Beaches. My life with all its memories is filled with them. My books are all written beside a beach or overlooking one or within the sound of one's waves. As I write now, the combers on the beach below my window roll into a continuous rush of sound. It is the white noise that separates my mind from my body and lets me think to write.
There is hardly a week that I don’t walk a beach. These days I can’t walk their soft white sand. There is too much pain and too many reminders of mortality in that. A dune to cross to reach a beach drains energy and resolve. No! The beach I walk is the hard wet sand at the sea’s edge. It is an edge that moves with the tide and each wave in the tide, of course. So, unless it is taken barefoot, the walk meanders just beyond the reach of the largest wave in a set—always the seventh, don’t the fishermen say?

This glistening strand between high and low tide is my freedom trail. I lose myself as I walk. I write in my mind; the waves are my worry beads. The last reach of the sea soaks into the sand. On one side of me, colonies of gulls and terns dry themselves on the white sand. On the other, the sea side, gannets dive into the troughs between breakers. Occasionally dolphins are to be seen surfing in the green transparencies of the waves. In the soak of the sea life stirs almost immediately, as the crab holes bubble. Worms and burrowing mollusks probe just below the surface, sucking life from the brine seeping into their world. Sandpipers ballet after the retreating waves.

This wet stretch between land and sea is the true beach, the true in-between space. Among the peoples of Oceania about whom I write—the maohi of Tahiti, the enata of the Marquesas, the kamaiana of Hawai‘i—it is a sacred, a tapu space, an unresolved space where things can happen, where things can be made to happen. It is a space of transformation. It is a space of crossings.

Let me take you to a beach to show you how. The time is 1789. The place is Matavai, a bay on the northwest coast of the island of Tahiti. It is the place of the first, violent and awful encounter between the maohi—the native islanders of Tahiti—and the European intruders in 1769. In the twenty years prior to 1789, James Cook has anchored there four times. The French under Louis de Bougainville and the Spanish in various expeditions from Peru have done the same. The latest visitor had been William Bligh, collecting breadfruit in the Bounty. Now the Bounty is back after the mutiny. Fletcher Christian and eight mutineers bargain with the rest that if he could take the Bounty to some place of settlement—he didn’t know where—he would leave the rest either to fulfill their dreams of paradise or to take their chances with the British navy, which would inevitably come looking for them.

The beach at Matavai is a black sand beach. This was a somewhat upsetting discovery for Marlon Brando when he filmed “Mutiny on the Bounty” there in 1965. It wasn’t his idea of a “real” Tahitian beach at all. So he imported thousands of tons of good white New Jersey-type sand to make it right. Didn’t I say that this in-between space of a beach was a space where things are made to happen?

The black sand beach at Matavai curves around the bay and ends at a point of land just opposite the passage through the reef through which first the *Dolphin*, then the *Endeavour*, then the *Resolution* and then the *Bounty* had sailed. The English had noted the point in 1769 and called it “Morai Point.” “Morai” is how they heard the Tahitian word *marae*, a sacred space. It was indeed a sacred space. Tahitians called it *Taputapuatea*: “Sacrifices from Abroad.”

There were several *marae* called Taputapuatea through the “Society Islands,” as Cook had called them after the Royal Society, which had sent him to Tahiti. The most important, the original and the most sacred was at Raiatea, a hundred miles to the northwest of Tahiti.

These *marae*—to call them “temples” is to say too much and too little—had all the same characteristics. They were all on a point of land. They all stood opposite a passage through the reef which itself was deemed sacred. They had two parts: a seaward side on which canoes beached bearing human, animal and vegetable sacrifices, and a landward side which was a treasure house for the most sacred icons and ritual paraphernalia of the people whose *marae* it was. The landward side was also a place of feasting, dance and mythical and historical song. This partition of landward and seaward sides had its own symbolic beach, a transition zone between gods and humans. It was a stone, *tepa*, on which the god-chief of the place stood and had the sacrifices offered to him. There he pantomimed eating the eyes of the human sacrifices. On that stone he was clothed in the feathered wraps that were the symbols and title of his power and authority.
Deep in Tahitian mythic understanding of themselves was a polarity that they negotiated by ritual and theatre. The marae Taputapuatae with its landward and seaward sides and its stone “beach” was the mythic and ritual space where the polarity was negotiated. Land and Sea were the basic oppositions, but the associations with these two poles ran wide and deep. Land was Native: Sea was Stranger. Land was Life, Legitimacy, Fertility: Sea was Death, Power, Sacrifice. The “beach,” tepa, was the place where the power of Violent Strangers—the ancient Polynesian chiefs who had come across the sea—was assuaged with sacrifices brought through the sacred passages in the reef. Tepa was the place where naked power was given authority and legitimacy by being wrapped in the feathered symbols that were their title to the land.

In September 1789, Fletcher Christian came and went at Matavai in the Bounty in a day and a night. He left the sixteen mutineers who had chosen to take their chances at Tahiti and kidnapped about the same number of Tahitian women, throwing those he deemed too ugly or unsuitable for his purposes into the sea as he left. The sixteen mutineers came to Tahiti with not much other than the clothes they wore, some muskets and other weaponry, three gallons of Madeira wine each, and a few useful tools. The five months they had spent in Tahiti collecting breadfruit for Bligh had taught them a smattering of the language, and some understanding of Tahitian
cultural practices. They knew that Tahitian greed was not so much for European goods as for the native goods—red feathers, clubs, drums, statuary—that the mutineers had stolen or exchanged at the islands the *Bounty* had visited after the mutiny. The Bounty men knew that their own safety depended on their making *taio* with Tahitians—friendships in which the individual's name, person and all social relationships were exchanged. They knew too that with their muskets they were an intrusive power in the politics of the islands.

It is not to my purpose to tell the dismaying and intriguing story of the eighteen-month stay of the mutineers at Tahiti, which ended when Captain Edward Edwards of HMS *Pandora* captured them and took them back to England for trial. Here I am talking of beaches. The mutineers discovered that theirs was a different sort of beach now that there was no *Bounty* in Matavai to dominate the scene with its cannons. They now had to bow to much that before they easily overrode. In fact, their first bowing took place at the *marae* Taputapuatea we have been talking about. They presented themselves, armed, to the boy-chief—Pomare was his name—who had title to the land where they wanted to stay. They came to the *marae*. Pomare was seated on the shoulders of one of his servants. (Should Pomare's feet touch ground, that ground became *tapu*, sacred, and inaccessible to others.) Tahitian protocol demanded that all who approached Pomare should bare their shoulders and their head and bow to the ground. This the mutineers refused to do. They were Englishmen, they said, and did not bare shoulders to anybody and besides, their own king demanded that they wear hats when they were armed. “Maitai!”—“fine!”—the Tahitians said. Put some Tahitian bark cloth on your shoulders and take that off. Then give our king an English salute.
Two beaches had been crossed in this one incident, don't you think? Two parties had bent to one another. Two parties had been relativised a little in their cultural perceptions. Two parties had to be inventive, create something new. That is what happens when beaches are crossed. In the in-between space of a beach, something new is made. Both sides give a little but lose nothing.

Around Pomare at Taputapuatea were all the sacred treasures of his people. There was an icon of the god ‘Oro and all his feathered accoutrements. ‘Oro was the god of sacrifice. Prominent among the treasures was a painting of Captain Cook by John Webber. (The latest portrait of Cook by Webber to come on the market was acquired by the National Gallery of Australia for over a million dollars!) All ship’s captains who came to Matavai were asked to sign their name on the back of it. It was wrapped in a red cloth and kept reverently in a chest among the skulls of famous warriors who had been killed or sacrificed. (In a little while, skulls of mutineers Charles Churchill and Matthew Thompson would join the collection, as would the red hair of the Bounty’s barber. He was deemed a most powerful man, since he touched other’s hair and kept in his cabin a collection of his own “skulls”—models of the latest hairstyles in London.) Along with the portrait of Cook, the mutineers were surprised to find a print of Zoffany’s painting of Cook’s death in Hawai‘i. Bligh had tried to keep Cook’s death a secret from the Tahitians. So did Fletcher Christian, who explained Bligh’s absence on his return to Tahiti by saying that Bligh had stopped off somewhere with Captain Cook. In a strange coincidence, a Swedish ship, the Mercury, had called at Tahiti between Christian’s first return to Tahiti and his last. The Mercury people told the Tahitians of Cook’s death and left the Zoffany print to prove it. Then the Mercury sailed on, passing the island of Tubuai where Christian had temporarily holed up and was building his Fort George. The ship did not stop at Tubuai but passed it in the night and saw the fires that the mutineers had lit, nearly discovering Fletcher Christian and the Bounty.

I haven’t made my full point yet. We need to go forward a year into the mutineers’ beachcombing story. Two of the most uncontrolled and violent of them are dead. Thompson in a fit of jealousy has murdered Churchill and the Tahitian taito of Churchill has murdered Thompson. Churchill and Thompson had raped and murdered Tahitians, flogged and mutilated them. The rest of the mutineers must have been relieved to see them gone. The most remarkable of the mutineers, James Morrison, the bosun’s mate with the star of the Garter tattooed on his breast and the order’s motto, Honi soit qui mal y pense, tattooed around his thigh, had built with huge ingenuity the small schooner Resolution, using strange woods, makeshift tools and unskilled labor. The Resolution was to be Morrison’s means of escape, and that of whoever would go with him. The making of the Resolution, however, changed the mutineers’ relationship with the Tahitians. They were much more deeply in Tahitian debt because of it. And the Tahitians realized that they had the last say in whether the mutineers could escape. They alone could supply the matting that would form the Resolution’s sails. The mutineers wouldn’t get the matting—unless they joined the wars that were endemic on the island.

A portrait of Cook by John Webber, like this one, was a sacred object in the marae.
The mutineers went to war for Pomare, and won victory for him. Tahitian politics were changed forever. These latest strangers from the Sea brought an uncontrolled and uncontrollable new violence to the Land. Their muskets and their scorn for the old rituals of Tahitian battle had brought death from the Sea in new ways, and had given the Pomare clan a sovereignty over the whole island that had never happened before. The Pomare clan immediately sought recognition for this new form of power in their boy-chief from all the powers of the island. They organized a “right-handed” procession around the island—right hand (signifying Life) towards the Land, left hand (Death) towards the Sea; we would say ‘clockwise’ in token of how other mythic forms shape our own imaging. The procession began at Taputapuatea in Matavai. It was preceded by a British flag on a pole. The boy-chief Pomare led it, “flying” on the shoulders of his servant. Behind him, his people danced under the canopy of a Union Jack extended by yards of white tapa bark cloth. The procession proceeded very precisely along the in-between space of the soak of the sea.

The purpose of the procession was to receive acknowledgment of Pomare’s sovereignty in the form of human sacrifices. Thirty of these canoe-borne Sacrifices from Abroad then came through the sacred passage at Matavai and were beached on the seaward side of Taputapuatea. All through the weeks of these events, the mutineers were not allowed to move from their houses unless they moved from Sea to Land first over the “beach” of Taputapuatea.

When the day came for Pomare’s inauguration, the mutineers assembled at Taputapuatea. They found the boy standing naked on his stone “beach,” tepa. Before him were laid out his people’s treasures—the painting and print of Captain Cook, the feathered image of the god ‘Oro, the skulls of Churchill and Thompson. Prominent was the red and yellow feather wrap, maro ura. This wrap was a historical register of Tahitian politics. At critical moments in the cultural life of the congregation of the marae patches of feathers representing human sacrifices were sewn on to the wrap. There was one remarkable patch: the red bunting with which Captain Samuel Wallis of the Dolphin claimed possession of Tahiti for King George III in 1767.
Sacrificial foods, dozens of slaughtered hogs, mountains of breadfruit, coconuts and taro—for the god ‘Oro, for Pomare, for the priests and for the communion feast of the congregation—lay at Pomare’s feet as well. The thirty “man-long plantains,” as the Tahitians called the corpses of human sacrifices wrapped tightly in coconut leaves and tied to poles, waited. The stench of them, now several weeks dead, was barely tolerable.

The priests offered their “man-long plantains” to Pomare by peeling back the coconut leaves covering their heads like a banana skin and scooping the eyes out. These Pomare “ate.” (He probably mouthed eating the eyes, rather than actually eating them.) When the violence in him was assuaged by these sacrifices from the Sea, his authority was acclaimed by wrapping him in the maro ura, the symbol of his title to the land. Then with the peculiar mixture of acclamation and defamation that was characteristic of Tahitian worship—and no doubt with the same archness of gesture with which he “ate” the sacrificial eyes—Pomare was covered with semen and feces by his worshipers. Or, they may have pantomimed the pouring as he had pantomimed the eating of the eyes. Their chief was a god. He was also the excrement of the gods. (This uplifting and then downputting is usually also part of the coronation ceremony in Westminster Abbey—but not quite as dramatically as in Tahiti.)

Pomare’s “beach” was a very in-between space.

Yesterday, when I completed that last sentence, I thought I needed some in-between space of my own. I went for a walk on my favorite beach. It was the first day of the Southern Hemisphere’s summer. The tide was low. The soak of the sea was a glistening twenty yards wide. The beach curves for five miles in the shelter of hills just a road-width back. There is a fishing harbor at one end behind a rock groin. Squid boats shelter there. I see their lights at night like UFOs on the horizon of the sea. At the other end of the curve, the beach ends, as so many Australian beaches end, with a small stream riding against a rocky headland. That stream is always my walking goal.

This first day of summer was brilliant. Pale blue sky, deep blue sea. Miles of white, white foam. What is it that the oceanographers say? At any one time two percent of the earth’s surface is under sea foam? The breeze beats against the green, green hills. The spring rains still hold their effect. It is a steady breeze, just right for the hang-gliders who float above my head. That is an in-between space that I haven’t dared try.

I’m thinking beaches, of course, as I walk. A very rewarding thing happened to me recently. Fenuaenata—The People of the Land, the Marquesans—through their Association Eo’ Enata, published a French translation of my book Islands and Beaches in a splendid edition. It was a great honor. I was humbled to be giving these sad and silent islands a history that they could never before read.

Islands and Beaches was an important book for me. It was the book I always had wanted to write when forty years ago I discovered that the history I wanted to write had two sides, a history both of the native islanders who came into the Central Pacific two thousand years ago and the strangers who “discovered” them four hundred years ago. I needed to see these island
cultures through the eyes of strangers who for the most part couldn’t “see” what they were seeing. Explorers, missionaries, whalers, traders made texts of what they saw in their journals, letters, diaries, books. But what attracted me most of all were the beachcombers, those who left their ships and “went native”—those who crossed beaches.

Beachcombers. There were hundreds of them in the years I was interested in, the mutineers of the Bounty among them. They were a peculiar breed. They were as varied as humanity itself, and as good and as evil. They were always a scandal to the societies they left, deemed traitors. They took freedoms that other men (there were no women among them in these years) didn’t dare or want to take. They soon found that their beaches were dangerous places. If they were wise, they did not bring any material goods with them. These would be taken from them, with their lives if they resisted. What they couldn’t bring with them was all the cultural and social support, including language, that made them who they were. To survive, they had to enter into native society in some way, its language first of all. They had to bow to the realities of politics and social relationships. They had to be good mimics and actors. They had to be able to read gestures and understand the ways in which power and class and gender can be in a color or a shape or a look.

So for me, who wanted to see across the beach, the beachcombers’ eyes saw more than most. I began to “see” the Land—Fenua—The Marquesas—through the eyes of two beachcombers, Edward Robarts and a lone nineteen-year-old missionary beachcomber, William Pascoe Crook. They both wrote long manuscripts of their experiences in the Land. Islands and Beaches grew out of that seeing.

Islands and Beaches freed me in many ways. It gave me courage to take risks in the theatre of cross-cultural writing. The beach metaphor allowed me to escape the tunnel vision of an island topic and to discover the many ways in which there are liminal—“threshold”—spaces in life. I experimented structurally in the book, balancing the two requirements of the historical endeavor, narrative and reflection, in a quite explicit way. I gained a freedom especially by giving back to Enata—The People—of Fenua something of their own identity in how they named themselves and their islands. But more importantly, how they structured their identity in the opposition of native (enata) and stranger (aoe). It was a first and small step in inverting the priorities of our cross-cultural gaze.

I tell you this because my present work, maybe half done, is called Beach Crossings. I’m going back to the beaches where I began. It is a little humbling to think that for forty years I’ve crossed the same beaches over and over again. But the miracle is that it is not actually the same beach that I’m crossing, and I’m not the same person crossing it.

Maybe it is self indulgent, but that gives me the concept for the book Beach Crossings. I’m using the beach crossings of Fenuaenata as a sort of mirror to my own beach crossings in life. I’m trying not to make it the Mirror of Dorian Gray! But it is pretty scary. It is not so much that the answers to the questions are frozen still, young and handsome. They aren’t. It’s the questions that are frozen. The problematic for which one has changing answers is rather scarily constant.
For me, I think, the constant issue has been how to describe process—how to describe the continuities and discontinuities of cultural existence in the present tense—not life, but living; not belief, but believing; not science but “sciening;” not empire, but “empring.” How to catch life, belief, science, empire not as if they were still frames in a moving film, but as if the illusion of the film’s movement was their actual reality. The beach above all is a stage in the theatre of the processes of living.

As part of Beach Crossings I’ve completed what I would call an ethnography of Herman Melville’s beach crossing in Fenuenata. His beach crossing for me is the three and a half weeks he spent on Nukuhiiva after deserting from the whaler Acushnet, enlarged by his four years’ experience in Hawai’i and Tahiti and on a variety of whalers as well as the frigate United States, enlarged again by his eighteen months reading and writing back at home in the Berkshires, Massachusetts. These readings and writings gave shape and language to his memories, gave sight to his unseeing eyes on the beach. His beach crossing for me begins July 9, 1842 when the twenty-three year old Melville and Toby Greene stuff hardtack down the fronts of their sailor’s frocks, slip away from the shelter of a canoe shed in the rain and scramble up the ridge behind to find a path and escape from the bay—where not only their whaler, but a French fleet is anchored. (The fleet’s 2,500 soldiers and sailors have their own business to attend to: they are about to take possession of Les Iles Marquises.) Melville’s beach crossing for me is from that day until November 14, 1851, nearly ten years later—the day Moby-Dick is published—when Melville gets into his horse and dray and drives from his home in Pittsfield over to Lenox to have dinner with Nathaniel Hawthorne in the Curtis Hotel. Hawthorne has just finished The House of the Seven Gables. Melville had dedicated Moby-Dick to Hawthorne “In token of my admiration of his genius.”

These hours with Hawthorne were among the happiest of Melville’s life. He wrote to Hawthorne afterwards: “From my twenty-fifth year [when he began Typee] I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed at anytime between then and now that I have not unfolded within myself.” It is this “unfolding” in reading and writing that I take to be his beach crossing.

Over the previous five years Melville had written Typee and its near-sequel Omo. He had felt the genius within himself and wrote Mardi to prove it—not for the money that the public was prepared to pay, but for all his ambitions for American literature. Mardi was a commercial and literary disaster. In disgust he set himself to write something that the public would buy. He wrote Redburn in three weeks; White-Jacket in twenty sittings.

Then, having done his duty and now quite determined to be the self that had unfolded within him, he wrote Moby-Dick.

For me, the mirror in Melville’s beach crossing reflects the unfolding that reading and writing stirs. Reading weaves experience into something else, enlarges it, deranges it. Reading is a dance on the beaches of the mind.