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Fraying Gauguin's Skirt: Gender, Race, and Liminality in Polynesia

Introduction

Fraying Gauguin's skirt? My title is in conversation with the recent book by Stephen F. Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt*. The skirt is not just a reference to the fact that during the ten years or so he spent in Tahiti and the Marquesas Gauguin habitually wore a *pareu* around his hips. In reconstructing and reinterpreting the life and the art of Gauguin, Eisenman portrays him as a liminal figure, not just inhabiting that limen of the beach Greg Dening perceives as the privileged space of most Pacific history (1996) but a person liminal by gender and sexuality as well as race.

Eisenman retells the wonderful story of Gauguin's arrival in Tahiti on 12 June 1891—dressed up like that performer he had relished at the Universal Exposition in Paris two years before, Buffalo Bill.¹ Jénot, a French naval lieutenant, was there to witness him striding down the gangplank, "his long, salt and pepper hair falling in a sheet on his shoulders from beneath a vast brown felt hat, with a large brim, like a cowboy's. . . . That very day Gauguin was renamed *taata vahine* (man-woman)" (p. 27). Gauguin soon learned of his novel notoriety, and after a few weeks cut his hair. It was not just the heat. With short hair and white linen suit he perhaps entertained a vain hope of appearing more acceptable to fellow French colonists. He was certainly less subject to jeers from Tahitians, especially women who fell about on that first day, jeering (p. 111). But, suggests Eisenman, not only did Gauguin remain an outsider to the society of the French administrators and settlers, he remained liminal in the eyes of locals throughout his successive Polynesian sojourns.

Here I consider Eisenman's portrait of Gauguin not so much in relation to the huge corpus of literature that his art and life have generated (Danielsson 1966; Teillet-Fisk 1983; Amishai-Maisels 1985; Thomson 1987; Sweetman 1995), but rather in relation to some critical reappraisals of the last decade or so. For, as James Clifford evokes it, in much recent scholarship

the image of Gauguin the romantic has been unceremoniously displaced by Gauguin the imperialist. Anti-colonial critics now portray the artist's alienation from Europe, and his many strident attacks on French bureaucrats and missionaries as avant-garde rebelliousness operating safely within the imperial system. (1997:3)

Moreover, feminist art historians like Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1989) and Griselda Pollock (1992) have not only subjected his “purportedly free and innocent love affairs with many young women to withering scepticism” (Clifford 1997:3), but have argued that his portrayal of Polynesian women in paint, in clay, in wood, and in words is pervaded by sexist objectification, verging on violence.

Feminist Stories of Gauguin

For Solomon-Godeau (1989) Gauguin’s primitivism was not so much a stylistic choice as a mythic proclamation. He and several contemporary commentators projected a myth of his life, as the Promethean artist, discovering the true self, the savage within. It has been retold often. She views his telos as a fantastic quest for difference and distance, both geographical and temporal. In Brittany, in Martinique, in Tahiti and finally the Marquesas, he pursues the archaic and the anterior.

Primitivism of course occludes the specificities of time and place, by evoking a stasis, an origin, beyond time and historical process. Solomon-Godeau contends that this primitivist telos intersects with Gauguin’s exoticist quest in Polynesia. The beyond and the before are both gendered—constantly evoked through women’s bodies. Just as in Brittany it was predominantly images of women in their blue and white costumes, attending ancient religious rituals, that conjured the archaic, so in Tahiti it is predominantly women’s bodies that evoke the original, the primordial (Solomon-Godeau 1989:123; cf. Brooks 1993; Perloff 1995).²

Solomon-Godeau thus sees Gauguin as living out a white male fantasy in Tahiti in endless pursuit of that which was “never more,” unable to reconcile himself to the realities of colonial presence and indeed the nasty condition of his own decaying body. For her, Gauguin’s Tahitian text, *Noa Noa*, is a self-serving fabulation of experience.³ The quest in that book, for deeper space and purer race, is, in my reading, self-consciously presented as an interior quest, which remakes him. “I was indeed a new man: from now on I was a true savage, a real Maori [*sic*]” (Gauguin 1985:22; cf. Gauguin 1978).⁴

This quest for the “new man,” the “true savage” for Pollock (1992) reveals the intimate connections between the values of creativity and vocation and the release of masculine sexuality in 1890s avant-garde art. Gauguin’s rejection of an etiolated European civilization in the name of a primitive paradise is, for her, both masculinist and imperialist: “Personal liberation through an unfettered sexuality and aesthetic refreshment through an appropriative and exploitative multiculturalism” (Pollock 1992:8). She casts him as the archetypical sexual tourist. His avant-garde art, though ostensibly antiestablishment,

is, she claims, emblematic of the development of a more capitalist mode of art practice, through publicity and critical promotion, a process that required packaging the self of the artist. Pollock portrays Gauguin not just as pillaging “the savages of Oceania” as Pissarro once claimed, but as “taking” women in his life and in art.

Eisenman’s Reinterpretation

Eisenman’s reinterpretation offers four challenges to such feminist stories of Gauguin. First, he complicates the account of a white man “going native” through coercive heterosexual relations with Tahitian girls. He does this, not so much by echoing Gauguin or his collaborator and co-editor of *Noa Noa*, Charles Morice, that the girls were willing or that a girl of thirteen in Tahiti was “the equivalent of eighteen or twenty in Europe” (Gauguin 1985a:28). Rather, Eisenman destabilizes Gauguin’s identity as a man, and indeed the identity of his erotic objects of desire as simply women. He thus infuses the myth of Gauguin with gender and sexual liminality.⁵ Second, Eisenman wants to distinguish Gauguin’s earlier “exoticism” from his more mature “primitivism,” by suggesting that rather than keeping the alluring “other” woman inscrutable and at a distance, Gauguin struggled, even if falteringly, to understand them and through them the Tahitian language and culture. Third, rather than the story of a dreamy primitivist, denying history and finding the savage within, Eisenman suggests that Gauguin’s work betrays the actuality of life in late nineteenth-century Tahiti and the Marquesas. Finally, he suggests that Gauguin’s art and writing represented a powerful critique of French colonialism that is foundational for contemporary Polynesian nationalisms. These four moves to rescript the story of Gauguin are connected. I will discuss them in turn.

The Limen of Gender and Sex

Eisenman not only suggests that Gauguin was seen by locals as a man-woman, he also suggests that he was attracted to men, that Gauguin “had no fixed sexual identity,” and indeed that the Tahitian girls in his bed and on his canvas were women-men. There is a singular evocation of homoerotic desire in *Noa Noa*, which Eisenman and most of the reviewers of his book recount. On this walk into the deep forest of the island interior to cut rosewood for his carvings, Gauguin is guided by Josefa, a young “faultlessly handsome” Tahitian man, who leads the aging, stumbling artist forward.

Both of us went naked, the white and blue *paréo* around the loins, hatchet in hand. . . . My guide seemed to follow the trail by smell

rather than by sight. . . . With the suppleness of an animal and the graceful litheness of an androgyne he walked a few paces in advance of me. And it seemed to me that I saw incarnated in him, palpitating and living, all the magnificent plant-life which surrounded us . . . a powerful perfume of beauty. Was it really a human being walking there ahead of me? . . . Was it not rather the Forest itself, the living Forest, without sex—and yet alluring? (Gauguin 1985a:19)

Then follows a disquisition, added in later editing, against the “cinctures and corsets” of civilized women, the “bizarre ideal of slenderness,” and the way European women are kept in a state of nervous weakness and muscular inferiority. He celebrates the ease of intercourse that derives from the similarity of Tahitians, “something virile in the women and something feminine in the men.” From this philosophical detour, the text returns to the path: “Why was it that there suddenly rose in the soul of a member of an old civilization a horrible thought? The fever throbbed in my temples, and my knees shook. But we were at the end of the trail.” His guide turns to make the final crossing of the brook and faces him. “The androgyne had disappeared. It was an actual young man walking ahead of me. His calm eyes had the limpid clearness of waters” (Gauguin 1985a:20).

Eisenman predictably makes much of this extraordinary passage. But he reads it not just as the surfacing and subsiding of a repressed homoeroticism, but rather as shedding light on “gender liminality in *fin de siècle* Tahiti⁶ and on the complex question of the interaction of European and Oceanic sexualities” (p. 119). Before their walk in the forest Josefa had been seeking erotic advice from Gauguin. Says Eisenman, “An adolescent Tahitian male seeking sexual knowledge from an exogenous *mahu* is himself perceived to be an androgyne who, by virtue of that very status, exposes the degraded nature of the other’s sexual identity” (p. 119). Eisenman thus assimilates the walk in the forest to Gauguin’s broader philosophical quest for sexual ambiguity, androgyny, even sexlessness. The vision of sexlessness was perhaps his artistic ideal, but hardly one that typified the life.

And how ambiguous was Gauguin in Tahitian eyes—was he, as Eisenman intimates, seen as a *taata vahine* or *mahu*? Beyond that first walk down the gangplank in cowboy gear with long hair, there is little evidence that Tahitians viewed him as anything other than a man. Eisenman suggests he was subject to teasing and taunts, but cites only a much later incident in the Marquesas. A blind and withered old woman approached him and felt his face and explored his body. “When it reached the navel the hand parted the skirt and carefully squeezed the male member. ‘Pupa’, (*popa’a*) she exclaimed with a grumble, then went off” (quoted in Eisenman, p. 109).⁷ Gauguin explains she was complaining that he lacked the scar of adult circumcision common

to Marquesan men. Eisenman suggests she was mocking him as she would a cousin-in-law or a *mahu*. This is a rather fine line of speculation, for the woman's disgusted utterance—*popa'a*—rather identifies him as a foreigner, an uncircumcised white man, liminal by race rather than gender. Perhaps she thought he was deficient in terms of Marquesan masculinity and he felt so, but do her tease and his unease warrant his identification as a *mahu*?

Although Eisenman has immersed himself in the anthropological debates about gender and sexuality in Oceania and most especially about gender liminality in Polynesia, he seems not to have conceded the main points of difference between Tahitian notions of gender and sexuality and those that prevailed in France in the 1890s. Niko Besnier has noted how European observers fixate on the homosexuality of the *mahu* (1994), but that, by itself, homoeroticism between men renders neither of them *mahu*, nor is it seen to compromise their masculinity or render them effeminate. A *mahu* is distinguished by homosexual acts, usually giving fellatio to non-*mahu* men, but also by acting "like a woman." A *mahu* dresses like a woman, does women's work, and assumes female gestures, postures, and linguistic styles. Early reports suggest that *mahu* plucked their beards, grew their hair, tied up their genitals, and sung and danced with women. In the era when *tapu* prohibitions separated men and women, they ate with women and children and slept in the same quarters. They plaited mats and made *tapa* with women. In the past they were attached to chiefly households where they performed both domestic and sexual service. *Mahu* also provided food for chiefly women and acted as their attendants and servants (Watts 1992). Although the links to *tapu* restrictions and to chiefly rank have long disappeared, *mahu* persist in contemporary Tahiti, where they are distinguished from *raerae*, who like Western gay men have sex with each other but whose gender identity is seen as less "like a woman" (Besnier 1994; Elliston 1997).

The evidence Eisenman evinces for Gauguin as *mahu* is slight. Neither his dress, his work, nor his sexuality marked him as other than *taata*. Wearing a skirt, or *pareu*, in no way complicated his gender identity as a man in Tahiti. In this period ordinary Tahitian men and women all routinely wore *pareu*, as we can see from the wonderful historical photographs in Eisenman's book. On formal occasions, such as going to church, women wore long gowns while men wore trousers or even a stiff woolen black suit. I doubt that Gauguin ever donned a muumuu. It may have been that wearing a *pareu* induced a sense of gender ambiguity in Gauguin's view of himself, but this is hardly evidence of how Tahitians saw him.

Gauguin relied on his succession of lovers and wives, or in their absence French landladies or servants, to do his domestic chores—his cooking, wash-

ing, cleaning. He also relied on his wives through their work and their kinship exchanges to complement his meager diet—at first tinned foods, white bread, beans, and macaroni bought from the Chinese storekeeper Aoni—with fish, breadfruit, taro, mangoes, and bananas (Danielsson 1966:99). After all, his vocation was to be an artist. I find no hint that his work on canvas, or in clay or wood, was seen as feminine work, yet Eisenman imputes that it was: “as a foreigner with evident *mahu*-ish tendencies (craftwork was generally considered feminine)” (p. 112). Later, in stressing the mutability of sexual and racial identity in colonial Polynesia, Eisenman not only associates Gauguin with *mahu*, but again claims his art was seen as feminine. “A *mahu* who is mercilessly mocked in one context can be fully embraced and respected in another; a Frenchman who is teased and travestied in Papeete may gain a measure of respect when he exercises his feminine, artistic abilities in a small town some distance from the colonial center” (p. 119).

But what makes Gauguin’s artistic abilities feminine? I see no evidence that his work on canvas was equated with women’s textile work, beating or marking *tapa* or plaiting pandanus, or with sewing or quilting. His carving and sculpting was probably closer to the ancient arts of men. Contrary to Eisenman’s interpretation of this incident (p. 133), his young friend Josefa/Totefa, in declining to try to use Gauguin’s tools to sculpt, does not insinuate that this is a feminine craft but rather that “I could do things which other men were incapable of doing, and that I was *useful to others*” (Gauguin 1985a: 18).⁸ He expressly distinguishes him from other *men*, but it is Gauguin who finds it remarkable that an artist is seen as a useful human being and Eisenman who equates this with the *mahu* notion of service. Perhaps if he had beaten *tapa* or plaited pandanus his art would have occasioned a different construction. Eisenman also suggests that his preoccupation with painting women is a sign of a lack of adult male company. Yet there is evidence of several friendships with adult men, indigenous and expatriate, reported by Danielsson (1966). There were reasons other than quotidian proximity that prompted Gauguin primarily to paint women.

Gauguin’s vigorous heterosexual life surely suggested that he was very much a man. He first went in voracious pursuit of lovers in the bars and the market of Papeete and then was given a succession of young girls as wives by Tahitian and Marquesan families—Teha’amana from Fa’aone, given by both her natural and adoptive parents; Pau’ura a Tai, of Punaauia, on his return to Tahiti; and Vaeoho, from Hekeani Valley near Atuona when he moved to the Marquesas (Danielsson 1966:195, 256).

It may be that back in France Gauguin was aware of the new languages of sexual “types”—the *persilleuses* (effeminate male prostitutes), *amateurs* (men with a taste for boys), and *inverti* (those who Charcot and Zola declared

were a distinctive third sex). He associated with a group of artists and poets, some of whom like Verlain and his former lover Rimbaud, were labeled *inverti* (p. 95). Like Verlain he cut an ostentatious figure—dressing up variously as a Breton fisherman, an Inca, a Magyar, and a Maohi. But whether such costumes constituted “a form of drag” (p. 98) and whether by simply associating with homosexuals he was inclined to be one is doubtful. Gauguin’s pursuit of sexual liberation in France seems relentlessly heterosexual. In Pont Aven, Arles, and Paris there is a suite of mistress/models but no suggestion of male lovers.

Thus reframing a portrait of Gauguin as the heterosexual tourist by evoking his sexual ambiguity seems rather stretched. But what of the feminist portrait of Gauguin’s corporeal and imaginative relations with Polynesian women as violent appropriation? Solomon-Godeau (1989) and Pollock (1992) cast his Polynesian wives, lovers, and models as victims of his voyeuristic gaze as much as they were victims of the fatal impact of French colonialism. Yet there is much evidence that several women, for reasons of their own, joined him with some alacrity. Perhaps they were unaware that he was not a rich, powerful Frenchman but mired in cycles of penury and profligacy, rapidly moving not so much beyond as down the social hierarchy of white colonial society. There is also evidence that these women were not so passive in their dealings with him as he might have desired and fantasized.

Many quote his words, in a letter to Seguin of 1897: “Just to sit here at the open door, smoking a cigarette and drinking a glass of absinthe, is an unmixed pleasure which I have every day. And then I have a fifteen year old wife who cooks my simple every-day fare and gets down on her back for me whenever I want, all for the modest reward of a frock, worth ten francs a month” (quoted in Solomon-Godeau 1989:127). But elsewhere he confesses to feeling timid and even terrified by the beauty, pride, and willfulness of young women. Titi was dispatched not just for her “mixed blood” but because she had sophisticated tastes for good gowns and Chinese food. The beloved Teha’amana and other women at first refused to sit except in their Sunday best, long gowns—those “hideous muumuus” in Solomon-Godeau’s phrase, for her hallmarks of the pervasive power of Christianity and modernity. Teha’amana left him for her relatives on several occasions and took other lovers during their years together. Still, she was tearful at his departure to France in 1893 and willing to resume relations with him on his return in 1895 despite an intervening marriage with a young Tahitian man, Ma’ari. She went to meet him but took fright at the sight of his running syphilitic sores and quickly returned to her indigenous husband. Pau’ura, however, consented to live with him at this time. Unlike Teha’amana, she had many relatives close at hand, and often spent more time with them.

In the Marquesas, in his fifties, despite his obvious ill health and ulcerated body, he was able to find yet another fourteen-year-old girl from a remote valley to be his wife. In exchange she and her parents received not just yards of chintz, muslin, calico, ribbons, lace, and thread but a sewing machine. In the Marquesas, he had sex with many others in his “House of Pleasure” including the red-haired Tohotaua, the wife of Hapaunai. No doubt all of these women were at great risk of contracting the syphilis with which he was long afflicted.

Pollock in her 1992 lecture attempts a re-identification with Teha’amana as “the historical Tahitian woman, a subject of her own history” rather than “only as the object of representation in a Western art history” (1992:10). Elsewhere I suggest that this rhetorical aim proves rather elusive (Jolly 1998), since Pollock is disinclined to treat Teha’amana’s eagerness to be with Gauguin or *her* lack of fidelity to *him* as signs of agency. Like Solomon-Godeau, Pollock tends to portray Teha’amana as victim of Christianity, colonialism, and ultimately Gauguin.

Thus, despite Pollock’s noble intention, there is little in her lecture that addresses the complex particularities of life in 1890s Tahiti, which Eisenman at least attempts. She too primarily discusses Teha’amana less as a historical subject and more as an object of representation in Western art history. Like Solomon-Godeau she focuses our attention on *Mana’o Tupapa’u* (The Specter Watches Over Her) of 1892. So let me now consider what they say about this painting and then ponder Eisenman’s alternative appraisal. But first let us hear what Gauguin had to say. This is a picture with which Gauguin anticipated some trouble. In a routine example of epistolary bad faith, he writes to his wife Mette (whom he kept in the dark about Teha’amana and all the others until the publication of *Noa Noa*) to explain and to justify the circumstances of its composition.

I have painted a young girl in the nude. In this position a trifle more, and she becomes indecent. However I want it in this way as the lines and the movement interest me. So I make her look a little frightened. This fright must be excused if not explained in the character of a person, a Maorie [*sic*]. This people have by tradition a great fear of the dead. One of our young girls would be startled if surprised in such a posture. Not so a woman here. . . . Here endeth the little sermon, which will arm you against the critics when they bombard you with their malicious questions. (Quoted in Pollock 1992:68)

And later, in a revised edition of *Noa Noa*, he writes,

One day I was obliged to go to Papeete. I had promised to return that evening, but . . . I didn't get home till one o'clock in the morning. . . . When I opened the door . . . I saw [Teha'amana] . . . motionless, naked, belly down on the bed; she stared up at me, her eyes wide with fear, and she seemed not to know who I was. For a moment, I too felt a strange uncertainty. Her dread was contagious: it seemed to me that a phosphorescent light poured from her staring eyes. I had never seen her so lovely; above all, I had never seen her beauty so moving. And, in the half-shadow, which no doubt seethed with dangerous apparitions and ambiguous shapes, I feared to make the slightest movement, in case the child should be terrified out of her mind. . . . Perhaps she took me, with my anguished face, for one of those legendary demons or specters, the *tupapa'us* that filled the sleepless nights of her people. (Gauguin 1985b, quoted in Eisenman, p. 120)⁹

As Eisenman suggests, this text and the image constitute a “veritable encyclopaedia of colonialist racism and misogyny” (p. 120)—the presumption of the emotive, superstitious native woman and the association of her dread with his rekindled desire.

Both Pollock and Solomon-Godeau view her terror as her terror of Gauguin. Moreover, they juxtapose this naked woman of color with other female nudes of the time. Pollock, like many others before her, compares the picture to Manet's *Olympia* of 1863. Gauguin was so impressed by that picture that he painted a copy in 1891, which he took to Tahiti and of which Teha'amana is said to have asked, “Is that your wife?” Pollock sees Manet's painting as being about the tension between the white woman, a prostitute masquerading as a courtesan, and the unnamed black female attendant who, as in many Orientalist pictures, signifies license or sexual excess.

But how then is Teha'amana to be seen—as both prostitute and maidservant? Pollock has no doubt that she was perceived as a prostitute by European viewers (in contradistinction to Teha'amana's own probable perception of herself as a wife). She could not be seen as a wife by a European audience. She was too young and, especially in that posture, too available. But, Pollock suggests, whereas *Olympia* is linked with the venality of modernity, Teha'amana is associated with the promise of sex given as part of nature's bounty: “A warm, naked childlike body, offered freely, according to local patriarchal customs, was taken, recorded, debased, and aesthetically reworked, rendered distant and different, through its color, the synonym of infantile superstition against which the European man can maintain his fictional superiority: rational, in control, creative” (Pollock 1992:47).

This might describe Gauguin's state of mind, but it is clearly not the only associations that a viewer familiar with Western art might make. Eisenman rather attends to the boyishness of the figure and what Pollock calls the "*a tergo*" posture. He discerns a lineage connecting her not just to Olympia but to the *Hermaphrodite*, that figure in antique marble of which Lady Townsend said it was "the only happy couple she ever saw." Like this famous sculpture in the Louvre (probably by Bernini), this figure "reclines on a mattress, crosses her legs and exposes her face and buttocks to the viewer" (p. 121).

But Eisenman claims that Gauguin is not just plagiarizing or recycling European sources, but is responding to Polynesian cosmology, with its stress on the interconnectedness of male and female, between light and everyday life (*noa*) and darkness and spirit (*mo'a*). Contra to Pollock's viewing, Teha'amana is not alone. She is accompanied by that specter, the spirit of the dead. And although Gauguin's representation of the *tupapa'u* as an old woman is rather odd, the evocation of spirit as incandescent light is more proximate to Tahitian notions. Ultimately the picture is about the union of Teha'amana and the specter, the indissoluble connection of light and dark, "either she thinks of the ghost or the ghost thinks of her" (p. 129). Eisenman sees Gauguin here struggling to reconcile the dialectical relations of Polynesian dualisms—of light and dark, male and female, matter and spirit—with his own painting practice, with his own theory of color. Thus the picture is elevated to a metaphysical plane that seems to transcend the mire of the sex and the color of bodies. But this elevated, spiritual quest connecting Polynesian and European religiosity also depends on a view of Gauguin as involved in translation and not just exoticist projection.

Gauguin as Ethnographer

There has long been debate between those who see Gauguin as maintaining an exoticist ignorance of Polynesia and those who see him as attaining a deeper understanding of language and of culture. Solomon-Godeau (1989) and Pollock (1992) follow Danielsson (1966) in stressing Gauguin's linguistic and ethnographic ignorance and incapacity. Indeed, Danielsson suggests that the titles of some of his earlier works are pidgin Tahitian, with inaccuracies of orthography, spelling, and basic grammar. Eisenman is rather inclined to follow Teilhet-Fisk (1983) in suggesting that Gauguin's understanding of the Tahitian language and of Polynesian myth and art was rather better. Indeed, they both claim him as an early ethnographer.

Gauguin was doubtless never fluent in Tahitian or Marquesan. In his first rural locale he relied on Chief Tetuanui, who was very pro-French and spoke French fluently (Danielsson 1966:92). He too had attended the Universal

Exposition in Paris (although whether he saw either the Symbolists or Buffalo Bill is not known). Gauguin never attained more than a basic, quotidian command of Tahitian. In a letter to his wife Mette he lamented that he lacks her skills in learning language. It may be that his move to French titles for his later works was an admission of his linguistic deficiencies.

But Teilhet-Fisk (1983) earlier discerned other ways in which Gauguin absorbed Tahitian culture through published texts, visual art, and material objects. Many of his paintings have backgrounded figures derived from Polynesian mythology, often merged with images from Java, India, or Egypt, but still suggesting an intimate knowledge of local myth and oral traditions. Moreover, she meticulously traced his use of Polynesian motifs and techniques of carving. His paintings, sketches, and carvings abound with patterns and figures modeled on Marquesan wooden bowls and war clubs or derived from Maori houses he saw in Auckland en route to Tahiti in 1895. Eisenman follows Teilhet-Fisk's argument that Gauguin was an ethnographer but elaborates this by stressing that in his quest for reconciling local and universal meanings Gauguin sought the mythic values of androgyny.

Gauguin as Visual Historian

Third, Eisenman defends Gauguin against the charge of egregious exoticism, of failing to depict Tahiti as it was rather than the dreamworld of his imagination. Indeed, Eisenman suggests that Gauguin eschewed the racist exoticism of Pierre Loti and progressively developed a far more nuanced and sophisticated primitivism, which both critiqued civilization in Europe and lamented the terrible local effects of colonialism. After all, Gauguin often painted women in what Solomon-Godeau dubbed "those hideous muumuus" (1989:125). What we witness in his early paintings from Tahiti, as in photographs of the period, are women in flowing and flattering gowns.

Eisenman makes much of these early, more formal portraits. As against the nudes that evoke a more primordial or mythic space, they suggest for him colonial hybridity (see Clifford 1997 for a critique). Although palpably different than the nudes, they are not just about benign "mixture" or hybridity, for these very portraits are also typifying—displaying the predicaments of Tahitians as a "diluted" or even a "dying race."

Gauguin's concessions to historical realism are rare and surely the opposite of what he aspired to do. (It is paradoxical that Solomon-Godeau and Pollock crucify him for his lack of realism!) Nowhere are there images of the town of Papeete, except for *Ta Matete* (The Market), an extraordinary picture of women parading in the market, drawn in imitation of an Egyptian frieze. He painted several portraits of settler women, he caricatured government officials in cartoons, and in his last days in the Marquesas he painted a

singular portrait of a nun. But nowhere does he register the presence of Europeans together with Tahitians in his pictures, except that of his own person in self-portraits. Perhaps he represented the morbid sign of modernity as Pollock implies. His pictures are surely seeking not historically specific or realist meanings but mythical ones—searching for Polynesian or Indo-European origins, or a theosophically inspired admixture of them.

Foreign and Local Radicals

Finally, Eisenman vaunts Gauguin's anticolonialism and, especially in his last years in the Marquesas, his alliances with and support of natives in resistance. Yet, as Eisenman has to concede, his credentials as an anticolonial critic and activist are, at best, uncertain. He arrived in Tahiti with a letter from the French government authorizing his mission and his second-class passage was paid. He was initially well received by Governor Lacascade, and even at first admitted to the upper echelons of Cercle Militaire, that club for officers and gentlemen amid the banyan trees in Papeete's largest park, where they could sip their aperitifs and look down on the townsfolk (Danielsson 1966).

Gauguin quickly descended from this. He sought and, after much delay and deliberation, was ultimately given free passage back to France in 1893. Although denied several sinecures by the colonial government, he was constantly badgering them for such positions, and desperately sick and poor in his later years he even settled for a menial position as a draftsman in the Office of Public Works.

His polemics had a moving set of targets: native chiefs, Chinese immigrants, colonial authorities, the Protestants, the Catholics. In his last years he became increasingly embroiled in disputes between the colonial authorities and the local settlers and between the Catholic and Protestant parties. From August 1899 to 1900 he produced his own scandal sheet, *Le Sourire*, but then terminated that to edit *Les Guepes* (The Wasps), the propaganda instrument of the Catholic party. His invective on their behalf was extraordinary given his own recent tracts castigating the role of the Catholic church in the corruption called "civilization." But even more extraordinary was the ease with which he switched sides in his move to the Marquesas. There he befriended the Protestant cleric Vernier, who along with Ky Dong, a Vietnamese Buddhist revolutionary in exile, gave him medical advice and assistance. Here the Catholic bishop, Martin, was rather the butt of his calumny: not only was he excoriated with words, but Gauguin sculpted a monstrous image of him as Father Lechery, complete with phallic horns on his head and in close proximity to Therese, a sculpture of a near-naked woman resembling Martin's domestic servant and alleged mistress.

In his years in the Marquesas, his political efforts did assume a more vig-

orous defense of indigenous interests, against taxation, against the prohibition of alcohol, and against the forced sending of children to schools. But colonial resistance and self-interest comfortably folded into each other. His agitation against schooling was doubly successful; not only did the numbers in classes plummet, to the worried consternation of the authorities, but he thereby “rescued” a bevy of young women from the surveillance of the nuns and was able to lavish them with seductive attentions and invitations to his House of Pleasure. Eisenman tends to equate Gauguin’s life of sexual liberty, drinking, and play as equivalent to Tahitian eroticism and laziness as alike acts of anticolonial resistance. This again might be too generous. The persistence of eroticism in daily life and song and dance, the refusal to send kids to school or to labor on plantations *were* important aspects of anticolonial resistance by Tahitians and Marquesans.

But what was the force of Gauguin’s example? Can we see him as party to an anticolonial alliance? I am inclined to a more pessimistic reading of him as an avant-garde rebel within an imperial system. His position in this system was not, as Clifford imputes (1997), “safe,” for in his final months he was in peril not just from penury, ostracism, and syphilis but jail. Do these grandiose acts of a foreign rebel constitute exemplary forms of anticolonialism? Does a focus on Gauguin as anticolonial hero rather obscure the indigenous taproots of resistance?

I find it very hard to accept Eisenman’s plotting of a straight line of connection between Gauguin’s rebellious, primitivist postures and contemporary anticolonial, antinuclear, and nationalist movements in Polynesia. Eisenman suggests that Gauguin’s interrogatives, “Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?” have “gone native.” His book ends with a depiction of lunch with a number of Tahitians prominent in independence politics. He quotes his Tahitian interlocutor, Joinville Pomare (direct descendant of Tahiti’s last queen and leader of the Pomare party, one of the main pro-independence political parties). He maintains that Gauguin’s questions remain pressing today. Tahitians now still ask themselves, “Who are you? Where do you come from? Where is your family? Where is your land? Where is your future?”

Eisenman fails to register the differences between Pomare’s questions and those posed by Gauguin’s captions to his vast canvas. Pomare does not so portentously construct the Tahitian self in terms of agonized, abstract questions about past, present, and future or the collective objectification “what are we,” where the “we” slides between a marker of racial specificity and pan-human universality. Rather, Pomare poses his questions in a way that relates self to family and to land, a far more concrete, genealogical, and grounded spatiotemporal reference.¹⁰ Eisenman not only unduly assimilates these questions to those of Gauguin, but sees them as expression of a pan-Pacific quest for identity, derived from European nationalist models.

In Tahiti today they indicate the migration of an old European ideology to a new geographical and cultural context in which self-definition has become the necessary precondition for political solidarity and the attainment of economic autonomy. Gauguin's achievement was thus to have taken primitivism—born in the brains of Rousseau, Diderot and the rest—and transported it physically to the colonies where it might eventually do some good. (P. 205)

This is an extraordinary claim. Pacific movements for self-definition and autonomy take shape in relation to colonial forces, but they are born in the brains of Pacific peoples rather than those ancient *philosophes* of Paris. Nationalist movements have indigenous as well as exogenous origins; they are not just transplants of Rousseau primitivism nor just the preferred hybrids of postcolonial theory, but local plants, which are constantly replanted and regrafted but that have deep roots that thrive in local soil. Tradition does not have to be ancestral and originary to be indigenous; it is remade by successive generations (see Jolly 1992). Tahitians may have read and imbibed Rousseau and Diderot in the course of their Francophone education, but it is Eurocentric hubris to see these French philosophers as the only or the primary source of contemporary Tahitian moves for independence (for example, see Firth 1987; Finney 1992).

Many anticolonial movements, even as they align with environmentalists in opposing military testing, even as they join forces with Greenpeace, are ultimately in argument with that “state of nature” that imagines people as but part of a beautiful, wild place. Perhaps the promotion of that image of the “state of nature,” that arcadian ideal of tourist pleasure, mists over the harsh history of these islands, so long dominated by French colonial and military interests.¹¹ I doubt Gauguin inspires many contemporary Tahitians who are struggling to resist rather than perpetuate those interests.

NOTES

1. Gauguin had seen Buffalo Bill perform at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1889. He is alleged to have returned several times and to have been especially interested in the fencing and boxing. This was also a space where he witnessed not just re-creations of villages from the colonies but indigenous peoples making traditional crafts. He encountered a number of Asian, African, and Pacific women in this locale. His work was also exhibited there at a café near the showground, called Café des Arts, as part of an Impressionist and Synthetist show (see Pollock 1992:13, 46).

2. Solomon-Godeau's position has been criticized by both Brooks (1993) and Perloff (1995). Brooks argues that her argument fails to do justice to the disruptive force of Tahitian sexuality in Western discourse and the way in which Gauguin's art, far from representing the untainted, exotic Tahitian woman, rather reveals how colonial and Christian

power sullies her through the commodification of sex and the new notion of sin. Brooks's stress on the pervasiveness of the figure of Eve (rather than Venus) and the salience of broader Christian narratives and icons in Gauguin's Polynesian pictures is warranted. Moreover, anticipating Eisenman's argument, he highlights both Gauguin's homoerotic temptation and his metaphysical pursuit of androgyny. But ultimately, Brooks is too generous in his assessment of Gauguin's reflexivity, his critical capacity to transcend the antinomies of savagery and civilization, and his initiation of a new genre of representing the body, beyond the old clichés of the nude. Perloff (1995) also depicts Gauguin not in pursuit of typifying ethnic essences but cross-cultural mixtures. She situates his work in the context of a fin-de-siècle preoccupation with degeneration and corruption. Like Brooks she stresses the importance not just of Christian narratives of sin but Gauguin's iconography of corruption derived from Symbolists like Redon. Lizards in lieu of serpents, dogs instead of foxes, and flowers echoing peacock feathers—such recurring motifs are portents of guilt and corruption in a world of alleged innocence, beauty, and bounty. So the Polynesian paradise Gauguin evoked is after, not before, the fall. Perloff stresses the colonial and masculine sources of decadence, of brooding malaise and decay, in a way that ultimately implicates Gauguin rather than exempts him, as Brooks tends to do, on the grounds of Gauguin's declared self-consciousness. For an excellent reappraisal, see Waldroup 1998.

3. The genre of the book is rather uncertain. Some seem to read it as a journal or a traveler's diary. I am inclined to read it rather as autobiographical fantasy novel or allegory.

4. Sweetman (1995) and other biographers note Gauguin's claims to ancestry from Indians in Peru, where he went with his mother as a child. Gauguin constantly confuses the term Maori with Maohi, the name for indigenous Tahitians preferred by those who support nationalism in the present.

5. Rather more persuasive is Eisenman's argument that in his art Gauguin pursued a quest for the liminal, the ambiguous, and the androgynous. In the simplest terms we might see this in his own claim that sexual difference in Tahiti was less marked than in Europe, "something virile in the women and something feminine in the men" (Gauguin 1985a:20). To the European eye the very bulk, squareness, and muscularity in his portrayals of Tahitian women might indeed render them masculine. In this Gauguin's women differ markedly from the pink flesh and the roundness of women's bodies in the paintings of Hodges or Webber, artists on Cook's voyages.

6. This very term suggests that Eisenman transposes European temporalities of "epochs," and more specifically "the end of a century" in Paris, to the history of colonial spaces like Tahiti.

7. This woman later appears as a grotesque, gnarled, reptilian hunchback merged with the memory of de Haan, his Dutch Jewish friend, in his picture *Contes Barbares* (Primitive Tales).

8. Note I am here using the edition translated by O. F. Theis (Gauguin 1985a) rather than that used by Eisenman (Gauguin 1985b).

9. My edition of *Noa Noa* has a slightly different rendering, including the alternative name for Teha'amana, Tehura:

Tehura, immobile, naked lying face downward flat on the bed with the eyes inordinately large with fear. She looked at me, and seemed not to recognize me. As for myself I stood for some moments strangely uncertain. A contagion emanated from the terror of Tehura. I had the illusion that a phosphorescent light was streaming from her staring eyes. Never had I seen her so beautiful, so tremulously beautiful. And then in this half-light which was surely peopled for her with dangerous apparitions and terrifying suggestions, I was afraid to make any movement which might increase the child's paroxysm of fright. How could I know what at that moment I might seem to her? Might she not with my frightened face take me for one of the demons and specters, one of the Tupapaus, with which the legends of her race people sleepless nights? Did I really know who in truth she was herself? The intensity of fright which had dominated her as the result of the physical and moral power of her superstitions had transformed her into a strange being, entirely different from anything I had known heretofore. (Gauguin 1985a:33–34)

10. This critical speculation, which I first wrote in February 1998, has been dramatically reinforced by my subsequent reading of Elliston's brilliant doctoral dissertation on Tahiti in May 1999 (Elliston 1997). In the midst of her compelling analysis of gender in both quotidian life and the languages of nationalism, she recounts this same conversation over lunch with Joinville Pomare, where she was both a guest and a translator for Eisenman. She reports Pomare as saying "That one! . . . He took eight year old girls to his bed! . . . Oh his paintings are beautiful, but the man!" Clement Pito, a member of Pomare's political party, complained that "Gauguin took our language and put it in his painting." And in elaboration, he protested the very process of translation and misrecognition I criticize. Elliston quotes Pito thus: "The questions in the painting—who are you, where do you come from, where are you going—those are our questions. . . . But [Gauguin] put them in the painting and generalized them . . . he changed the questions. . . . One asks 'Where are you going?' and he changed it [to] 'Where are we going?'" One asks 'Who are you?' and he changed it [to] 'Who are we?'" One asks 'Where are you from?' and he asked 'Where are we from?'" As Elliston observes, Pito's criticism was not just that Gauguin appropriated the quotidian questions that Tahitians ask strangers when they meet, but that he subverted them. By substituting the third-person plural "we" for the second-person singular "you," he changed the questions into the classic existential questions of French intellectual thought and effectively displaced such angst from the French onto Polynesians. This substitution is even more extraordinary when we consider that "we" in Tahitian differs from the vague English equivalent, having both an inclusive and exclusive and dual and plural forms. I find the echoes between my own critical speculation and Elliston's extended report of the conversation extraordinary. Even more extraordinary is that Eisenman does not allude to this criticism by Pomare or Pito, critiques that effectively challenge his own Eurocentric translations as much as that of Gauguin.

11. See Teresia Teaiwa's essay on Bikini for a compelling argument about the links between militarism and tourism (1994) and writing on Hawai'i by Trask (1993).

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