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GOING NATIVE

Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism

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The massive 1988 Gauguin exhibition which debuted at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., traveled to the Art Institute of Chicago, and ended its run at the Grand Palais in Paris, is perhaps most interestingly considered as an exemplum not only of museological blockbusterism but, as well, of the construction of the (male) artist as promethean and agonistic hero. In the Parisian incarnation, the weeks before the opening witnessed Gauguin as the cover story in mass-media publications such as *Telerama* and *Figaro,* displacing more familiar cultural icons such as Princess Di or Johnny Halliday. From the moment the exhibition opened, lines routinely stretched from the entrance of the Grand Palais to the Métro station; I was told that an average of 7,000 people saw the show each day. The accompanying scholarly apparatus conformed equally to the now-familiar terms of these kinds of exhibitions: a seven-pound, 300-franc catalogue produced by a Franco-American *équipe,* brimming with facts and factoids; a three-day symposium uniting scholars from several countries; blue-chip corporate sponsorship on both sides of the Atlantic—Olivetti in France, AT&T in the States; and satellite exhibitions of both the graphic work of the Pont-Aven school and historical photographs of Polynesia. Also attendant upon the show were disputes, if not polemics, concerned with problems of dating in publications such as *The Print Collector's Newsletter,* and the reissue of numerous older Gauguin monographs.

Consistent with this discursive presentation of the artist and his work—a presentation which, for short, may be designated business as usual—the physical presentation of the exhibition and the catalogue were insistently concerned with a certain inscription of the artist. In the Grand Palais, for example, at various strategic points, the viewer was confronted with over–life–size photographic blowups of Gauguin. And departing from the overall stylistic/chronological organization of the show, the very last room was consecrated to a medley of Gauguin's self-portraits, revealing a progression (if that is the right term) from the rather louche *Autoportrait avec chapeau* (1893–94) to the lugubrious *Autoportrait près de Golgotha* (1896). In other words, there were at least two narratives proposed by this exhibition; one structured around a temporal, formal trajectory (the

From *Art in America* 77 (July 1989): 118–29.

stylistic evolution and development of the artist's work), and the other around a dramatized and heroicized presentation of the artist's life. The former narrative was produced through curatorial strategies of selection and exclusion; the latter, through the interpolation of Gauguin as a biographical subject—for example, the use of text panels chronicling his activities, his travels, his mistresses. These two narratives were unified under the mystic sign of the promethean artist; thus, fully in keeping with the exigencies of secular hagiography that characterizes mainstream, culturally dominant approaches to art, the catalogue offers us a full-page photograph of Gauguin's hand.

This shamanlike image is as good a point of entry as any other into the myth of Gauguin, and by extension, into the discourse of artistic primitivism which Gauguin is taken to exemplify. Gauguin's position is here quite central insofar as he is traditionally cast as the founding father of modernist primitivism. I am less concerned here, however, with primitivism as an aesthetic option—a stylistic choice—than with primitivism as a form of mythic speech. Further, it is one of my themes that the critical interrogation of myth is a necessary part of art-historical analysis. Myth, as Roland Barthes famously defined it, is nothing more or less than depoliticized speech—consistent with the classical definition of ideology (a falsification or mystification of actual social and economic relations). But mythic speech is not only about mystification, it is also, and more crucially, a *productive* discourse—a set of beliefs, attitudes, utterances, texts and artifacts that are themselves constitutive of social reality. Therefore, in examining mythic speech, it is necessary not only to describe its concrete manifestations, but also to carefully attend to its silences, its absences, its omissions. For what is not spoken—what is unspeakable, mystified or occulted—turns always on historical as well as psychic repressions.

Second only to the life of his equally mythologized contemporary Vincent van Gogh, Gauguin's life is the stuff of which potent cultural fantasies are created. And indeed have been. Preeminently, the myth is associated, in both the popular and the art-historical imagination, with Gauguin's ten years spent in Polynesia and—integrally linked—his assumption of the role of savage. Simultaneously, Gauguin's life is also deemed tragic and accursed. A glance through the card catalogue yields some of the following book titles: *Oviri: The Writings of a Savage; The Noble Savage: A Life of Paul Gauguin; Gauguin's Paradise Lost; La Vie passionée de Paul Gauguin; Poètes et peintres maudit; Les Maudits; Gauguin: Peintre maudit;* and—my personal favorite—*Gauguin: Sa Vie ardente et misérable.*

Even during his lifetime Gauguin was associated with the flight from, variously, bourgeois life and respectability, the wear and tear of life in the cash nexus, a wife and children, materialism, "civilization." But no less mythically important than the things escaped are the things sought—the earthly paradise, its plenitude, its pleasure, its alluring and compliant female bodies. To admirers of Gauguin during his lifetime and the period immediately after—I refer here to such indispensable and powerful promoters as Albert Aurier, Charles Morice, Daniel de Monfried, and most crucially, Victor Segalen[1]—Gauguin's voyage of life was perceived in both the most literal and gratifyingly symbolic sense as a voyage ever further outward, to the periphery and margins, to what lies outside the parameters of the superego and the polis. On a biographical level, then, Gauguin's life provides the paradigm for primitivism as a white, Western and preponderantly male quest for an elusive object whose very condition of desirability resides in some form of distance and difference, whether temporal or geographical.

In the myth of Gauguin "the man," we are thus presented with a narrative (until quite recently, one produced exclusively by men) that mobilizes powerful psychological fantasies about difference and otherness, both sexual and racial. On a formal level—or on the level of Gauguin the artist—another narrativization is at work. Here, the salient terms concern originality and self-creation, the heroism and pathos of cultural creation, a telos of avant-gardism whose movement is charted stylistically or iconographically.

Common to both the embrace of the primitive—however defined—and the celebration of artistic originality is the belief that both enterprises are animated by the artist's privileged access, be it spiritual, intellectual or psychological, to that which is primordially internal. Thus, the structural paradox on which Gauguin's brand of primitivism depends is that one leaves home to discover one's real self; the journey out, as writers such as Conrad have insisted, is, in fact, always a journey in; similarly, and from the perspective of a more formally conceived criticism, the artist "recognizes" in the primitive artifact that which was immanent, but inchoate; the object from "out there" enables the expression of what is thought to be "in there." The experience of the primitive or of the primitive artifact is therefore, and among other things, valued as an aid to creation, and to the act of genius located in the artist's exemplary act of recognition.

Is it the historic Gauguin that so perfectly incarnates this mythology, or is it the mythology that so perfectly incarnates Gauguin? Did Gauguin produce this discourse, or did the discourse produce him? From whichever side we tackle this question, it must be said that Gauguin was himself an immensely persuasive purveyor of his own mythology. But the persuasiveness of Gauguin's primitivism—both as self-description and as aesthetic project—attests to the existence of a powerful and continuing cultural investment in its terms, a will to believe to which 100 years of uncritical commentary bears ample witness. Mythic speech cannot be dispelled by the facts it ignores or mystifies—the truth of Brittany, the truth of Polynesia, the truth of Gauguin; rather, it must be examined in its own right. And because myth's instrumentality in the present is of even greater moment, we need to attend to its avatars in the texts of contemporary art history. Thus, while it is fruitless to attempt to locate an origin of primitivist thought, we can at any point along the line attempt to unpack certain of primitivism's constituent elements, notably the dense interweave of racial and sexual fantasies and power—both colonial and patriarchal—that provides its raison d'être and which, moreover, continues to inform its articulation. Insofar as Gauguin is credited with the invention of modernist primitivism in the visual arts, such an investigation needs to reckon both with Gauguin's own production—literary as well as artistic—and with the successive levels and layers of discourse generated around it.

For my purposes here, it is sufficient to begin in 1883, when, at the age of thirty-five, Gauguin makes his decisive break with his previous life as a respectable bourgeois and paterfamilias; terminated from the investment firm of Bertin in the wake of the financial crash of 1882, he resolves to become a full-time artist. Three years later he leaves his wife, Mette Gad Gauguin, and his five children in Copenhagen and returns to Paris. Then begins his restless search for "luxe, calme et volupté," a troubled quest for another culture that's purer, closer to origins and—an equally insistent leitmotif—cheaper to live in.

By July 1886, he is installed at Pont-Aven, at the Pension Gloanec. It is during this first Breton sojourn that he begins to present himself, quite self-consciously, as a savage. Simultaneously, and in concert with other artists—notably Emile Bernard—he begins to specifically adumbrate the goals and intentions of a primitive art. Brittany is thus presented in Gauguin's correspondence, and in the subsequent art-historical literature, as the initial encounter with cultural Otherness, a revivifying immersion in a more archaic, atavistic and organic society. Such a view of Brittany is exemplified by Gauguin's often quoted comment, "I love Brittany: there I find the wild and the primitive. When my wooden shoes ring on this stony soil, I hear the muffled, dull, and mighty tone I am looking for in my painting." Daniel de Monfried, Gauguin's close friend and subsequent memorialist, tied the move to Brittany specifically to Gauguin's ambitions for his art: "He hoped to find a different atmosphere from our exaggeratedly civilized society in what, he thought, was a country with archaic customs. He wanted his works to return to primitive art."[2]

Since the publication of Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock's important essay of 1980, "Les Données Bretonnantes," which significantly does

2. Javanese village at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris *(Roger-Viollet).*

not even appear in the Grand Palais catalogue's bibliography, this conception of Brittany as somehow primitive, severe and eminently folkloric has been revealed as itself a mythic representation. Indeed, Pollock and Orton's evocation of Pont-Aven in the late 1890s suggests nothing so much as Provincetown in the 1950s—an international artists' colony, and a popular site for tourism, coexisting with, and forming the economy of, a relatively prosperous and accessible region whose diversified economy was based on fishing (including canning and export), agriculture, kelp harvesting and iodine manufacturing.

Far from constituting the living vestiges of an ancient culture, many of the most visually distinctive aspects of Breton society (preeminently the clothing of the women) postdated the French Revolution; they were, in fact, as Orton and Pollock demonstrate, aspects of Breton *modernity.*[3] But from the perspective of an inquiry into the terms of a nascent primitivism, what needs be emphasized is the construction of Brittany as a discursive object; in keeping with analogous constructions such as Orientalism, we might call this construction "Bretonism." Accordingly, the distance between the historical actuality of Brittany in the later 1880s and the synthetist representation of it is not reducible to a distance from or a distortion of an empirical truth, but must be examined as a discursive postulate in its own right. Of what, then, does this postulate consist?

On a formal level, the developments one observes in Gauguin's work of 1886–90, and indeed in the work of the Pont-Aven circle as a whole, have little to do with Brittany, whether real or imagined. These years encompass the first two Breton sojourns, punctuated by the 1887 trip to Panama and Martinique, and the crucial encounter with tribal arts and culture at the 1889 Universal Exhibition [2, 3] Gauguin's jettisoning of phenomenological naturalism with respect to color, atmosphere and perspective, and his assimilation of, variously, Japonisme, French popular imagery and Emile Bernard's cloisonnisme, all of which had long since been discursively constituted as the primitive, did not require Brittany for its realization.

On the level of motif, however, Bretonism signals a new interest in religious and mystical iconography—Calvaries, self-portraits as Christ, Magdalens, Temptations and Falls. To be sure, this subject matter is not separable from the emerging precepts of Symbolism itself, any more than Gauguin's self-portraiture as Christ or magus is separable from his personal monomania and narcissism. In this respect, Synthetism, cloisonnisme, primitivism and the larger framework of Symbolism all represent diverse attempts to negotiate what Pollock and others have termed a crisis in representation—a crisis whose manifestation is linked to a widespread flight from modernity, urbanity and the social relations of advanced capitalism.

To commentators such as Camille Pissarro, Symbolism was itself a symptom of bourgeois retrenchment in the face of a threatening working class:

> The bourgeoisie, frightened, astonished by the immense clamor of the disinherited masses, by the insistent demands of the people, feels that it is necessary to restore to the people their superstitious beliefs. Hence

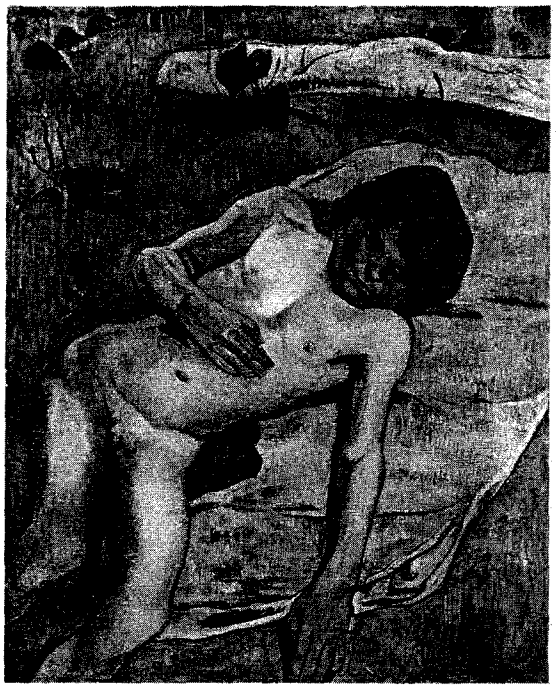
the bustling of religious symbolists, religious socialists, idealist art, occultism, Buddhism, etc., etc.[4]

And he reproached Gauguin for "having sensed this tendency" and, in effect, pandering to it. But from either perspective, it seems clear that Bretonism fulfills a desire for the annihilation of what is deemed insupportable in modernity, which in turn requires that the Brittany of Bretonism be conceived as feudal, rural, static and spiritual—the Other of contemporary Paris.

Stasis—being outside of time and historical process—is particularly crucial in the primitivizing imagination, insofar as what is required is an imaginary site of psychic return. The "return to origins" that Gauguin claimed as his artistic and spiritual trajectory is emblematized in another frequent quotation: "No more Pegasus, no more Parthenon horses! One has to go back, far back . . . as far as the dada from my childhood, the good old wooden horse."[5] Gauguin's words limn an atavism that is anterior to and more profound in its implications than the search for a kind of ethnographic origin in either Brittany or the South Seas.

This atavism has its lineage in Rousseauist thought, in various kinds of temporal exoticism, in certain currents in Romanticism, and—closer to Gauguin's own time—in a new interest in the child and the child's perception. While it might be possible to argue that Gauguin's numerous images of children—Breton girls and adolescents, naked little boys (some of them quite strikingly perverse)—themselves constitute an element of Bretonism[4, 5], it is also possible that the prevalence of children, like that of unindividuated Breton women, masks something largely absent from the Bretonist vision—namely, adult men and their activities. Why should the character—physiognomic, sartorial or spiritual—of Breton men be of no interest? While there is no simple answer to this question, I would like to suggest that the absence of men from Bretonism may be structurally similar to the absence of men in the nineteenth-century *discours prostitutionelle.* In other words, in the same way that discussions of *proxénètisme* and other forms of male entre-

3. A group of Javanese participants at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris *(Roger-Viollet).*



preneurial relations to prostitution are elided, it may well be that what is at work in these discourses is a fantasmatic construction of a purely feminized geography. In this respect, Bretonism thus supplies a vision of an unchanging rural world, populated by obliquely alien, religious women and children, a locus of nature, femininity and spirituality. And as the Grand Palais catalogue so ingenuously puts it, "In the artistic itinerary of Gauguin, le Pouldu would remain as 'the first of his Tahitis,' his 'French Tahiti.' "[6] And lest we think that Bretonism is a late nineteenth-century phenomenon, here is a description of Breton women written in 1971: "The feminine population of Brittany was both earthy and undifferentiated, the women possessing a shared character which took form in a sort of animal nature, the result of centuries of ritualized response to an established role."[7]

In any event, the appearance of female nudes in Gauguin's work during the first stay in Brittany

4. Paul Gauguin, *Nude Breton Boy,* 1889. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum *(Rheinisches Bildarchiv).*

5. Paul Gauguin, *Breton Girls Dancing, Pont-Aven,* 1888. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.

(the only ambitious female nude anterior to the Brittany work is the "realist" *Suzanne Coussant* of 1881) participates in many of the same structures of desire as does Bretonism itself. Significantly, during the Breton period Gauguin elaborated his peculiar mythology of the feminine—a hodgepodge of Wagnerian citations, fin-de-siècle *idées reçues* about woman's nature, Strindbergian misogyny, French belles-lettriste versions of Schopenhauer and so forth. Modern art-historical literature abounds in grotesquely misogynist exegeses of the meanings in Gauguin's representations of women.[8] In terms of my larger argument, it is enough to note that like the putatively archaic, mysterious and religious Bretonne, the deflowered maiden, the naked Eve and the woman in the waves (all from the Breton period) alike reside in that timeless and universal topos of the masculine imaginary—femininity itself.

Unmistakably, in Gauguin's writing and in his art, the quest for the primitive becomes progressively sexualized, and we must ask if this is a specific or a general phenomenon. From 1889 on, there is an explicit linkage of the natural and Edenic culture of the tropics to the sensual and the carnal—nature's plenitude reflected in the desirability and compliance of "savage women." "The first Eves in Gauguin's Eden," as one art historian refers to them, appear in 1889 (the two versions of *Eve bretonne, Ondine, Femmes se baignent,* and, in the following year, *Eve exotique*). Much psychobiographic ink has been spilled over the fact that the head of the *Eve exotique* derives from a photograph of Gauguin's mother—Aline Chazal. But if we recall that Eve means mother to begin with, and that, biblically speaking, Eve is the mother of us all, Gauguin's use of his mother's photograph could mean any number of things. Given the ultimate unknowability of an artist's intentions, motivations and psychic structures, there seems little point in psychoanalyzing the subject through the work. Of far greater importance to my mind is an analysis of the availability and indeed the self-evidence of the constellation Eve/Mother/Nature/Primitive to the patriarchal imaginary as a cultural and psychic construction.

Again, we are confronted with a form of mythic speech that can by no means be historically relegated to the era of Symbolism. I quote a contemporary art historian:

> What better symbol for this dream of a golden age than the robust and fertile mother of all races? . . . Gauguin's Eve is exotic, and as such she stands for his natural affinity for tropical life. His was more than a passing taste for the sensuality of native women; of mixed origin—his mother had Peruvian as well as Spanish and French blood—he was deeply aware of his atavism, often referring to himself as a pariah and a savage who must return to the savage.[9]

And from another art historian:

> Although Gauguin's imagery clearly emerges out of the 19th-century tradition of the fatal woman, it rejects the sterility of that relationship. On the contrary, the ceramic [the *Femme noire*] suggests a fruitful outcome to the deadly sexual encounter by representing the Femme Noire as full-bellied and almost pregnant: the female uses the male and kills him, but she needs the phallus and its seed to create new life. So the fated collaboration is productive, even though fatal for the male. Gauguin's imagery is basically an organic and natural one.[10]

The leitmotifs that circulate in these citations (chosen fairly randomly, I might add)—strange references to mixed blood, persistent slippages between what Gauguin said or believed or represented and what is taken to be true, the naturalizing of the cultural which, as Barthes reminds us, is the very hallmark of mythic speech—all these suggest that Gauguin's mythologies of the feminine, the primitive, the Other, are disturbingly echoed in current art-historical discourse. Furthermore, insofar as femininity is conventionally linked, when not altogether conflated, with the primitive (a linkage, incidentally, that reaches a delirious crescendo in the fin-de-siècle), is there, we might then ask, a mirror version of this equivalence in which the primitive is conflated with the feminine? Is primitivism, in other words, a gendered discourse?

One way to address this question is by tracking it through Gauguin's own itinerary. By 1889, he

6. Paul-Emile Miot, *The Royal Family of Vahi-Tahou from the Marquesas, Photographed on Board the French Frigate* Astrée, 1869–70. Paris, Musée de l'Homme.

had already resolved to make his life anew in Tahiti. Significantly, he had also considered Tonkin and Madagascar; all three were French colonial possessions. Tahiti, the most recent of these, had been annexed as a colony in 1881 (it had been a protectorate until then). Gauguin's primitivism was not free-floating, but followed, as it were, the colonizing path of the *tricouleur.* From Brittany he wrote to Mette Gauguin the following:

> May the day come soon when I'll be myself in the woods of an ocean island! To live there in ecstasy, calmness and art. With a family, and far from the European struggle for money. There in Tahiti I shall be able to listen to the sweet murmuring music of my heart's beating in the silence of the beautiful tropical nights. I shall be in amorous harmony with the mysterious beings of my environment. Free at last, without money trouble, I'll be able to love, to sing, to die.[11]

In this as in other letters, Gauguin makes very explicit the equation tropics/ecstasy/amorousness/native. This was mythic speech at the time Gauguin articulated it, and it retains its potency to this day; one has only to glance at a Club Med brochure for Tahiti to appreciate its uninterrupted currency.

Insofar as we are concerned with Polynesia as a complex and overdetermined representation as well as a real place in time and history, we may start by asking what kinds of associations were generated around it in nineteenth-century France. From the moment of their "discovery"—a locution which itself demands analysis—by Captain Samuel Wallis in 1767, the South Sea Islands occupied a distinct position in the European imagination. Renamed La Nouvelle Cythère shortly after by Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, Tahiti especially was figured under the sign of Venus: seductive climate, seductive dances, seductive (and compliant) women.

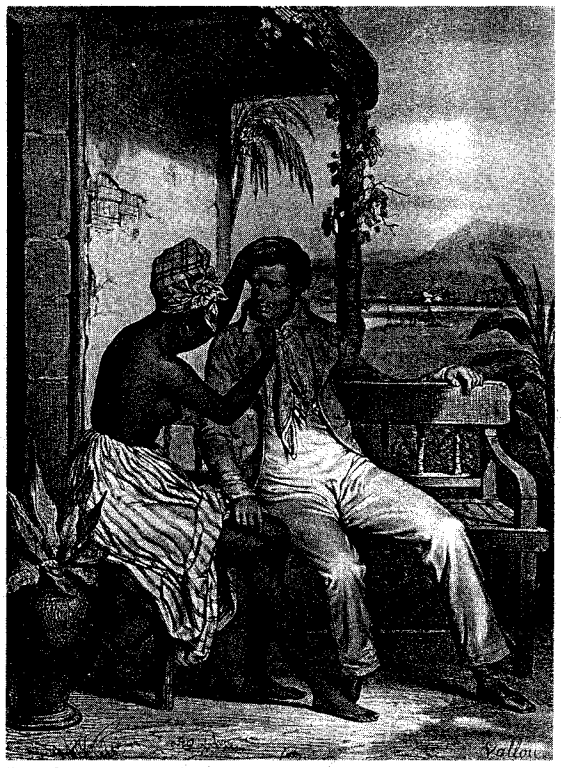
In the expeditionary literature generated by Captain Cook, Wallis, Bougainville and the countless successive voyagers to the South Seas, the colonial encounter is first and foremost the encounter with the body of the Other. How that alien body is to be perceived, known, mastered or possessed is played out within a dynamic of knowledge/power relations which admits of no reciprocity. On one level, what is enacted is a violent history of colonial possession and cultural dispossession—real power over real bodies [6]. On another level, this encounter will be endlessly elaborated within a shadow world of representations—a question of imaginary power over imaginary bodies.

In French colonial representation, the nonreciprocity of these power relations is frequently disavowed. One manifestation of this disavowal

can be traced through the production of images and texts in which it is the colonized who needs and desires the presence and the body of the colonizer. The attachment of native women—often the tragic passion—for their French lovers becomes a fully established staple of exotic literary production even before the end of the eighteenth century [7].

The perception of the Maori body—entering European political and representational systems much later than the black or Oriental body—can be seen to both replicate and differ from the earlier models for knowing the Other's body. Like that of the African, the body of the South Sea Islander is potentially—and simultaneously—monstrous and idealized. In the Polynesian context, these bodily dialectics were charted on a spectrum ranging, on the one hand, from cannibalism and tattooing to, on the other, the noble savage (usually given a Grecian physiognomy) and the delightful *vahine.* It is the fantasmatic dualism of cannibalism and *vahine* which alerts us to the central homology between the Polynesian body and the African body in European consciousness. For as Christopher Miller has pointed out in relation to Africanist discourse, "The horror of monstrousness and the delight of fulfillment are counterparts of a single discourse, sharing the same conditions of possibility: distance and difference. . . ."[12] The Maori body has its own specificity; it did not conform altogether to the model of the black African body. On the contrary, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century images of the Maori—and they are overwhelmingly of women—work to produce a subject who, if not altogether "white," is certainly not inscribed within the conventional representational schema for "black." This in turn may account for the perpetual problem posed by the "origin" of the Maori. If neither Black, White nor Yellow (the overarching racial categories systematized in such summas of racialism as Joseph Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*), the Maori race, along with its placelessness, was clearly disturbing for nineteenth-century racial theory. In this respect, it would be amusing to think that the "problem" of Maori origins was unconsciously allegorized in Gauguin's *D'où venons-nous, Que sommes-nous, Où allons-nous?*

The Polynesian body had another specific valence, which was structured around the perception of its putative androgyny, androgyny here understood in a morphological sense. As Victor Segalen, following countless previous descriptions, specified: "The woman possesses many of the qualities of the young man: a beautiful adolescent [male] comportment which she maintains up to her old age. And diverse animal endowments which she incarnates with grace."[13] Conversely, the young male Maori was consistently ascribed feminine characteristics. This instability in gendering was given explicit expression in the encounter Gauguin described in *Noa Noa* which hinged on his "mastery" of homosexual desire for a young Maori who trekked for him in search of wood to make his carvings.



7. Julien Vallou de Villeneuve, *Petit Blanc que j'aime,* lithograph, ca. 1840s. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes.

8. J. Webber, *A Young Woman of Otaheete Bringing a Present,* early nineteenth-century British print, after a French original *(Roger-Viollet).*

9. L. Massard, *Femme tatouée de l'Ile Madison, Océanie,* ca. 1820 *(Roger-Viollet).*

The logic at work in the literary and iconic production of La Nouvelle Cythère was explicitly structured by the erotic fascination organized around the figure of the young Polynesian woman. "There should be little difficulty," wrote one frigate captain in 1785, "in becoming more closely acquainted with the young girls, and their relations place no obstacles in their way."[14] We may recall too that the mutiny on the Bounty was in part a consequence of the crew's dalliances with the native women. In any case, from the eighteenth century on, it is possible to identify various modalities in which the South Sea Islands are condensed into the figure of the *vahine* who comes effectively to function as metonym for the tropic paradise *tout court.* Indeed, Maori culture as a whole is massively coded as feminine, and glossed by constant reference to the languor, gentleness, lassitude and seductiveness of "native life"—an extension of which is the importance in Polynesian culture of bathing, grooming, perfuming, etc. By the time the camera was conscripted to the discursive production of the Maori body (in the early 1860s, a good twenty years before Gauguin's arrival), these conventions of representation were fully established [8, 9].

In examining popular representational modes —whether graphic or photographic—one can situate them with respect to the high-cultural forms to which they relate as iconographic poor relations. Hence, we move from Rococo *vahines* to "naturalist" or academic representations of unclothed Tahitians in the later nineteenth century, underpinned, as they clearly are, by the lessons of academic painting and its protocols of pose and comportment [10].

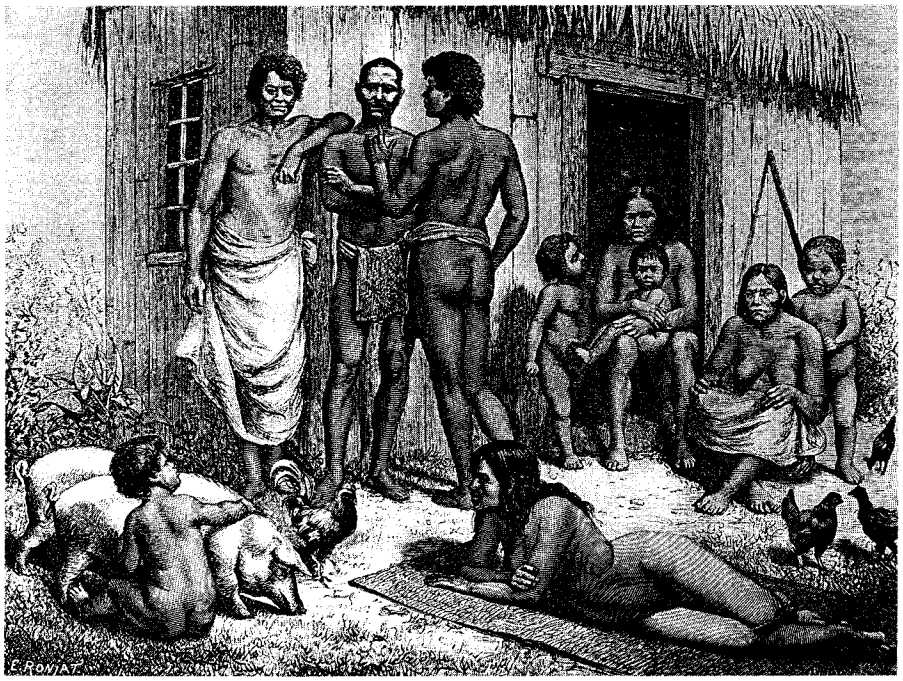
There was, as well, a fully developed literary tradition concerning Tahiti and to a lesser extent the Marquesas, ranging from what are now deemed high-cultural productions such as Herman Melville's *Typee* and *Omoo,* to enormously successful mass-cultural productions such as the

Marriage of Loti by Pierre Loti (the pen name of Julien Viaud). "Serious" primitivists such as Gauguin and Victor Segalen dismissed books such as the *Marriage of Loti* as sentimental trash—*"proxynètes de divers,"* Segalen called them—but to read Segalen's *Les Immemoriaux* or to contemplate Gauguin's strangely joyless and claustral evocations of Tahiti and the Marquesas is to be, in the final instance, not at all far from Loti.

In short, the "availability" of Tahiti and the Marquesas to Gauguin was as much a function of 100 years of prior representation as was its status as French possession, which additionally entitled Gauguin to a 30 percent reduction on his boat ticket and a spurious mission to document native life. Both forms of availability are eloquently symbolized in the 1889 Universal Exhibition, whose literal center was composed of simulacra of native habitations, imported native inhabitants and tribal objects. William Walton, a British journalist, indicated the scale and ambition of this colonial Disneyland in his "Chefs d'oeuvre de l'Exposition Universelle": "The colonial department includes Cochin Chinese, Senegalese, Annamite, New Caledonian, Pahouin, Gabonese and Javanese villages, inhabitants and all. Very great pains and expense have been taken to make this ethnographic display complete and authentic."[15]

In addition to these villages, there was a model display of forty-odd dwellings constituting a "History of Human Habitation" as well as a display of "The History of Writing," including inscriptions taken from Palenque and Easter Island. The importance of this lexicon of exoticism for Gauguin should not be—but usually is—underestimated. Over a period of several months, Gauguin was frequently within the precincts of the exhibition (the Synthetist exhibition at the Café Volponi ran simultaneously). Thus, the experience of the primitive "framed" within the Pavilion of the Colonies or the History of Human Habitation is analogous to the primitivist discourse "framed" by the imperialism that is its condition of existence and the context of its articulation.

To acknowledge this framing is but a first step in demythifying what it meant for Gauguin to "go native." There is, in short, a darker side to primi-



10. Lithograph after drawing by E. Ronjat, *Indogènes des Iles Tubuai,* ca. 1875 *(Roger-Viollet).*

11. Paul-Emile Miot, *Two Tahitian Sisters in Missionary Garb,* 1869–70. Paris, Musée de l'Homme.

tivist desire, one implicated in fantasies of imaginary knowledge, power and rape; and these fantasies, moreover, are sometimes underpinned by real power, by real rape. When Gauguin writes in the margin of the *Noa Noa* manuscript, "I saw plenty of calm-eyed women. I wanted them to be willing to be taken without a word, brutally. In a way [it was a] longing to rape,"[16] we are on the border between the acceptable myth of the primitivist artist as sexual outlaw, and the relations of violence and domination that provide its historic and its psychic armature.

In making an argument of this nature, one can also make reference to the distinction between the Polynesian reality and Gauguin's imaginary reconstruction of it. In 1769, the population of Tahiti was reckoned at about 35,000 persons. By the time of Gauguin's arrival in Papeete in 1891, European diseases had killed off two thirds of the population. Late nineteenth-century ethnographers speculated that the Maori peoples were destined for extinction. The pre-European culture had been effectively destroyed; Calvinist missionaries had been at work for a century, the Mormon and Catholic missionaries for fifty years. The hideous muumuus worn by Tahitian women were an index of Christianization and Western acculturation [11, 12]. According to Bengt Danielsson, the only Gauguin specialist who diverges from mythic speech, "virtually nothing remained of the ancient Tahitian religion and mythology . . . ; regardless of sect, they all attended church—at least once a day. Their Sundays were entirely devoted to churchgoing."[17]

Not only had the indigenous religion been eradicated, but the handicrafts, barkcloth production, art of tattoo and music had equally succumbed to the interdiction of the missionaries or the penetration of European products. The bright-colored cloth used for clothing, bedding and curtains that Gauguin depicted was of European design and manufacture.

Gauguin did, of course, indicate his dissatisfaction with Papeete as a provincial town dominated by colonials and demoralized and deracinated *indigènes.* In later years, in the Marquesas, he saw fit to regularly (and publicly) denounce the practice of intermarriage between the resident Chinese and the Polynesians. But the tourist/colonialist lament for the loss of the authentic, primitive culture it seeks to embrace is itself a significant component of the primitivist myth. For within

this pervasive allegory, as James Clifford points out, "The non-Western world is always vanishing and modernizing. As in Walter Benjamin's allegory of modernity, the tribal world is conceived as a ruin."[18]

In France, Gauguin had imagined Tahiti to be a sensual land of cockaigne where a bountiful nature provided—effortlessly—for one's needs. This was also what the colonial pamphlets he had read told him. In fact, installed in his house thirty miles from Papeete, Gauguin was almost entirely reliant on the extremely expensive tinned food and biscuits from the Chinese trading store. Bananas and breadfruit, a staple of the Tahitian diet, were gathered by the men once a week on excursions to the highlands. Fishing, which provided the second staple food, was both a collective and a skilled activity. Ensconced in his tropical paradise, and unable to participate in local food-gathering activities, Gauguin subsisted on macaroni and tinned beef and the charity of Tahitian villagers and resident Europeans. Throughout the years in Tahiti and later in the Marquesas, Gauguin's adolescent mistresses were not only his most concrete and ostentatious talisman of going native, they were also, by virtue of their well-provisioned extended families, his meal tickets.

There are, of course, as many ways to go native as there are Westerners who undertake to do so. Gauguin scrupulously constructed an image of himself as having a profound personal affinity for the primitive. The Polynesian titles he gave most of his Tahitian works were intended to represent him to his European market, as well as to his friends, as one who had wholly assimilated the native culture. In fact, and despite his lengthy residence, Gauguin never learned to speak the language, and most of his titles are either colonial pidgin or grammatically incorrect.[19] His last, rather squalid years in the Marquesas included

12. Engraving by Patas, illustration from *Les Voyages de Capitaine Cook* (vol. III, pl. 6), 1774. *Vue de l'intérieur d'une maison dans l'île d'Uhetea, répresentation d'une danse à la mode de pays (Roger-Viollet).*

stints as a journalist for a French newspaper and a series of complicated feuds and intrigues with the various religious and political resident colonial factions.

It is against this background that we need to reconsider the text of *Noa Noa.* It has been known for quite a long time that much of the raw material of the text—notably that pertaining to Tahitian religion and mythology—was drawn from Gauguin's earlier *Ancien Culte mahorie,* of which substantial portions were copied verbatim from Jacques-Antoine Moerenhout's 1837 *Voyages aux îles du grand océan.* [20] Thus, when Gauguin writes in *Noa Noa* that his knowledge of Maori religion was due to "a full course in Tahitian theology" given him by his thirteen-year-old mistress Teha'amana, he is involved in a double denial; his avoidance of the fact that his own relation to the Maori religion was extremely tenuous, merely the product of a text he had just appropriated, and his refusal to acknowledge that Teha'amana, like most other Tahitians, *had* no relation to her former traditions.

I will return to this paradigmatic plagiarism shortly, but first I want to say a few more words about what we might call Teha'amana's structural use value for the Gauguin myth. Certainly, and at the risk of stating the obvious, it is clear that Teha'amana's function as Gauguin's fictive conduit to the ancient mythologies is entirely overdetermined. No less overdetermined is the grotesque afterlife of Gauguin's successive *vahines* in the modern art-historical literature. Conscientiously "named," their various tenures with Gauguin methodically charted, their "qualities" and attributes reconstituted on the "evidence" of his paintings and writing, their pregnancies or abortions methodically deduced, what is at work is an undiminished investment in the mythos of what could be termed primitivist reciprocity. This is a form of mythic speech that Gauguin produces effortlessly in the form of the idyll or pastorale, as in the following passage from *Noa Noa:*

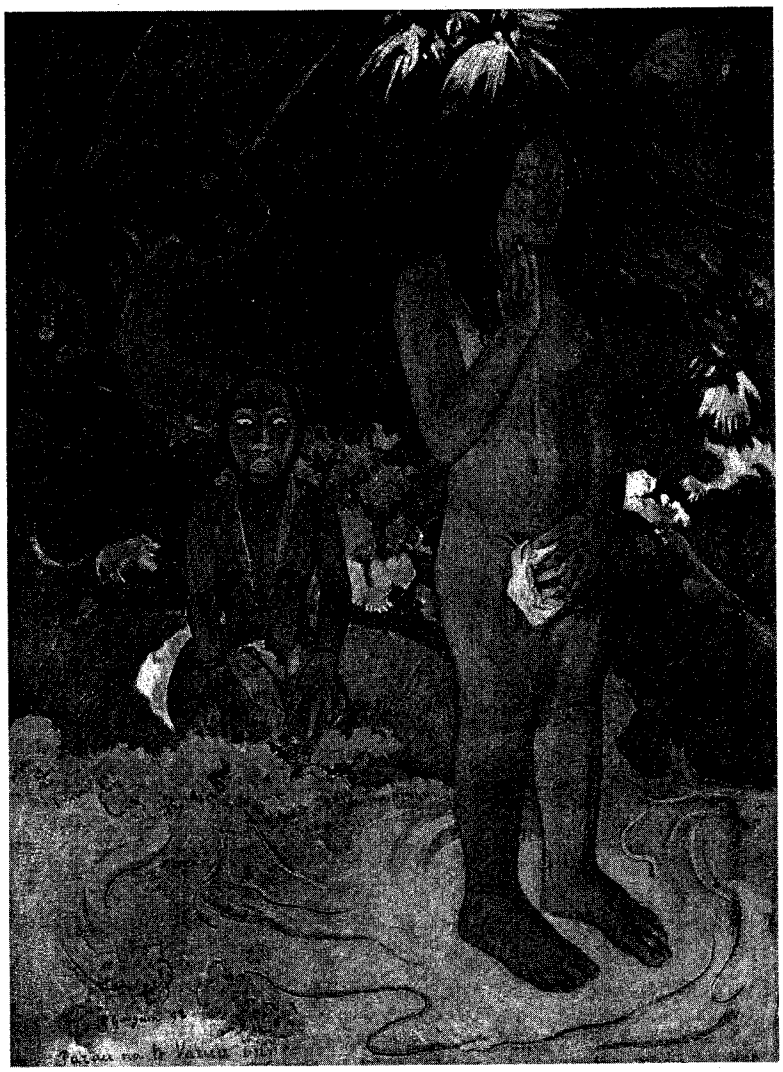
> I started to work again and my house was an abode of happiness. In the morning, when the sun rose the house was filled with radiance. Teha'amana's face shone like gold, tinging everything with its luster, and the two of us would go out and refresh ourselves in the nearby stream as simply and naturally as in the Garden of Eden, *fenua nave nave.* As time passed, Teha'amana grew ever more compliant and affectionate in our day to day life. Tahitian *noa noa* imbued me absolutely. The hours and the days slipped by unnoticed. I no longer saw any difference between good and evil. All was beautiful and wonderful.[21]

The lyricism of Gauguin's own idealized description of life in Tahiti with its piquant allusions to the breaking of bourgeois norms and strictures—most spectacularly in the vision of a fifty-year-old man frolicking with his thirteen-year-old mistress—is one of the linchpins of the Gauguin myth. All the more necessary to instate less edifying perspectives on Eden, as in Gauguin's 1897 letter to Armand Seguin:

> 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 15-year-old wife [this was one of Teha'amana's successors] 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.[22]

Such oppositions give some notion of the rich range of material available to the Gauguin demythologizer. More pointedly still, they call attention to one of the particularly revealing aspects of what I may as well now call Gauguinism—namely, the continuing desire to both naturalize and make "innocent" the artist's sexual relations with very young girls, as symptomatically expressed in René Huyghe's parenthetical assurance in his essay on Gauguin's *Ancien Culte mahorie* that the thirteen-year-old Tahitian girl is "equivalent to 18 or 20 years in Europe."[23]

Huyghe's anodyne assurance that the female Maori body is *different* from its Western counterpart is paradoxically motivated by the desire to normalize a sexual relationship which in Europe would be considered criminal, let alone immoral. But the paradox is fundamental, for what is at stake in the erotics of primitivism is the impulse to domesticate, as well as possess. "The *body* of



13. Paul Gauguin, *Parau Na Te Varua Ino* (Words of the Devil), 1892. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of Marie N. Harriman.

strangeness must not disappear," writes Hélène Cixous in *La Jeune Née,* "but its strength must be tamed, it must be returned to the master."[24] In this respect, the image of the savage and the image of the woman can be seen as similarly structured, not only within Gauguin's work, but as a characteristic feature in the project of representing the Other's body, be it the woman's or the native's. Both impulses can be recognized in Gauguin's representational practice.

In the Polynesian pictures as in the Breton work, images of men are singularly rare. Frequently, and in conformity with the already-represented status of the Maori, they are feminized. Nothing suggests that there is anything behind the men's pareros, while Gauguin is one of the first European artists to depict his female nudes with pubic hair. In this regard it is interesting to note that Gauguin's supine nude Breton boy (male nudes appear only in the Breton period) has had his penis strangely elided. But while there is nothing quite comparable to this odd avoidance of masculine genitalia in his images of women, and although they are figured with all the conventional

tropes of "natural" femininity—fruits with breasts, flowers and feathers with sex organs—there is nonetheless something in their wooden stolidity, their massive languor, their zombielike presence that belies the fantasy they are summoned to represent [13].

What lies behind these ciphers of femininity? By way of approaching this question, I want to reintroduce the issue of Gauguin's plagiarisms. For the scandal of the appropriation of Moerenhout may be seen to have broader implications. Copied for use in *L'Ancien Culte mahorie,* it resurfaces in the later *Noa Noa.* Parts of the same text reappear in *Avant et après.* A paragraph from the French colonial office pamphlet touting Tahiti for colonial settlement appears in a letter to Mette Gauguin.

In addition to the appropriation of others' texts, Gauguin tends to constantly recycle his own. Bits and pieces of *The Modern Spirit and Catholicism* surface in letters and articles. In his personal dealings with artists during his years in France, there is another kind of appropriation: Emile Bernard, for example, claimed that Gauguin had in effect "stolen" his Synthetism, and there is no question that Bernard's work comprised a far more developed and theorized Symbolism when the two artists first became friends in Brittany. From 1881 through the 1890s, one can readily identify a Pissarroesque Gauguin, a van Goghian Gauguin, a Bernardine Gauguin, a Cézannian Gauguin, a Redonian Gauguin, a Degasian Gauguin and, most enduringly and prevalently, a Puvisian Gauguin. And as for what is called in art history "sources," Gauguin's oeuvre provides a veritable lexicon of copies, quotations, borrowings and reiterations.

Drawing upon his substantial collection of photographs, engraved reproductions, illustrated books and magazines and other visual references, Gauguin, once he jettisoned Impressionism, drew far more from art than from life. Consider, for example, Gauguin's repeated use of the temple reliefs from Borobudur and wall paintings from Thebes. His borrowings from the Trocadéro collections, and from the tribal artifacts displayed at the Universal Exhibition, are obvious. In certain cases, he worked directly from photographs to depict Maori sculptures that he never saw; photographs were often the source of individual figures as well. The Easter Island inscription from the Universal Exhibition appears in *Merahi Metue No Tehamana.* Manet's *Olympia* and Cranach's *Diana* are reworked as *Te Arii Vahine.* A double portrait of two Tahitian women comes directly from a photograph. Certain of Gauguin's ceramic objects are modeled on Mochican pottery. Woodcuts by Hiroshige provide the motif for a Breton seascape.

For some of Gauguin's contemporaries, this bricolage was the very essence of what they understood to be Gauguin's brand of Symbolism, as in Octave Mirbeau's description of Gauguin's "unsettling and savory mingling of barbarian splendor, Catholic liturgy, Hindu meditation, Gothic imagery and obscure and subtle symbolism."[25] For less sympathetic observers, such as Pissarro, "All in all . . . it was the art of a sailor, picked up here and there."[26]

All of which suggests that in Gauguin's art the representation of the feminine, the representation of the primitive, and the reciprocal collapse of one into the other, has its analogue in the very process of his artistic production. For what is at issue is less an invention than a reprocessing of already constituted signs. The life of Gauguin, the art of Gauguin, the myth of Gauguin—approached from any side we confront a Borgesian labyrinth of pure textuality. Feminine and primitive, Breton and Maori, are themselves representable only to the extent that they exist as already-written texts, which yet continue to be written. "When myth becomes form," cautioned Barthes, "the meaning leaves its contingency behind, it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains."[27] In contrast to the recent and elaborate rehabilitation of the primitivizing impulse, Pissarro, closer to the history that the Gauguin myth occludes, always retained his clarity of judgment: "Gauguin," he wrote, "is always poaching on someone's land; nowadays, he's pillaging the savages of Oceania."[28]

NOTES

1. By profession a doctor in the French navy, and by avocation a diarist and writer, Victor Segalen (1878–1919) was an influential producer of toney literary exotica. His first naval tour of duty was in Oceania, and he arrived in Tahiti a few months after Gauguin's death. Subsequently, he purchased many of Gauguin's effects, including manuscripts, art works, photographs, albums, etc. Segalen's essays on Gauguin are anthologized in the posthumous collection *Gauguin dans son dernier décor et autres textes de Tahiti,* Paris, 1975. Upon Segalen's return to France, he wrote his novel *Les Immemoriaux* (1905–6), an imaginary reconstruction of Maori life which he characterized as attempting "to describe the Tahitian people in a fashion equivalent to the way Gauguin saw them." Subsequently, Segalen was posted to China for four years (1909–13), a sojourn that resulted in the novel *René Leys,* as well as two collections of essays, *Steles* and *Briques et tuiles.* His *Essai sur l'exoticisme,* published posthumously, is a meditation on the nature of [Western] exoticism—a desire for the Other.

2. Cited in John Reward, *Gauguin,* New York, 1938, p. 11.

3. Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, "Les Données Bretonnantes: La Prairie de la Representation," *Art History,* Sept. 1980, pp. 314, 329.

4. *Camille Pissarro: Letters to His Son Lucien,* ed. John Rewald, New York, 1943, p. 171.

5. Cited in Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Painting,* New York, 1938, p. 60.

6. Claire Frèches-Thory, "Gauguin et la Bretagne 1886–1890," *Gauguin* (exhibition catalogue), Paris, Grand Palais, 1989, p. 85.

7. Wayne Andersen, *Gauguin's Paradise Lost,* New York, 1971, p. 53.

8. Examples are legion, but Wayne Andersen's book, cited above, is one of the worst offenders. Its central thesis is that Gauguin's work is unified around the theme of the woman's life cycle, wherein the crucial event is the loss of virginity, which, as Andersen has it, may be understood as homologous to the Crucifixion of Christ. Not surprisingly, this theory promotes a fairly delirious level of formal and iconographical analysis.

9. Henri Dorra, "The First Eves in Gauguin's Eden," *Gazette des beaux-arts,* Mar. 1953, pp. 189–98, p. 197.

10. Vŏjtech Jirat-Wasiutynski, "Paul Gauguin's Self-Portraits and the Oviri: The Image of the Artist, Eve, and the Fatal Woman," *The Art Quarterly,* Spring 1979, pp. 172–90, p. 176.

11. *Lettres de Gauguin à sa femme et ses amis,* ed. Maurice Malingue, Paris, 1946, p. 184.

12. Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French,* Chicago, 1985, p. 28.

13. Victor Segalen, "Homage à Gauguin," *Gauguin dans son dernier décor,* p. 99 [my translation].

14. C. Skogman, *The Frigate Eugenie's Voyage Around the World,* cited in Bengt Danielsson, *Love in the South Seas,* London, 1954, p. 81.

15. Cited in Christopher Gray, *Sculpture and Ceramics of Paul Gauguin,* Baltimore, 1967, p. 52.

16. Paul Gauguin, *Noa Noa,* ed. and intro. Nicholas Wadley, trans. Jonathan Griffin, London, 1972, p. 23. There are a number of editions of *Noa Noa* in keeping with its complicated production and publication history. Originally planned by Gauguin as a collaboration between himself and Charles Morice, he later declared himself dissatisfied with the literary improvements and narrative reorganization that Morice had imposed. At least three different versions are in print, not counting translations.

17. Bengt Danielsson, *Gauguin in the South Seas,* London, 1965, p. 78.

18. James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *Art in America,* April 1985, pp. 164–72, p. 178.

19. See in this regard, Bengt Danielsson, "Les Titres Tahitiens de Gauguin," *Bulletin de la Société des Études Oceaniennes,* Papeete, nos. 160–61, Sept.–Dec. 1967, pp. 738–43.

20. See René Huyghe, "Le Clef de Noa Noa," in Paul Gauguin, *Ancien Culte mahorie,* Paris, 1951. Gauguin's spelling of *mahorie* is incorrect in any language.

21. Gauguin, *Noa Noa,* p. 37.

22. Letter to Armand Séguin, Jan. 15, 1897. Cited in Danielsson, *Gauguin in the South Seas,* p. 191.

23. Huyghe, "La Clef de Noa Noa," p. 4.

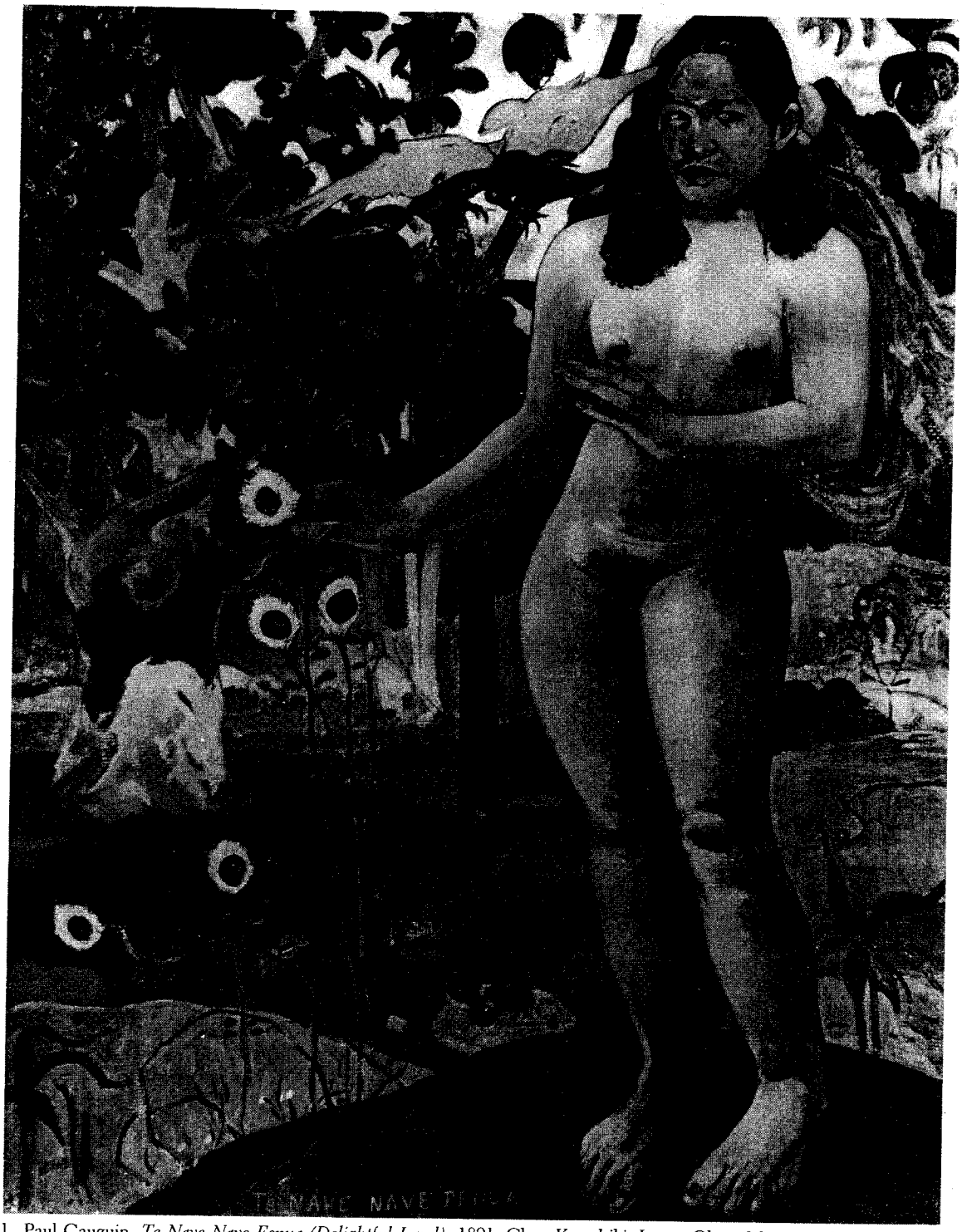
24. Cited in Josette Féral, "The Powers of Difference," in *The Future of Difference,* eds. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine, Boston, 1980, p. 89.

25. Octave Mirbeau, "Paul Gauguin," *L'Echo de Paris,* Feb. 16, 1891. Reprinted in Mirbeau, *Des Artistes,* Paris, 1922, pp. 119–29.

26. *Camille Pissarro,* p. 172.

27. Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," *Mythologies,* ed. and trans. Annette Lavers, New York, 1978, p. 139.

28. *Camille Pissarro,* p. 221.



1. Paul Gauguin, *Te Nave Nave Fenua (Delightful Land),* 1891. Chuo Kurashiki, Japan, Ohara Museum of Art.