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A Preface for Natives

Do you think of him as a French colonist or as a Tahitian (p. 204)? This surprising question about Paul Gauguin's identity, directed by Stephen Eisenman to a Tahitian in the 1990s, is a good example of the overwhelming sense that this book leaves with me. A feeling that the author is grasping at straws—or grass as the case is here. Why on earth would a Tahitian think that *Gauguin* was Tahitian? In only a little more than a hundred years after his arrival are Tahitians that confused and ignorant of history? Or was Gauguin just really good at fitting in? By Eisenman's and a whole host of other scholars' assertions the latter is not true. And as a person of the nineties himself, we trust that Eisenman would not answer the former positively.

Instead, it seems that Eisenman's question reflects a tendency among some

whites to flirt with identity and the identities of others. To toy coquettishly with the idea of going native. To hope somehow that they might be mistaken for a native—if only temporarily. To bond. Or at least to make a connection. A friend. I have no right to doubt the depth of meaning in the exchanges Eisenman had with Tahitians on his visit. What I would love to see is the book written by a person who survived after asking me, “Do you think of Harry Maude as a British colonist or as a Banaban?” Unfortunately, most of us islanders do not take scholarly investigators seriously enough. So instead of sensibly ignoring, or more appropriately punching, the person who asks us such inane and insulting questions, we show off a little bit.

Pomare then cited Gauguin’s manifesto painting: “Who are you? Where do you come from? Where is your family? Where is your land? What is your future? These are the questions we ask each other all the time here in Tahiti. (P. 205)

And what does the scholarly investigator say—not to your face—but in the safety of pages that you probably will never read?

Oceanic peoples have always been vitally concerned with lineage and genealogy, yet Pomare’s questions would probably not have been asked by Tahitians of Gauguin’s day. “Where do you come from? Who are you? Where are you going?” are specifically European primitivist questions. (P. 205)

The scholarly investigator asserts that he knows more about what your ancestors thought than you do. (In which case, perhaps he *does* think that you are confused and ignorant of history.) The scholarly investigator asserts that your epistemological base—lineage and genealogy—has nothing to do with philosophy or great philosophical questions. The scholarly investigator usurps what you believe or what you made up for the interview or what you in fact have wondered about from time to time, and he reassigns it to *them*.

These are not your questions. These are *their* questions. *Theirs*. Remember that. Always remember that. “Like Gauguin . . . the native peoples of the Pacific refused to become relics and pass into the tomb of history” (p. 195). *Like* Gauguin? This book might anger you. It may amuse you. Or it could bore you.

An Attempt at a Review for a More General Audience

Part of the value of *Gauguin’s Skirt*, according to its author, is that it brings together three ideas that cannot be found—together—in the existing litera-

ture: (1) Fin-de-siècle Tahiti—despite its small population—had a rich, complex, and resilient culture; (2) nineteenth-century Polynesians, like their contemporary descendants, were more often active antagonists of than passive witnesses to French imperialism; and (3) Paul Gauguin was well aware of the Polynesians' cultural and political perspicacity and represented it in his art (p. 15).

Eisenman attempts to illustrate Gauguin's sensitivities by rereading his paintings, correspondences, memoirs, and other art historians' interpretations with an eye toward evidence of complexity and hybridity. Visually, the book's major emphasis is juxtaposing Gauguin's paintings alongside photographs of Tahitians and Marquesans at the turns of both centuries. The purpose of doing this, it seems, is to establish a certain archival authenticity for Gauguin—as if he needed it at this point!—and the author also takes the opportunity to prejudice the reader's reading by imposing his narrative commentaries on the photographs.

This review takes on two issues raised by Stephen Eisenman in *Gauguin's Skirt*: first, the author's argument for a reading of gender liminality in Gauguin's person as well as his work; second, the author's argument that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Gauguin was pioneering a theoretical framework called "critical primitivism" that would eventually converge with indigenous rights movements of the late twentieth century. While this is perhaps the first work on Gauguin to draw explicit connections between the cultural politics of fin-de-siècle and contemporary Tahiti, Eisenman's central arguments are problematic and weak. This review tackles the issues by way of examining the correspondence between the book's title and its content.

As soon as Gauguin disembarked [at Papeete], he attracted the stares of the natives, provoked their surprise, and also their jeers, above all from the women. . . . What focused attention on Gauguin above all was 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. As far as the inhabitants could remember they had never seen a man with long hair on the island. (P. 27, quote from P. Jenot)

This book should have been called "Gauguin's Hair," because Eisenman takes the incident recounted above as the originary moment of Gauguin's marginalization in Tahiti. Gauguin soon cut his hair, but according to Eisenman the damage to his reputation had been done: from that moment onward he would remain on the peripheries of both colonial and indigenous societies in Tahiti. What is difficult to believe about this anecdote is that Tahitians had

not seen a man with long hair before. Eisenman does not clarify whether there was really a general scarcity of long-haired men in fin-de-siècle Tahiti, whether long hair was unusual on European men only, and, if long hair was not acceptable on Tahitian men, how and when that taboo emerged. Later on Eisenman discusses two of Gauguin's paintings, *Bathers, 1902* and *Marquesan Man in a Red Cape, 1902*, both of which depict native men with long hair; inexplicably, he does not comment on this detail (pp. 101–102).

While Eisenman does not directly problematize the issue of long hair as a signifier of gender, he does discuss the complexity of Tahitian responses to perceived gender liminality.

The *mahu* is an ancient traditional role, but its particular shape and content changes according to historical circumstance. The ritual castration of Gauguin as *taata vahine* in 1891 suggests, indeed, that the improvisatory ingeniousness of Tahitian culture was fully operational during the fin-de-siècle. Far from genuflecting before white man and genius artist, the women and children in Papeete harbor were armed with sharply pointed verbal spars, directed precisely where they knew they would do the most damage. (Pp. 108–109)

But Eisenman's whole take on the *mahu* is problematic. Is *taata vahine* equivalent to *mahu*? He translates both as "transvestite" and then as "third-sex figure" (p. 28). His slippery handling of these terms is disconcerting. A transvestite is someone who cross-dresses, regardless of sexual preference or practice; therefore, a transvestite is not a third-sex figure because transvestitism is simply a performance of gender in which gender remains a binary construct. Eisenman is heavily invested in promoting the "third-sex figure," but scouring feminist anthropology, he appears frustrated by dualistic constructs of gender and dimorphic constructs of sex.

Marilyn Strathern's articulation of Hagen sex/gender practice and performance in Papua New Guinea, however, seems to support his case. But he much too quickly goes on to generalize, "Sex in the Western Pacific . . . is less an identity than a means for understanding the world," and by implication generalizes the case to Polynesia (p. 94). Still intent on finding "non-dimorphic sex and gender positionings" and "multiple-gendered subjectivities," Eisenman offers an example from Nigeria where daughters can be turned into sons and women can take other women as their wives.

Am I quibbling over semantics when I argue that we are still left with dimorphic and dualistic terms? There is no third, fourth, or multiple sex or gender in his examples; there are only two sexes and two genders—just a bit of traveling between them. Eisenman would counter, however, that certain

dualisms can imply a liminal third term (p. 130). Describing the painting *The Day of the God*, 1894, he suggests that Gauguin's representation of water functions as a "third term of representation between material and spiritual realms," just as the *mahu* provides a third term between feminine/female and masculine/male roles (p. 133). Yet Eisenman still makes no attempt to test the correspondence between the two English terms, transvestite and "third-sex figure," and the Maohi terms *taata vahine* and *mahu*. He even goes so far as claiming that the *mahu* cannot be considered an institution because "there are no hard and fast rules of comportment, behavior or function, and there can be little doubt that the forms and patterns of Tahitian sexual identity and behavior have changed over time" (p. 106).

Without reexamining his definition of what constitutes an institution—is the family, then, no longer one?—and without resolving his definition of a *mahu*, Eisenman introduces two more contemporary Maohi terms, *raerae* and *pitae*. A *raerae* is a Maohi transvestite/"third-sex figure"/*taata vahine/mahu* who works as a prostitute, while a *pitae* is a Western-style/*popa'a*/white homosexual (p. 107). The *raerae* and *pitae*, however, appear to have little theoretical or historical relevance to his thesis, and only add to the gratuitous and exhibitionist character of his work.

Eisenman goes on to hastily assert in a parenthetical statement that Gauguin had tendencies that were considered "*mahu-ish*" by Tahitians: "craft-work was generally considered feminine" (p. 112). Eisenman does not pause to ponder how Tahitians understood Gauguin's work as a sculptor, which was, and still is, considered a purely masculine privilege in Polynesia. It is Eisenman's conjecture that Gauguin was excluded from the world of men, and that the world of women, children, and *mahu* was the only one to which he was allowed access. To make his argument that Gauguin was seen as a "third-sex figure," Eisenman confidently claims that women and children do not gossip with men—if they had seen him as a man, they would not have gossiped with him.

What Eurocentric logic is this? Are or were gender relations in the Pacific, and especially in Polynesia, ever so rigid? It would seem highly unlikely that the majority of Polynesian men would want to cut themselves off from "the coconut wireless." Eisenman is not very specific about the possible inhabitants of this world of women, children, and *mahu* to which Gauguin may have been given access. He gives us no evidence at all that Gauguin did in fact spend time with *mahu*; all we have is Gauguin's confession of a delirious erotic fantasy about a young man (pp. 113–114).

Teha'amana, Gauguin's first Tahitian concubine, is the most substantive character we have, and even then, Eisenman alludes only vaguely to "her complex family origins" (p. 70). Teha'amana's liminality is what should be of

interest here, not Gauguin's, but Eisenman bypasses the opportunity to explore those "complex family origins." I believe that rather than gender liminality being the cause of Gauguin's marginalization in Tahiti, it was more simply his abrasive behavior and cultural incompetence (in both French colonial and Tahitian worlds). So maybe Gauguin's hair really was not the issue, but calling the book "Gauguin's Hair" would have more accurately captured the fetishistic fervor of the artist and some of his fans.

Gauguin's questionable gender liminality, however, is not the sole point of Eisenman's book: "From the moment Paul Gauguin set foot on Polynesian soil on 12 June 1891, a tangled colonial dance was begun" (p. 27). "Gauguin's art, like his thought . . . enacted a colonial two-step. . . . (E)very aesthetic and political breakthrough was followed by a setback" (p. 204). This book, then, might have been better titled "Gauguin's Two-Step." In his attempt at hybridizing anthropology and art history, Eisenman has tried to be as diplomatic and fair yet accurate as possible in describing the intentions, actions, and reputations of an artist who moved "peripatetically" (this term and its conjugates appear regularly in the text) across centuries, cultures, and ideologies. Eisenman's work practically enacts a tangled dance of its own—necessarily, almost, but unsatisfactorily. I think this is a problem for much writing on hybridity and liminality: we often fall victim to the tangled contents of our objects of study. Hybridity breeds hybridity, messiness breeds messiness; but must it be so?

Part of the problem in this case is that if Gauguin was enacting a two-step, Eisenman is trying to accompany him with a waltz. By this I mean that Eisenman is not only trying to keep up with Gauguin's peripateticism, but he is insisting on including an additional "step"—to pay homage to the native or indigenous factor. The result is an awkward (and often uncited) exhibitionism of native information (for examples, pp. 66, 60–70, 111, 112, 203) and an embarrassingly gratuitous tokenism of native informants (for examples, pp. 108, 124, 204–205). So *Gauguin's Skirt* seems to have been misnamed. The title, I believe, is intended to signify Gauguin's gender liminality; the specific deployment of the "skirt" in the title, I am guessing, is also an allusion to the author's thesis that Gauguin was not only seeking an authentic primitivism (signified by the skirt), but was engaging in a "critical" primitivism of his own.

Eisenman traces the genealogy of Gauguin's primitivism to the general milieu of exoticism in nineteenth-century Europe. Here, Eisenman is at his most incisive, helpfully elucidating some of the features of this powerful ideological framework: he describes exoticism as a "preference for difference combined with more or less willful ignorance of historical and cultural particulars" (p. 29) and goes on to elaborate how it was, "for Gauguin as for many others, an elaborate rhetoric of dreams, forgetfulness and withdrawal

from modernity” (p. 36). Reasonably enough, European primitivists found a convenient object in their own rural “others,” and Gauguin’s Breton period provides interesting fodder for reflection.

“I like Brittany,” Gauguin wrote during his second visit to the region in 1888, “it is savage and primitive. The flat sound of my wooden clogs on the cobblestones, deep, hollow and powerful, is the note I seek in my paintings.” . . . Gauguin sought to marry his increasingly anti-empiricist and anti-naturalist art to a culture that, he believed, was equally resistant to the onward rush of positivist thought and material progress. (P. 33)

What if Gauguin had stayed in Brittany? Would it, like Tahiti, be the ultimate exotic destination today? But in the logic of exoticism, Gauguin could not have stayed in Brittany, “for the more one is immersed in the exotic, the more one discovers sameness, and the more one seeks ever greater difference” (p. 38).

Hence, Tahiti (and later the Marquesas) and what Eisenman describes as Gauguin’s eventual intellectual progression from racist exoticism to “a dialectical understanding of race and exploitation” (p. 78). “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). How could primitivism do more good in the colonies than in Europe? Primitivism, Eisenman seems to believe, manages to avoid the ahistoricism of exoticism and misanthropy of racism. The etymology of the word “primitive” is innocent, and from its earliest usage it simply referred to that which was “first, originative and basic.” Primitivism, thus, is a “quest for knowledge of the primitive—of the pre-civilized, of otherness, of that which is basic, original and essential to humans, of what has been lost and what gained in the creation of civilization.” It has only been in the past half-century, Eisenman confidently asserts, that the term has been used pejoratively (pp. 78–79).

Eisenman’s use of chronology here is misleading, however, because he uses the “dialectic understanding of race and exploitation,” which he admits Gauguin only achieved shortly before his death, to introduce the notion of a critical primitivism, as if the latter was the natural parent of the former. The question remains, how could primitivism do more good in the colonies than in Europe? And we find our answer in Gauguin’s (however erratic and self-contradictory) anticlerical and anticolonial activism in Tahiti and the Marquesas. It is not so much the facts of Gauguin’s life but Eisenman’s analysis that is problematic, then.

One of the historical facts that Eisenman brings up is that the French Communards of 1871 were deported to New Caledonia. How does knowing this help us rethink (in his terms) the relationship between “critical primitivists” and actual “primitives”? Eisenman says, “There [in New Caledonia] the European communists would receive their chastisement from the true primitive communists” (p. 84). This deft rhetorical twist conceals an appallingly irresponsible distortion or ignorance of the historical record (shades of Eisenman the exoticist), for it was the “true primitive communists” (the Kanaks) in New Caledonia who received brutal “chastisement” from the European communists, and not the other way around (Tjibaou 1996; Spencer, Ward, and Connell 1988; Ounei 1985).

With this initial confusion of the historical relationship between “critical primitivists” and actual “primitives,” Eisenman leaps into present-day fin-de-siècle Tahiti with more troubling interpretations:

In Tahiti, the very same primitivism that functions to attract tourists is also used to foster Maohi solidarity and to stimulate resistance to French colonial domination. Pareus, outrigger canoe races, native dance competitions, tattoos and pagan ceremonies at rebuilt maraes . . . are all primitivisms designed to appeal to *popa'a* sensibilities; they are at the same time, however, expressions of Maohi pride and anti-colonial commitment. (Pp. 202–203)

Although Eisenman is probably well-intentioned, his overwhelming desire to affirm indigenous culture leads him to remarkably uncritical theoretical practices and conclusions. For one thing, he collapses *pareu*, outrigger canoe races, native dance competitions, tattoos, and pagan ceremonies at rebuilt *marae* (absence of the “s” as a *popa'a* signifier of the plural is intentional here) as if they were a single phenomenon without differing histories of invention, survival, or revival. Eisenman also naively glosses these phenomena as “primitivisms designed to appeal to *popa'a* sensibilities; they are at the same time, however, expressions of Maohi pride and anti-colonial commitment.”

We are left to ask, which *popa'a* sensibilities? French colonial, French radical, Christian, secular, demi, tourist, Anglophile? And then, which particular primitivisms go with which sensibilities? And is there no possibility that any of these phenomena (*pareu*, outrigger canoe races, native dance competitions, tattoos, and pagan ceremonies at rebuilt *marae*) was not designed to appeal to *popa'a* sensibilities? Are we able to transcend the contradiction between being designed to appeal to *popa'a* sensibilities and being expressions of Maohi pride and anticolonial commitment? Isn't it a tad too

romantic to think of *all* of these “primitivisms” as expressions of Maohi pride and anticolonial commitment? Aren’t some of them simply trendy—expressions of either Yuppie or New Age culture in Oceania? Hollow signifiers of difference? This is not to say that there are no authentic expressions of Maohi pride and anticolonial commitment. But just because you observe a native wearing a *pareu*, paddling with a canoe club, performing in a dance group, sporting a tattoo, or worshiping at a rebuilt *marae*, one cannot presume that you understand their political or cultural standpoints.

Like Pomare, we need to reproduce and transform “Gauguin’s manifesto”: “Who are you? Where do you come from? Where is your family? Where is your land? What is your future?” These are the questions we ask each other all the time here in Tahiti” (p. 205). *Unlike* Eisenman we will not mistake these questions for “specifically European primitivist questions.” These are *our* questions. *Our* questions. Remember that. Always remember that.

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