

Response: STEPHEN F. EISENMAN
NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

(Anti) Imperial Primitivist: Paul Gauguin in Oceania

By a remarkable process, the arts of subjugated backward peoples, discovered by Europeans in conquering the world, became aesthetic norms to those who renounced it. The imperialist expansion was accompanied at home by a profound cultural pessimism in which the arts of the savage victims were elevated above the traditions of Europe. The colonies became places to flee to as well as to exploit.

—Meyer Schapiro, “The Nature of Abstract Art,” 1937

Introduction—Primitivism and Modern Art

The relationship between modern and so-called primitive art has been a subject of artistic and critical interest for more than a hundred years. Cubists and Expressionists at the beginning of the century saw in the traditional material cultures of Africa and Oceania the forcefulness, directness, and naïveté they were seeking in their own paintings and sculptures. They emulated the styles and materials of indigenous art and sometimes described themselves as savage and instinctual in their own creative processes and procedures. Conservative critics in Europe and the Americas—especially those attached to court, or state-sponsored schools or academies—similarly saw affinities between primitive and modern artists; to them, however, this was evidence of the delirium, degeneracy, or atavism of the latter.

Primitivism was thus an ideological weapon with which progressive and reactionary European and American cultural forces fought to gain legitimacy or to determine the pace and trajectory of cultural modernization. The celebration or denigration of primitive art was often a gauge of a group or sub-culture's position on other issues, such as women's suffrage, the social question, and imperialism. Yet in the course of these ideological and cultural struggles, the impact upon tribal or colonial peoples of metropolitan artistic appropriation was rarely considered. Indeed, the sympathetic observation and imitation of indigenous arts was accompanied, in most cases, by a studious avoidance of the original values, meanings, and contexts of the native works, thereby easing the course of Eurocentrism and imperialism. The instances in which avant-garde artists actually involved themselves in anticolonial struggles, traveled to indigenous communities, or engaged themselves in serious and sustained research concerning native cultures were very few, though these did occur.

Probably the first dialectical analysis of the relation between modern and primitive art is found in the 1937 essay by Meyer Schapiro quoted above. Though Picasso, Matisse, Kirschner, and their contemporaries celebrated, collected, and imitated pre-modern African and Oceanic art, Schapiro observed, they nevertheless tended to devalue its intellectual and historical complexity. In addition, he writes, these artists were largely indifferent “to just those material conditions which were brutally destroying the primitive peoples or converting them into submissive, cultureless slaves.”¹ We are more aware today that the history of colonialism has been one of active cultural and political resistance, not passive submission to European power, but Schapiro's acknowledgment of modernist complicity in imperialism was extremely bold in its day. In subsequent decades, it spurred considerable self-

examination among scholars and artists in New York—Schapiro's base of operation—and elsewhere.

At about the same time that Schapiro was exploring the significance of primitivism for the development of modern art, the Surrealist poet and impresario Andre Breton was undertaking his own, more sustained and engaged interrogation of the matter. In 1931 he decried the alliance between modernization and imperialism represented by the *Exposition coloniale internationale à Paris* and helped organize a Surrealist "Anti-Imperialist-Exposition."² The Surrealist counter-*Exposition* juxtaposed photos of notoriously brutal French colonial officers and exploited African railway workers in order to undermine the anodyne *negrophilie* that colored the emerging alliance of modernity and fashion. Also included were recordings of Polynesian songs and, in mockery of the display of "primitive fetishes" at the official fair, some "European fetishes."

The exhibition, not surprisingly, was derided by visitors (the few who attended), but Breton and his colleagues were not deterred from their principled antagonism to French imperialism. In 1945, at the dawn of the epoch of decolonization, Breton stated that the Surrealists stood shoulder to shoulder with "peoples of color." He added: "First because it has sided with them against all forms of imperialism and white brigandage . . . and secondly because of the profound affinities between surrealism and 'primitive' thought."³

Breton's words are more critical than they might at first appear. The poet generally rejected Henri Levy-Bruhl's popular notion of a pre-logical primitive mind in favor of insistence on the intellectual parity of so-called primitives and moderns. This point of view was reinforced by close acquaintance with the views of his longtime friend Claude Lévi-Strauss. "Savage thought," Lévi-Strauss stated in Surrealist fashion in 1961, is just like modern, abstract and scientific thought, it "proceeds through understanding, not affectivity, with the aid of distinctions and oppositions, not by confusion and participation." Lévi-Strauss contrasted the creativity and suppleness of indigenous scientific thought with the narrow classificatory system of modern Western society: Its "supremely concrete . . . theory of the sensible order provided the basis of the arts of civilization (agriculture, animal husbandry, pottery, weaving, conservation and preparation of food, etc.) . . . and continues to provide for our basic needs by these means."⁴ The political significance of this posture for Breton and like-minded artists and poets was thus clear: it meant consistent support for indigenous peoples and participation in antiracist and anti-colonial struggles in France, the Caribbean, Algeria, Vietnam, and elsewhere. "Freedom," Breton wrote in honor of Ho Chi Minh in 1947, "is a Vietnamese Word."⁵

During the 1950s the pace of writing that concerned modernism, primitivism, and imperialism slowed, though a number of artists from among the European and American avant-gardes—the Abstract Expressionists, *l'Art Brut*, and CoBrA for example—took aggressively internationalist approaches to art making and ostentatiously emulated indigenous (less often now termed “primitive”) art styles from the Americas, Africa, and Oceania. In addition, the great U.S. poet Charles Olson, along with others associated with the arts collective at Black Mountain College, explicitly rejected the prevailing nationalism and ethnocentrism of the age. Olson’s literary pantheon, for example, included the Popul Vuh and works by Rimbaud, Neruda, and Mao. The music of Cage and the combine-paintings of Rauschenberg, similarly nurtured at Black Mountain, also pointed beyond U.S. and European sources; these artists’ emphases on process and multiplicity were explicitly derived from both Native American and Buddhist forms. For them, as for a new generation of art historians, indigenous artworks, like modern ones, were understood to have an aesthetic, not simply a ritual or religious function; each was therefore available for the same kinds of sustained formal appreciation and susceptible to the same kinds of critical analyses.⁶ There was also often a political component to this aesthetic cosmopolitanism: recognition of the value of indigenous art and cultures during these years seemed inevitably to lead to support for anticolonial struggles.

Since the 1960s, there have been vastly more efforts in the United States and Europe at constructing genuinely international works of art and literature, and dozens of studies—in several disciplines—devoted to exploring the nature and history of modern Western borrowings from the art of small-scale societies, indigenous communities, tribes, conquered civilizations, and colonial cultures. In the 1970s, a revival of interest in the evolutionary and materialist writings of Lewis Henry Morgan and Frederick Engels—notably by the anthropologists Eleanor Burke Leacock, Richard Lee, and Stanley Diamond—gave renewed legitimacy to the word “primitive.” From a sometimes crude cliché, even racist slogan or epithet, “primitive” was changed into a term with both sociological specificity and political saliency.

An understanding of past or present primitives—of humans living in circumstances that approached those that prevailed during a historical stage of primitive communism—helped native peoples and their supporters in the present recognize and articulate the inhumanity and ecological destructiveness of capitalist civilization. “Primitives were a complex lot,” writes the Native American scholar and activist John Mohawk. “Within that complexity lies a whole realm of consciousness which modern society finds unacceptable, indeed dangerous.”⁷

I shall not attempt to review here the vast recent literature on primi-

tivism and modern art, except to note two things: first, that much of it has overlooked precisely the redefinition of the terms “primitive” and “primitivism” effected by Schapiro, Surrealism, Lévi-Strauss, and evolutionary Marxism; and second, that some of the most impassioned, if not always cogent, reevaluations of the issue have arisen from considerations of the life and art of Paul Gauguin. Indeed, part of my ambition in writing *Gauguin’s Skirt* was to situate the French artist in precisely the intellectual and artistic lineage sketched out above.

I am thus naturally disappointed that my critics—Childs, Jolly, and Teaiwa—have failed to reckon with this cultural and political history. If they were to do so (and my little book can be their guide), they would discover that Gauguin’s ostentatious embrace of sexual and racial hybridity or *metissage* reveals him to have been an anti-imperialist primitivist, albeit one who was sometimes hypocritical and often ineffective. Nevertheless, his political impact—especially on the Marquesas at the very end of his life—was not insignificant, and it does not surprise me that some Maohi people today invoke his name when they want to describe political actions or modes of life that stand outside colonial law or bourgeois convention. For a white man to disavow his race privilege or for an ostensibly heterosexual man to avow same-sex desire was then—and remains today—an act of political courage that merits attention.

Gauguin Myths

Until the 1980s, interpretations of Paul Gauguin’s life and work were often badly disfigured by Eurocentrism and misogyny. In the accounts of Robert Rey in the 1920s, John Rewald in the 1940s, and Wayne Andersen in the 1960s—to mention just three out of dozens—Gauguin was described as a virile painter-hero, who was courageous in his willingness to abandon a decadent civilization and prophetic in his recognition of the international salience of modernism.⁸ Questions about his possible complicity with colonialism were simply never asked in these books and articles, and his sexual politics was similarly ignored.

Yet much of the recent scholarship devoted to Gauguin—the product of a generation of writers schooled in feminism and postcolonial theory—is almost equally flawed, though it begins from very different premises. In their basic outlines the arguments of Griselda Pollock, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Hal Foster, and Nancy Perloff are compelling.⁹ They generally describe Gauguin’s sojourn to Polynesia not as an heroic escape from European bondage, but as a purposive act of imperial piracy. Armed with bank draft, paintbrush, and syphilis, Gauguin pretended an attachment to indigenous Tahiti but re-

mained deeply wedded to the values of his own sex, class, nationality, and race. His superior airs and independent means, not to mention his poor language skills, isolated him from native Polynesians. While they were occupied with subsistence fishing, gardening, and plantation labor, Gauguin busied himself gossiping, kibitzing, carousing, and painting. The particular commodities he produced—oil paintings, drawings, wood carvings, block prints—were fancy export goods as valuable as vanilla and copra but obtained with much less visible effort. Indeed, what distinguished Gauguin from other colonials, these authors basically stated, was only the greater intensity and brazenness of his greed, libertinism, drunkenness, deceit, and racism.¹⁰

Gauguin's life and art, from this point of view, played an important role not just in the construction of modernism, but in the manufacture of a colonial ideology of primitivism that treats Tahiti as nothing more than a sun-filled land of beaches and bikinis, the erotic template for a white, masculinist dream of *far niente*.¹¹ Without Gauguin, it is implicitly argued, there would be less sexism in modern art and popular culture; without him, colonialism would have one less pillar of support; without him—who knows—there might even have been no Moruroa, poisoned site of three decades of French nuclear weapons tests.¹²

The new Gauguin paradigm, however—represented here by Childs, Jolly, and Teaiwa—resembles in one key respect the very colonial mythology it seeks to counter. Like many fin-de-siècle and later European travel writers, government administrators, ethnologists, and art historians, these recent scholars implicitly suggest the existence of timeless and ineradicable cultural differences between whites and Pacific peoples, failing to recognize that Tahitians (like everyone else) are constantly engaged in the work of constructing identity out of the raw materials of their own and others' heritages. To ask when an emigrant becomes a native is not, as Teresia Teaiwa states, an "inane and insulting" question, but one that is asked and provisionally answered daily by native Tahitians whose parents and grandparents are from France, China, the United States, and Britain, as well as from Tahiti, Moorea, Huahine, Bora Bora, Fiji, the Tuamotus, and Tonga.

Many of the Tahitians I met during my visit in 1995—including members of two of the leading indigenist and pro-independence parties, Pomare (named after the last royal family) and Tavini Huiraatira No Te Ao Maohi (Polynesian Liberation Front)—had quite complex ancestries; some were clearly first-generation native. In fact, the question of how one became (and stayed) a Maohi fascinated me during my visit. When I asked one highly respected figure in the Tavini party—a prosperous, middle-aged Maohi man of obviously Chinese heritage—if I could ever become a Maohi, he at first laughed at me. I had only been on the island a couple of weeks, and my

speech, clothes, and manner marked me at once as a bourgeois American. But after a few minutes of discussion, he answered my question seriously, saying that if I lived among the Maohi for a long time I might become one of them. There would obviously be many more prerequisites for my Maohi ethnogenesis than just the passage of sufficient time, but the malleability of identity and the plurality of culture seems to be a staple of much Oceanic thought and practice.¹³

Fin-de-siècle Tahiti was scarcely less marked by immigration, shifting identity, and cultural *metisage*, as indicated by the number of Salmons, Henrys, Branders, Jameses, and Stevensons in the last royal household. Nineteenth-century Tahitians had no prohibitions against racial exogamy—nor a concept of race for that matter. Indeed, it was French settler society, not the indigenously population, that was terrified by the specter of racial mixing and by what they saw as the inevitable decadence or degeneracy that would result. It was precisely Gauguin's penchant for hybridity that caused greatest political anxiety among secular and religious authorities in Tahiti and the Marquesas and led to the artist's fatal ostracism from settler society. In the end, Gauguin was deemed to have "gone native" and therefore to have become a traitor to his country, his sex, and his race.

Going Native

It is important to remember that "going native" in the late nineteenth century did not have the antic and anachronistic connotations it has today; it was not like retiring to Belize or living off the grid. To "go native" or to become a racial hybrid (in French, *encanaqué*) had extremely pejorative connotations among whites.¹⁴ It meant one had undergone both a physical and moral transformation and degeneration and become a kind of race traitor. The closest English equivalent to calling someone *encanaqué* is the brutal American epithet "nigger lover" with all its associations of sexual and racial depravity and disloyalty.

Robert Louis Stevenson, a traveler to Tahiti in 1888 and a resident of Samoa from 1890 until his death two years later, described white men's fears of becoming Kanakaized in his *South Seas Tales*. In "The Beach of Falesa" (1892) the protagonist, a rough and ready trader named John Wiltshire, is always at great pains to distinguish himself as a white from the lowly Kanakas. He says of the missionaries on the island: "I didn't like the lot, no trader does; they look down on us, and make no concealment; and besides, they're partly Kanakaized, and suck up with natives instead of other white men like ourselves."¹⁵ A little later Wiltshire (who is married to a native woman named Uma) says to the minister Mr. Tarleton: "I'm no missionary, nor missionary

lover; I'm no Kanaka, nor favorer of Kanakas—I'm just a trader; I'm just a common, low, Goddamned white man and British subject, the sort you would like to wipe your boots on." Wiltshire may be poor, dirty, and ignorant, he says, but at least he is white and British! At all costs he wishes to evade the sobriquet by which he is certainly known to the settler elites: someone who is Kanakaized or *encanaqué*.

The danger of becoming Kanakaized is also the central theme in W. Somerset Maugham's famous novel *The Moon and Sixpence*, published in 1919 and loosely based upon the life of Gauguin. The protagonist, an artist named Charles Strickland, moves from London to Paris to Tahiti, marries a native woman called Ata (the name means "laugh") and establishes a household in a remote corner of a tropical forest. There the two live in promiscuity and squalor until the artist dies of leprosy. In the novel, Strickland's every artwork is touched by his disease, that is, his morbid embrace of the primitive, even a simple still life of a bowl of fruit. Here is how the painting—probably inspired by one of Gauguin's late Tahitian still lifes, like *Still Life with Sunflowers and Mangos*, c. 1901—is described by the narrator of Maugham's novel:

There were sombre blues, opaque like a delicately carved bowl in lapis lazuli, and yet with a quivering lustre that suggested the palpitation of mysterious life; there were purples, horrible like raw and putrid flesh, and yet with a glowing sensual passion that called up vague memories of the Roman empire of Heliogabalus. . . . It was enchanted fruit, to taste which might open the gateway to God knows what secrets of the soul and to mysterious palaces of the imagination. They were sullen with unawaited dangers, and to eat them might turn a man into a beast or a god. All that was healthy and natural, all that clung to happy relationships and the simple joys of simple men, shrunk from them in dismay; and yet a fearful attraction was in them, and, like the fruit on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, they were terrible with the possibilities of the Unknown.¹⁶

Here we see the sexist myth of Gauguin in the making. In Maugham's novel, Strickland proudly violates the laws of nature by marrying a Kanaka woman, living in the primeval forest, eating the native food, wearing *pareus*, walking barefoot, and having hybrid children (one dies, the other goes off and becomes a seaman, a homeless wanderer). He has gone native, polluted his very flesh and blood, and so must die from his transgression. By Maugham's day the terrors concerning degeneration that haunted fin-de-siècle

writers like Max Nordau and Gustave Le Bon had begun to subside and could now more easily become the stuff of pulp fiction. In Gauguin's day, however, degeneracy was perceived to be a threat to the very existence of the native population and therefore to the prosperity and stability of the colonial order itself.¹⁷

Degeneracy and Depopulation

There is abundant evidence for the anxiety about depopulation in the colonial record for the years spanning Gauguin's stay in Polynesia. Secular and religious authorities in Papeete and Paris were deeply concerned about indigenous depopulation and the viability of the plantation economy. In 1902 Governor Edouard Petit in Tahiti sent a communiqué to the minister of colonies in Paris, stating that he was witnessing in the Marquesas "the end of a race."¹⁸ Villages that once had five to six hundred inhabitants now had between twenty-five and fifty. During the previous year there were just fifty-four births compared with one hundred-eighty deaths, and little could be done to arrest the decline. It was feared a similar demographic collapse was occurring elsewhere in Polynesia. By 1906 the indigenous population of Tahiti was less than seven thousand and that of the Marquesas less than three thousand according to government records. The decline was attributed to numerous causes including venereal disease, alcoholism, consumption, leprosy, flu, and elephantiasis. One factor, however, predominated in fin-de-siècle accounts: indigenous decadence and moral corruption, abetted by race mixing. Governor Gallet wrote to the Ministry of the Marine and Colonies in Paris in 1898 that the natives of the Marquesas were "primitive and perverted beings" who entirely lacked family structure.¹⁹

The theme of moral laxity and sexual degeneracy is found in official tracts and popular narratives alike. In the central marketplace in Tahiti, wrote Edward Reeves in 1898 in *Brown Men and Women*, "it is a matter of evident congratulations when a girl [of 16] goes off with a Frenchman; all the old ladies [in the marketplace] squatting before the stock of nicknacks, and everyone else—man, woman and child—look pleased at the increase of business."²⁰ In a book titled *In the Strange South Seas*, Beatrice Grimshaw wrote that women in Polynesia live only for luxury, adopting "almost as a national profession, a mode of life to which the conventionalities forbid me to give a name."²¹ In his travel narrative *Chez les Maoris*, Levacon writes: "What we would call restraint or decency in our countries, is something completely unknown to the natives down below. There prostitution has attained the status of an institution, or better still, it has become a religion."²² These texts and dozens more like them should alert us to the ideological and political

significance of hybridity, *metisage*, mixing, and decadence in fin-de-siècle Oceania.

Gauguin as Sex and Race Traitor

One of the central theses of my book was that much to the consternation of colonial authorities, Gauguin positively trumpeted his own immorality and degeneracy, that is, his embrace of multiple and often conflicting identities of sex and race. The story I told began in France: just prior to his departure for Tahiti in the summer of 1891, Gauguin was pilloried on the front page of *Le Figaro* for being sexually perverse, for being what would today be called “queer”; the critic Fouquier described him as belonging (along with Verlaine) to a circle of “*insexuels*” and “*ephebes*” “who want nothing but to retard the French nation.”²³

In Papeete just a few weeks later, Gauguin was similarly perceived as sexually deviant: native people teased and taunted him with calls of “*taata vahine*” (man-woman) on account of his long hair, peculiar leather-fringed costume (derived from the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show), and simply his general ostentation. He seems to have flirted with every woman he saw but also enjoyed the intimate company of much younger men or boys, including the Frenchman Jenot and the Maohi Totefa. Back in Paris and Brittany in 1894, he regularly extolled the beauty and seductiveness of the young men he had known in Tahiti. It was during that same brief return from exile that he was attacked and badly injured on the docks at Concarneau by a pair of rough seamen. In the existing Gauguin literature the reason for the beating remains a mystery, but to me it looks like a hate crime: he was dressed in his Persian cap, bejeweled blue cape, and white gloves, and he carried a hand-chased silver-knobbed cane. He was accompanied by his black-skinned Javanese lover Anna and their pet monkey.

I do not think (and never stated in *Gauguin's Skirt*) that local people in Tahiti or the Marquesas thought him a *mahu*, but they likely detected in him—as whites did in France and as the native women and children at the Papeete harbor did—certain *mahu*-ish tendencies. (All the recent Oceanic and cross-cultural evidence indicates that Elizabeth Childs, citing Robert Levy,²⁴ is wrong to argue that “either one is a *mahu* or one is not.” The fact that some men gradually change from being *mahus* to being heterosexual husbands, for instance, indicates that an intermediate status exists.) Admittedly, Gauguin did not wear women’s clothes, but his frequent assumption of the *pareu* in place of *popa’a* suits would have feminized him in the eyes of whites and thereby diminished his masculine, white prerogative among natives.

Margaret Jolly correctly notes that art and craftwork do not fall into the category of women's labor, but then neither does painting or drawing on paper and coarse linen fall clearly within the province of men. The very absence of clear gender signifiers in the mixed labor Gauguin performed during his more than ten years in the Pacific—he was a journalist, bureaucrat, gardener, and day laborer in addition to an artist—is precisely the point that needs to be stressed. Just as significantly, Gauguin's own interest in mixed or hybrid sexualities is vividly apparent in his writings and paintings. He spoke of himself as a "young girl" in some notes and letters, assumed a female guise while working as a journalist in Tahiti, and wrote at length about androgyny. In several Tahitian pictures, he misrepresents the town of Paea where he lived as Paia (*pa'i'a*, a term that, as Levy states, is used to describe lesbian sex)²⁵ and later puts the word into the mouth of young Totefa.

In Gauguin's most important picture from his Brittany period, *Vision after the Sermon* (1888), he represented himself as a woman. Moreover, the large, central figure in arguably Gauguin's most important work—*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897)—is a feminine boy, or a masculine girl, or possibly a *mahu*. The seductive and cross-dressed figures in *Marquesan Man in a Red Cape* (1902) and *Bathers* (1902) are almost certainly *mahus*, as a number of art historians including Teilhet-Fisk have noted. The inability of Childs, Jolly, and Teaiwa to accept these obvious facts indicates that queer theorists and historians have not made as many inroads in Pacific studies as we might think.

In Tahiti and the Marquesas, Gauguin's class and racial position, like his sexual status, was unlike that of any other settler. Let us just say he was aggressively hybrid. He painted, drew, cast pots, and carved blocks of wood but was not regularly in the employ of any colonial official or big planter. Though he repeatedly tried to gain entry into colonial and military high society, he just as regularly insulted its rituals, customs, and habits. Though he acted as if he was much above the station of mere bureaucrats, tradesmen, or laborers, he generally lived no better than they and suffered periods of real economic hardship. In the Marquesas, he dressed and drank orange wine like a native and became *tayo* (entered into an indigenous name-exchange relationship) with his neighbor Tioka. He antagonized gendarmes and Catholic church officials and worked hard to thwart government agents in their attempts to order and police native behavior. He also made special efforts to prevent the internment of native children. That effort is especially salient here, since the colonial policy was specifically crafted to combat what was considered native sexual license, racial mixing, and degeneration.

In an effort to preserve the race and buttress the economic viability of the colony, officials in Tahiti and the Marquesas established an archipelago

of public and private schools in the 1880s. The purpose of the schools, as the native people well knew, was not liberal education but the segregation of children from the moral viciousness of their families and from Kanakaized whites. "It is not necessary at this time to give the children a proper education, but simply to save them, during their early years, from debauchery and the rampant destruction of morals" that occurs in the company of their families, wrote Admiral Bergen in a letter from 1880 first proposing the establishment of religious and secular schools.²⁶

Less than two decades later, a system of schools was established nearly everywhere in Polynesia. Instruction generally included morals and hygiene, as well as French language, history and geography, natural science, physics, math, agriculture, drawing, music, gymnastics, and manual arts and crafts.²⁷ In Tahiti children from ages six to fourteen were required to attend secular school from 8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. each day. In the Marquesas exceptionally, the schools were all run by the Catholic church and children were required to board, the better to protect them from what Colonial Inspector 1st Class Andre Salles called "indigenous institutions."²⁸

Not surprisingly, this policy of forced assimilation—which parallels contemporaneous practices of indigenous internment in the United States, Australia, and elsewhere—led to widespread animosity and resistance. A note written by a gendarme named Picquenot to Salles summarizes the situation. The native people are "absolutely fixed" in their opposition to these schools, he wrote, but we must nevertheless assert our "moral authority" and "isolate [children] as long as possible from their families, and from the savage manners that rules them." He continued, "It will probably suffice to publicly oppose the concerted campaign of Goguin [*sic*], and the others] against the schools."²⁹

Though Paul Gauguin was clearly allied with native people in opposition to the colonial policy of forced assimilation, he was not immune to the colonial rhetoric of degeneration. He was in fact, scandalously, its very apostle. Intimate with the poets called the "*maudits*," member of the larger class of artists and writers called "*les decadents*," Gauguin read with avidity the works of Poe and Huysmans and embraced degeneracy as a weapon with which to attack chauvinism, militarism, and anti-Semitism, what he called: "breeches morality, religious morality, patriotic morality, the morality of the soldier, of the gendarme. . . . The duty of exercising one's function, the military code, Dreyfusard or Non-Dreyfusard. The morality of Drumont [the anti-Semite], or Deroulede [the extreme nationalist]. The morality of public education, of the censorship. Aesthetic morality. . . ." In Tahiti and especially in the Marquesas, Gauguin felt himself to be a decadent among the decadents. He painted the fabled Tahitian Epicurians—the notorious, aristocratic Areois class—several times, as in *Te Aa No Areois* (1892) and *Te Arii Vahine* (1896),

and praised their erotic and cannibal heritage in his diary/novel *Noa Noa* and other texts.

In the spring and summer of 1902, less than a year after his arrival in the Marquesas, Gauguin's rebellious violation of sexual and racial norms became transformed into actual politics. Although in poor health, he undertook to assist Marquesan men and women in their efforts to resist the internment of native children in convent schools. "Monsieur Gauguin," wrote Special Corporal Charpillat in a secret communiqué to the colonial administrator in Papeete, "despite the difficulty he experiences walking, has not hesitated to go by himself to the beach in order to try to convince the natives to remove their children [from the convent boarding schools] and argue that the law cannot oblige parents to send them." Charpillat continued:

On Wednesday, August 20, some indigenes came to find me—to be precise the ones named Tenefitu and Makahooni from the valley of Vaitahu—and said: "Why did the gendarme of Vaitahu say to us that we must bring our children to school if it is not the law? Gauguin came to us on the beach and said we could take them back home." All I could do was tell them that the Governor, during his recent visit, said the population had to send their children away to school. Despite this, the indigenes have taken back their children. . . . Thus the schools are empty.³⁰

A year later, the situation remained grave. The efforts of the gendarmes to enforce school attendance, writes Charpillat, have largely failed, with the result being that

Our authority has been undermined. M. Gauguin makes public speeches . . . against the schools. And the parents hold back their children. Is it because of love? Can love, even maternal love, exist in a place where children are given away to others at the very moment of their birth? It is more like brutishness [than love] since the parents make use of their girls at an early age. These are the habits that Gauguin and his consorts favor.³¹

Indeed, Gauguin sought to encourage native Marquesans in the kinship and sexual practices that Monsignor Martin and successive colonial governors believed would lead to decadence and death. In April 1903, just a few weeks before the artist's death, Colonial Inspector Salles reported to the Ministry of the Marine and Colonies in Paris:

The Marquesan natives continually indulge in drunken orgies in remote parts of the valleys. On such occasions, groups of forty-fifty persons fill the largest containers in their village with orange wine, and sometimes even use a canoe for the purpose. The men and women, completely nude, will then drink and drink, fight and copulate. The gendarmes know that it is very dangerous to arrive in the middle of such a feast. The painter Gauguin, who lives in Atuona and defends all the native vices, sees in these savage scenes no more than a simple amusement necessary to the well being of the natives.³²

In fact, Gauguin saw these orgies as more than a “simple amusement”; he saw them as acts of indigenous insolence and independence and as expressions of an emancipatory sexual and racial degeneracy. Gauguin’s very artistic project, which involved the ostentatious embrace of decadence in its many forms, encouraged him to assist the native people of the Marquesas in their successful resistance to the French colonial policy of sequestering children in Catholic boarding schools. Within a few years the policy was in fact reversed.

Conclusion

I did not intend *Gauguin’s Skirt* to be a vindication of Gauguin. In the book, and elsewhere, I discussed the artist’s many political failures and what can only be described as his frequent bad faith. He was cruel to his wife and children, showed a reckless disregard for the health of his Tahitian lovers, and was duplicitous in his dealings with church and state authorities. Gauguin was also highly deceitful—even in notes and journals largely written for himself. A more important failure, however, from the judgment of art history and anthropology was his crude representation—in words and images—of a unified or synthetic archaic ur-culture and religion combining elements from Buddhist, Tahitian, and Christian religions. The results of this crude diffusionist and evolutionist perspective are seen in such pictures as *Te Nave Nave Fenua* (1892), *Mahana No Atua* (1894), and the aforementioned *Where Do We Come From?* . . . , as well as in the artist’s unpublished treatise “The Modern Spirit and Catholicism.”

This is precisely the bad primitivism and bad universalism condemned by Meyer Schapiro in an essay from 1947 called “The Fine Arts and the Unity of Mankind”:

The assumption that there is in art an easy path to unity and an immediate insight into remote truths about the minds of distant

peoples may stand in the way of the desired unity. Conviction that rests on immediate intuitive experience is obviously dogmatic and inflexible. The belief in fixed psychological characteristics of races, the notion of humanity formed of antagonistic breeds with distinct, inherent psychological dispositions, owes more perhaps to the insights of historians and critics of art than it does to biologists or scientific students of human behavior. And the consequences of such beliefs we see in the fruits of imperialism and nationalistic policy. The perception of essential cultural and racial traits in art has done more to divide than unite mankind.³³

Gauguin often appeared to grasp at just such an easy, intuitive understanding of Maohi culture and history and to claim he had found the mythological missing link that united all world religions. Yet the remarkable thing of it is that Gauguin was a far greater artist than he was anthropologist, and the subtlety and complexity of the works belies their sometimes crude religious essentialism.

The proof of this contention lies in the artworks themselves, which I have not been able to discuss here. But I would like to make one more comment about the relation between the art and the life: Gauguin's art demanded such a life as the one he lived. It is an art that is restless, interrogative, and rebellious, and one that draws upon art historical tradition while at the same time seeking to destroy the very religious and political foundation upon which that tradition was built. It is an art too that is highly impure—in its range of vivid and dissonant colors, its attention and inattention to such things as modeling, anatomy, and perspective, its engagement and refusal of narrative and anecdote. An art such as this demands a life lived on a border or in a liminal space between different cultures, sexes, races, and traditions. Gauguin was in this sense the true painter of colonial Tahiti, and his art gives us a picture of parts of that world that would otherwise be invisible.

NOTES

1. Meyer Schapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art" (1937), reprinted in *Modern Art, 19th & 20th Centuries: Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 201.

2. Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 105–111.

3. Andre Breton, *What Is Surrealism?* ed. Frank Rosemont (New York: Pluto Press, 1978), 256.

4. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 268.

5. Breton, *What Is Surrealism?* 339.

6. See, for example, *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Carol F. Jopling (New York: Dutton, 1971).

7. John Mohawk, "In Search of Noble Ancestors," in *Dialectical Anthropology: Essays in Honor of Stanley Diamond*, ed. Christine Ward Gailey (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1992), 33.

8. Robert Rey, *Gauguin* (Paris, 1928); John Rewald, *Gauguin* (New York: Hyperion, 1938); John Rewald, *Post-Impressionism: From Van Gogh to Gauguin* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1956); Wayne Andersen, *Gauguin's Paradise Lost* (New York: Viking Press, 1971).

9. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native," *Art in America* 17 (July 1989): 119–128, 161; Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits 1888–1893: Gender and the Color of Art History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993); Peter Brooks, "Gauguin's Tahitian Body," in *Body Works: Objects of Desire in Modern Narratives* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 163–198; Hal Foster, "'Primitive' Scenes," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (Autumn 1993): 69–102; Nancy Perloff, "Gauguin's French Baggage: Decadence and Colonialism in Tahiti," in *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, ed. Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 226–229.

10. Let me very briefly highlight a few more of their specific arguments: According to Pollock, the passage from France to the South Seas was a self-conscious, and successful, marketing ploy—an "avant-garde gambit"—that drew upon a well-established tradition of artistic exoticism. Gauguin hatched a plan, connived with like-minded French dealers and patrons, exploited guileless Tahitian natives, and made racism and misogyny the sine qua non of advanced European and American art for the next two generations.

In Hal Foster's eyes, however, the late-nineteenth-century victory of white, masculine prerogative appears less complete. He argues that Gauguin's flight from France provided the artist an opportunity to reexperience the primal scene of psychoanalytic lore. In this case, however, the tableau was primitive rather than domestic, and its cathected subjects were not mother and father but a series of other structural oppositions: white and black skin, male and female, gay and straight, and nature and culture. Though Foster suggested that Gauguin's project entailed a partial "dis-identification with white, patriarchal, bourgeois society," the critic emphasized how paintings of the nude functioned as "compensatory fantasy that bespeaks a feared lack of . . . mastery" (" 'Primitive' Scenes," 76). In other words, Gauguin's paintings failed to represent the racist self-assurance of the white European male, but not for lack of trying. Indeed, the very scale and relentlessness of the artist's colonial ambition reveals the concomitant scope of the antihegemonic threat posed by the colonies. There is something at once malicious and pitiful about Foster's Gauguin; the artist attempted to ride the crest of a wave of imperialism and patriarchy, but was instead dashed on the fin-de-siècle shoals dubbed "the crisis of masculinity" (*ibid.*, 102).

11. The literature on these debates is large and growing. A good introduction is found in R. D. Anderson, *France, 1870–1914* (London, Henley, and Boston: RKP, 1977), 141–156. See also Lebovics, *True France*. On imperialism in Tahiti, see Jean-François Baré, *Tahiti, les temps et les pouvoirs: Pour une anthropologie historique du Tahiti post-européen* (Paris: Editions ORSTROM, 1987).
12. On French nuclear policy in the Pacific, see Robert Aldrich, *France and the South Pacific since 1940* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), 302–341.
13. The question is highly vexed, of course; considerable distinctions must be made between, for example, Maori and Hawaiian cultures. Cf. Marshall Sahlins, *How Natives Think, About Captain Cook for Example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 241–251. On hybridity in the contemporary Pacific, see Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) and *In Oceania* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997). Also see the many exemplary publications of Margaret Jolly, including *Family and Gender in the Pacific: Domestic Contradictions and the Colonial Impact*, ed. Margaret Jolly and Martha Macintyre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
14. Pierre-Yves Toullelan, *Tahiti Colonial* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1984).
15. Robert Louis Stevenson, *South Sea Tales*, ed. and intro. Roslyn Jolly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 35.
16. W. Somerset Maugham, *The Moon and Sixpence* (New York: Dover, 1995), 160.
17. For further references on this, see *Gauguin's Skirt*, 222 n. 27.
18. Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, SG Oc. carton 98, H39.
19. Quoted in *Gauguin's Skirt*, 167.
20. Edward Reeves, *Brown Men and Women, or, the Strange South Seas in 1895 and 1896* (London: Swan and Sonnenschein, 1898), 56.
21. Beatrice Grimshaw, *In the Strange South Seas* (London: Hutchinson, 1907), 112.
22. Toullelan, *Tahiti Colonial*, 63.
23. *Ibid.*, 97.
24. Robert I. Levy, *Tahitians: Mind and Experience in the Society Islands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 130–141.
25. *Ibid.*, 141.
26. Archives d'Outre-Mer, SG Oc. carton 98, H31.
27. Archives d'Outre-Mer, SG Oc. carton 98, H39. See also Office of the Irish Messenger, *Workers in the Vineyard: The Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny in Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands, 1844–1946* (Dublin: OIM, 1950).

28. Archives d'Outre-Mer, SG Oc. carton 64, n.p.

29. Ibid., Q.3, p. 6.

30. Quoted in *Gauguin's Skirt*, 170. It should be noted here that the Marquesas absorbed a number of ex-Communards and other radical exiles, and that Gauguin may have been thought to belong to this community. The artist was, for example, close friends with Ngyen Van Cam, who was transported to the Marquesas in 1898 from Saigon, where he had been imprisoned for sedition.

31. Archives d'Outre-Mer, SG Oc. carton 64, Q.3.

32. Quoted in *Gauguin's Skirt*, 161.

33. Meyer Schapiro, *Worldview in Painting—Art and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1999), 240–241.