed by the romantic Frenchman, Emile de Becque. No sooner does Nellie finally declare herself to Emile than she notices a line of Polynesian children nearby. She thinks he is joking when he says that they are his. When she realizes that he is not, she jumps into her jeep and goes back to base.

Handsome Lt. Jo Cable from Philadelphia, takes the boat to the 'off-limits' romantic island Bali Ha'i and immediately falls in love with Liat, a beautiful young Polynesian girl. Embracing her passionately, he leaves reluctantly and keeps returning. One day, they talk happily about marriage. Until her mother, 'Bloody Mary', mentions their having children. Cable breaks away, and runs back to his boat. Exotic romance is one thing. But its dusky human consequences are another.

The rest of the film tells of how both Americans learn to overcome their immediate racist reactions of desire and aversion, of simultaneous attraction and repulsion, and come to understand that such racism is not instinctive, but learnt. Cable sings: `You've got to be taught / Before it's too late / Before you are six, or seven, or eight / To hate all the people your relatives hate ...'. Too late for what? For the advent of desire.

This is a book which traces the emergence of desire in history, its genealogy and its disavowal in the history of racialized thought. The impresario which stages this patriarchal drama is called culture, itself the production of an emergent capitalist European society; the conflictual structures generated by its imbalances of power are consistently articulated through points of tension and forms of difference that are then superimposed upon each other: class, gender, and race are circulated promiscuously and crossed with each other, transformed into mutually defining metaphors that mutate within intricate webs of surreptitious cultural values that are then internalised by those whom they define. Culture has always carried these antagonistic forms of inner dissonance within it: even `Englishness' has always been riven by its own alterity. And so too, racial theory, which ostensibly seeks to keep races forever apart, transmutes into expressions of the clandestine, furtive forms of what can be called colonial desire: a covert but insistent obsession with transgressive, inter-racial sex, hybridity, and miscegenation—the story, in fact, of *South Pacific*.

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