

The Myth of Tahiti:  
Breaking Colonial Confines and Finding the Subaltern Voice Through a Revival of Traditional  
Art Forms

Submitted by Madison Gurley  
Department of Art History

November 2, 2015

*Thesis Advisor*  
Marilyn Brown, Department of Art & Art History

*Defense Committee*  
Robert Nauman, Department of Art & Art History, Honors Chair  
Janice Ho, Department of English

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	3
Chapter I: First Contact and Setting the Tone for Colonialism.....	5
Chapter II: The Art of Gauguin and his Contemporaries: a Myth Explored .....	10
Chapter III: ‘Primitive’ and the History of Polynesian Art.....	16
Chapter IV: Polynesia and Tahiti Occupying a Postcolonial Space.....	21
Chapter V: The Contemporary Movement.....	24
Findings and Conclusion.....	35
Works Cited.....	39
Images.....	42
Figures.....	43

## Introduction

The colonial impact on Polynesian islands such as Tahiti morphed their culture in such a way that many of the ‘traditional’ art forms were lost and their meanings almost completely forgotten. There are many causes for the unalterable change to Polynesian art and culture, including the forceful Christian conversion on the islands, the presentation of European tools and materials, the deterioration of their class structure, as well as the introduction of globalization. All of these factors aided in the alteration of their territory in a way common in places affected by colonization that would take decades or even centuries to display a counteraction. To further understand the colonial period in Tahiti I look to Elizabeth Childs and Kirk Varnedoe. In order to form a clearer understanding of the impact of colonialism on Tahiti, I draw upon literature by Miriam Kahn, Philip J.C. Dark, as well as Rod Edmond, and look to contemporary sources like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the first-hand accounts of experiences in Tahiti from Anna Laura Jones.

For Tahiti, I argue it was globalization and the European desire to find new places for trade that has affected the island’s artistic identity to the degree that it is only starting to find its own again. It was due to globalization that Europe was eager to explore these lands and cultures that had not yet been exploited, and artists went there to find ‘exotic paradises’ or ‘the studio of the tropics.’ As more Europeans began to visit the South Pacific, more explorers, writers, and artists alike would return to Europe to share their stories and depictions of different and exotic lands. Some of these early visitors would write about places they could only compare to the Garden of Eden. It was descriptions like this and the promise of exoticism that brought Paul Gauguin to Tahiti for the first time. Among the numerous sources I have consulted I have found

Rod Edmond, Stephen Eisenman and Elizabeth Childs to be extremely helpful regarding Paul Gauguin, his time in Tahiti, and his work there.

Through my paper I will argue that it was these very descriptions of the ‘exotic paradise’ that would serve to stunt the artistic development of the native islanders. I look at the work of Paul Gauguin and his contemporaries to show how their continued idealized depictions of the South Pacific did nothing but set back the native population and endorse a fictional place. Today, Pacific Islanders are looking for new ways to code, decode, and recode the space that they occupy in order to construct their identity after colonial influence. Many of these postcolonial projects have gone back to try to emulate the art forms practiced pre-contact, while others look for new and perhaps more obvious ways to show resistance to colonial influence.

I begin by looking at the first contact of outsiders on the Pacific islands and see how these interactions set the tone for the rest of colonial occupation. With this understanding, I explore how Gauguin and his contemporaries came to Polynesia with certain misconceptions. Paul Gauguin’s work represents just one example of the myth surrounding Tahiti and Polynesian culture that has been perpetuated since the colonial presence began. After looking at Gauguin’s ‘studio of the tropics,’ I draw connections regarding the colonial influence in Tahiti and the art that was and is produced in the area up to today and how the inhabitants have tried to find a new identity in a postcolonial space. I will pose an alternative to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s conclusion that the subaltern cannot actually speak.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I attempt to pose a view that does not romanticize the people of the South Seas, but describes how, after many years, their unique and creative art displays a new voice for the subaltern where they do not necessarily have

---

<sup>1</sup> Spivak. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

to lash out against the colonial force or globalization, but can define their postcolonial space their own way, thus creating their own artistic voice.

To preface this discussion of postcolonialism and art, I must acknowledge the fact that as the author I have never been to the South Seas or experienced their cultures. Without this specific experience and knowledge, I still posit an overall claim that due to the colonial European and foreign artistic presence in Polynesia, their traditional art and culture was suppressed in such a way that not until the mid twentieth century were they able to begin to form an artistic style that can be carried and understood through generations to come. Unfortunately, due to the colonial presence, most of the traditional practices have been long forgotten. In Tahiti the Maohi traditions of religion and art have been replaced with the Christian missionaries' teachings.<sup>2</sup> Their art practices and the importance of spirits are all something of the past and only a few documents survive to suggest what Tahitian culture would have been like before the colonial presence. Many Tahitians today respect their history but centuries of cultural disregard have made it difficult to understand historic and religious practices. Nonetheless, contemporary artists have begun to revive traditional artistic practices and customs and there has been a push to regain objects that have been taken from the area to place back in cultural centers and the Museum of Tahiti and the Islands.

## **Chapter I**

### *First Contact and Setting the Tone for Colonialism*

From the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century there was an influx of travel to the South Pacific from literary-minded individuals, most likely those who wanted to experience the Garden of Eden-like places described by the accounts of the explorers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. British Captain Samuel

---

<sup>2</sup> Maohi is the term used to refer to the people that occupy Tahiti and the Society Islands.

Wallis was the first European to land on Tahiti in 1767, and stories of this first interaction have dictated how Tahitians have responded to outsiders since. As Wallis approached the island he opened cannon fire. This violence was most likely the reason for the Tahitians' passive greetings to other Europeans, since before European occupation they were a warlike people who armed themselves against outsiders. Wallis' first contact explains why, as Childs puts it, "by the time French explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville arrived on Tahiti the following year (not yet aware of Wallis's earlier landing), Tahitian leaders had adopted a strategy for 'taming' foreign ships by sending women out in canoes to offer themselves to the sailors."<sup>3</sup> Tahitian history was disregarded throughout colonization and we see how even their violence and resistance to French rule that lasted for several years was completely unseen in artistic depictions of the time.<sup>4</sup> Even though Tahitians were known for their violent responses to most opposition, they knew the modern weaponry of the Europeans would outmatch them. The solution after the Tahitian's first contact was to 'tame' these ships. This solution helped to create the original conception of Tahitian women as being sexually willing.<sup>5</sup> Although we know that Bougainville only spent nine days on the island of Tahiti in 1768, his account of the "willing women"<sup>6</sup> on these islands has forever impacted the perceptions of Tahiti for visitors. Gauguin especially might have been driven by the promise of the exotic women due to his previous erotic history.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Childs. *Vanishing Paradise, Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti*. 2013. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Tahitians acted in three years of armed guerilla warfare between the years of 1844 through 1847. Kahn. *Tahiti Beyond the Postcard: power, Place, and Everyday Life*. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Brooks. "Gauguin's Tahitian Body." *The Yale Journal of Criticism*; Spring 1990. 51-77.

<sup>6</sup> Childs. *Vanishing Paradise, Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti*. 2013. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Pollock. *Avant- Garde Gambits: Gender and the Colour of Art History*. New York : Thames and Hudson. 1993. And Solomon-Godeau, A., "Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism," *Art in America*, vol.77 (July 1989), 118-29; reprinted in N. Broude & M. Garrard, *The Expanding Discourse*, 313-30.

Through accounts of explorers and the London Missionary Society (LMS) we know that the South Pacific was already tainted by heavy European influence by the time Gauguin arrived on Tahiti. Edmond states that the LMS “decided that Tahiti was the most promising part of the ‘heathen world’ for a mission,” and brought several different groups of missionaries to Tahiti over several decades even before the French presence was really felt on this island.<sup>8</sup> According to the missionaries’ account, it was they who introduced Christianity, its domestic culture, dress, and several of its customs to the Pacific Islanders. At this point the missionaries were already trying to force their culture on the original inhabitants by promoting their own religious and societal norms over the traditional Tahitian culture. They encouraged the wearing of missionary dress over Tahitian customs, so as to encourage more modesty. They were also in strong opposition to the traditional tattooing practices because they believed these tattoos were symbols of a polytheistic religion practiced before missionary contact.<sup>9</sup> Through the LMS records and recorded communications we have from their time in Tahiti, it is easy to visualize the long history of outside influence from Europe on different South Pacific cultures that occurred before Paul Gauguin developed his own utopic vision of Tahiti, which he saw as the embodiment of exotic ‘Otherness.’

Possibly without any knowledge of the religious changes occurring in Tahiti, many people living in France became interested in the stories they heard about Polynesia. Similar to the way novels are devoured by readers today, people like Gauguin absorbed these exotic islands through the accounts of explorers and novelists. Romantic visions of an exotic paradise were distributed as colonial propaganda to get French citizens to settle in the South Seas. Miriam Kahn suggests that when Bougainville went to Tahiti, he “immediately named the island

---

<sup>8</sup> Edmond. *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin*. 1997. 98.

<sup>9</sup> Edmond. *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin*. 1997. 98.

Nouvelle Cythère (New Cythera) after the birthplace of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. To aestheticize Tahiti and Tahitians through classical references was common practice at the time.”<sup>10</sup> However, Childs posits that after further examination of Bougainville’s text, *Voyage autour du monde*, we know that, “what Bougainville described for his European audience was tremendously exaggerated ... [he] embellished his writings with stylistic flourishes and details taken from other people’s writings, as well as references to goddesses, nymphs, and noble savages,”<sup>11</sup> Even with the embellishments we know that during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the French government was circulating Bougainville’s writings as well as the 1882 publication of Pierre Loti’s novel *Rarahu* as a way to promote more of their citizens to immigrate to the colonies. These works of French propaganda, which described Tahiti as a land of bounty and earthly delights, became available to inspire artists like Gauguin. They described a land only comparable to the Garden of Eden for romantic and literary-minded Europeans.

All the romantic accounts of voyages to the South Seas enticed Gauguin and helped him form a romantic idea of the possibility of a “studio of the tropics,” but one of the biggest pushes for Gauguin to visit Tahiti came from the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris.<sup>12</sup> The world’s fair in Paris came at a time when France was trying to regain its stability and power in the global view. Elizabeth Childs suggests that the fair was strategically used to cover up “a modern world of political upheaval and financial stress with visions of a larger, stable world of global empire in which France had emerged as an expansive and prosperous force.”<sup>13</sup> After the French Revolution many people, including Paul Gauguin could see the direction the country was moving toward: large expansion coupled with modernization and industrialization. The fair came at the

---

<sup>10</sup> Kahn. *Tahiti Beyond the Postcard*. 2011. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Kahn. *Tahiti Beyond the Postcard*. 2011. 34.

<sup>12</sup> Eisenman. *Paul Gauguin: Artists of Myth and Dream*. Skira. 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Childs. *Vanishing Paradise, Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti*. 2013. 61.



right time for Gauguin and other literary-minded artists who sought out the beauty and exoticism of what was displayed in Paris that summer. Childs further suggests that this was the first time Tahiti was “represented in Paris by more than literary and travel accounts” even though the depictions of Tahiti as well as other South Pacific colonies were not altogether accurately representative.<sup>14</sup> These views of the different locations that France and other countries were colonizing served to create an exotic spectacle. However, this “was a world of fabricated pleasure and ease, with great and profound cultural differences aesthetically and theatrically flattened out and geographic locales from around the globe seemingly interchangeable.”<sup>15</sup> It was through these inaccurate depictions that Paul Gauguin fell in love with this idea of Otherness and exotic culture. This blending of the South Pacific and all of its cultural differences with even more distant, separate Asian colonies, could explain the disappointment upon arrival in Papeete that he experienced.

The exhibits at the fair gave the impression that these new worlds were ones Europeans could simply stroll into. The way the exhibits were set up gave the idea that one could go from “one ‘colony’ to another, from one exotic spectacle of sight, sound, and smell to another [and] assured visitors of the Other’s distinctive difference and also extended the promise of seamless entry into the Other’s world.”<sup>16</sup> It was then that Gauguin prepared to depart, to find this exotic paradise with so many cultural artifacts that it seemed almost surreal (because it was). This eclectic overview of an ‘exotic paradise’ that was also open to new exploration was most likely what brought Gauguin to look to the Pacific Islands. However, it was most likely this same synthesized view of these lands that caused him to be disappointed upon arrival. Gauguin

---

<sup>14</sup> Childs. *Vanishing Paradise, Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti*. 2013. 54.

<sup>15</sup> Childs. *Vanishing Paradise, Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti*. 2013. 69.

<sup>16</sup> Childs. *Vanishing Paradise, Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti*. 2013. 68.

arrived on the island of Tahiti in 1891, over a hundred years after the first voyages to Polynesia by other Europeans occurred. Gauguin expected to be met with a combination of Mayan temples, exotic willing women, Egyptian influences, and a rich, primitive culture. What he was met with in actuality was a place that had been influenced by European culture and religion for over a hundred years.

## **Chapter II**

### *The Art of Gauguin and his Contemporaries: a Myth Explored*

Tahiti was often described in ways that mimicked Eden – a beautiful and bountiful paradise that offered a willing and exotic Eve to men. History however, indicated how fantastical these accounts were. The Tahitians’ history with outsiders ultimately could explain the warm greetings that Gauguin received. Gauguin first traveled to Tahiti in 1891 and was surprised to find the landscape and culture of Tahiti already changed by the French colonial influence. When he arrived Tahiti was stuck at a crossroads, partially caught on its indigenous culture and being pulled towards a new foreign policy. Colonial authority and policy disrupted its class system, and its culture was already being forgotten in favor of the new religion as well as a more globalized economy. In many ways Gauguin expressed in his art his disappointment with what he found, despite his occasional reliance on colonial photography.<sup>17</sup> When he first arrived in the capital he lived amongst the colonial officers but his symbolist representations were not well received and he moved away from the capital to a hut that he inhabited for nearly two years. There, as Eisenman puts it, “his goal was to renounce his own colonial status, and to

---

<sup>17</sup> Childs. *Vanishing Paradise*. “The Colonial Lens: Gauguin, Primitivism, and Photography.” 91-132.

go native.”<sup>18</sup> In reality when he lived in his hut he was usually with his young Tahitian lover Teha’amana and relied heavily on others to sustain him.

Upon his return to France in 1893-4 he wrote a short fictional account of his encounter with Tahitian customs, *Noa Noa*. With this publication he became author to yet another account of a mythicized depiction of Tahiti, ranging from the beauty and bountifulness of the environment to the women. Gauguin gives his Parisian readers an exciting view of his sexual adventures and perpetuates the idea of the Tahitian Venus. However, alternative reports of his encounters with his mistresses and other Tahitian women primarily suggest that he had to seek out these sexual experiences.<sup>19</sup> Thus *Noa Noa* provides yet another illustration of the French perpetuation of the idea of the Other in colonial accounts, specifically in the representation of the female as socially Other to those in European society in almost every way: physically, sexually, morally, and in terms of religious beliefs.

In *Noa Noa* Gauguin writes, “it was all over – nothing but civilized people left. I was sad, coming so far ... Shall I manage to recover any trace of that past ... the present had nothing to say to me. [I wish] to get back to the ancient hearth, revive the fire,”<sup>20</sup> and this is exactly what he attempted to do through his artwork. In his work done in Tahiti composed over his two trips to the island, one can see how, like the Exposition Universelle (Fig. I), Gauguin chose to incorporate different eclectic cultural elements into a product that was intended to represent Tahiti but was technically inauthentic and almost completely devoid of ties to modern Tahiti. In Figure I we see a photograph of Javanese women who were displayed at the Exposition

---

<sup>18</sup> Eisenman. *Paul Gauguin: Artists of Myth and Dream*. Skira. 2008. 45.

<sup>19</sup> Gauguin. *Paul Gauguin's Intimate Journals*. Trans. Van Wyck Brooks. New York : Crown Publishers 1936. And Childs, Elizabeth. *Vanishing Paradise, Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti*. 2013. 36.

<sup>20</sup> Gauguin. *Noa Noa: The Tahitian Journal*. Dover Publication. 1985. 13.

Universelle; they are represented as a spectacle of the uncivilized for the civilized world. They are ornately ornamented and would dance for those who watched. This representation of women from colonized places as Other and objectified to be consumed by the European (male) gaze is also represented in *Spirit of the Dead Watching* of 1892 (Fig. II) where a young girl, namely Teha'amana, Gauguin's teenaged *vahine*, is placed on the bed in a very suggestive position. Her eyes and body language may depict fear; staring back at the viewer, she confronts him with her vulnerability. This painting suggests not only the sexuality of the Tahitian woman, but also the difference: a division in cultural understanding that the European is unlikely to understand. In a letter to his wife Gauguin says,

I have painted a young girl in the nude. In this position a trifle more, and she becomes indecent. However I want it this way as the lines and movement interest me. So I make her look a little frightened. This fright must be excused if not explained in the character of a person, a Maohi. This people have by tradition a great fear of the dead. One of our young girls would be startled if surprised in such a posture. Not so a woman here ... Here endeth the little sermon, which will arm you against the critics when they bombard you with their malicious questions.<sup>21</sup>

However, his statements to his wife highlights the youth of the figure as well as her fear, and further suggests, "she is to be viewed as weak and subservient."<sup>22</sup>

I would suggest this painting could be seen as yet another instance of the Tahitian woman being represented as a sexual object, one that upholds the stereotypes of literature (including Gauguin's own writing) that was published in France during this period. There are also obvious ties with modern European art during this time. *Spirit of the Dead Watching* and Édouard

---

<sup>21</sup> Eisenman. *Paul Gauguin: Artists of Myth and Dream*. Skira. 2008. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Eisenman. *Paul Gauguin: Artists of Myth and Dream*. Skira. 2008. 47.

Manet's *Olympia* (Fig. III), of which Gauguin had painted a copy in 1891, both display a reclining nude woman, with a similar background of a black figure. Although different, Manet's composition focuses on a Parisian prostitute as Gauguin similarly highlights the sexual objectification of his foregrounded Tahitian model. Yet Gauguin changes the skin color, making Manet's black servant the main focus, the reclining woman.<sup>23</sup>

Similar to the way *Spirit of the Dead Watching* highlights the 'exotic' difference of Tahitian culture is *Arii Matamoe (The Royal End)* (Fig. IV). Completed in 1892, it is a work that depicts Gauguin's search for an exotic land. This painting represents an imagined narrative, a myth that he had hoped to find based in reality when he arrived in Tahiti. *Arii matamoe* represents a constructed narrative by Gauguin that depicts the "myth of the still- cannibalistic island,"<sup>24</sup> signified by the severed head in the foreground of the painting. Here Gauguin invents his own story for Tahiti, one constructed around the myth of the gruesome savage. By creating this work Gauguin aligns the legends of the Areoi dynasty with present-day Tahiti and as a result suggests that savagery is still present. Not only does he reimagine the present Tahitian culture with this severed head, he incorporated figures that can be representative of Peruvian, not Tahitian culture, seen through the woman in the background, possibly there to keep guard. This woman is constructed in a way that resembles the Peruvian Mummy form, hunched over, with hands by her head.<sup>25</sup> In this depiction both ancient Tahitian myth as well as Peruvian culture is combined to construct an inaccurate representation of Tahiti. Gauguin spent a portion of his childhood with his mother's family in Peru and possibly used his time spent there for inspiration

---

<sup>23</sup> Pollock. *Avant-Garde Gambits 1888-1893: Gender and the Colour of Art History*. 1993. 16-28, 67-72.

<sup>24</sup> Kahn. "Gauguin's First Stay on Tahiti, Society Islands, 1891-93." Suzanne Greub, *Gauguin Polynesia*. 2011. 169.

<sup>25</sup> Andersen. "Gauguin and a Peruvian Mummy." *Burlington Magazine* 109.769. Apr. 1967. 238.

for his works. *Arii Matamoe* as well as his *Jug In the Form of A Head, Self-Portrait* (Fig. V.) that displays him as a decapitated criminal in the form of an Incan spirit vessel could show his continued use of Peruvian culture for inspiration.<sup>26</sup> In both *Arii Matamoe* as well as his self-portrait Gauguin draws from his Peruvian heritage as well as contemporary French culture. The theme of decapitation may link these pieces with France and the widespread use of the guillotine during the Revolution as well as afterwards in the execution of criminals.

Through *Arii Matamoe*, one sees the appropriation of past myths, the incorporation of French Revolutionary and disciplinary culture, and a completely separate, very different country's funerary figure. Gauguin continuously draws connections between what he sees, or wishes to see in Tahiti with other cultures he is somewhat familiar with. In a similar way this eclectic melding of cultures in his work can also be seen in *Spirit of the Dead Watching*. This work, perhaps more understandably so, references the classical reclining nude of the European tradition, while inventing its own racial messages. Overall, much of what Gauguin created while in Polynesia was a mixing of different cultures, a creative construction that was to represent the exoticism he wished to find in Tahiti.<sup>27</sup> When he was met with the European colonial influence, he constructed his own fictional paradise and he created his 'studio of the tropics' with his own imagination of what he had hoped to find: a new land and culture to explore. Further, although we know he stated he wished to experience Tahiti and its culture, his actions were contradictory. It is recorded that Gauguin did not make the same effort to experience those parts of 'primitive' Tahitian culture that were still available and untouched by outside influences. When it came to

---

<sup>26</sup> Brettell, et al., *The Art of Paul Gauguin*. Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1988, cat. no. 64, catalog entry by Françoise Cachin.

<sup>27</sup> Braun. "Paul Gauguin's Indian Identity: How Ancient Pottery Inspired His Art." *Art History*, vol. 9 (March 1986), 36-54, specifically looking at 50 on diffusionist theories linking Peru and Tahiti.

normal practices of the day-to-day life of Tahitians that were still imbedded in their past traditions, Gauguin did not partake. Elizabeth Childs describes how Gauguin was used to “buying tinned food and French wine at the Chinese convenience store and depending on the generosity of Tahitian neighbors to bring him fresh foodstuffs, [which suggests] that he never fully adapted to the indigenous patterns of obtaining food,”<sup>28</sup> and supports the argument for Gauguin’s lack of commitment to truly experiencing their culture.

I argue that through his artwork and social practices Gauguin, possibly unconsciously, acted as a colonial force. He submitted to French colonialism by creating propaganda through his art that gave viewers the idea of a place that was not real. In his art the social and political climate is never discussed; we never see violence; we only see the use of a vibrant color palette and imagery of an exotic place filled with mystery. By taking a creative approach, and depicting a fictionalized view of what he wished to find in Tahiti, Gauguin only helped to perpetuate the myth of Tahiti. His work will forever be remembered on postcards and in tourist information, but similar to other colonial artists of his time, he did not depict the colonial atmosphere and the suppression of a culture that was occurring during this period in Tahiti. Stephen Eisenman submits, “Gauguin was a ‘poacher;’ (Pissarro) like other French colonists, he wished to ‘replenish himself’ – his masculinity, his imagination and his purse – at the expense of the Tahitians,”<sup>29</sup> and I must agree that he is guilty of poaching aspects of different cultures in order to reaffirm himself. His motives were entirely driven by selfish economic expectations, as he hoped to sell his exotic painting back in France.

---

<sup>28</sup> Childs. *Vanishing Paradise, Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti*. 2013. 29.

<sup>29</sup> Eisenman. *Paul Gauguin: Artists of Myth and Dream*. Skira. 2008. 51.

### Chapter III

#### *'Primitive' and the History of Polynesian Art*

Through this exploration it is important to note how the colonial lens has been applied to Polynesia and Tahiti through the presence of colonial forces and artists.<sup>30</sup> I argue that Paul Gauguin is one of these artists; he refused to display the colonial presence and the changing of a culture, which only perpetuated the idea of the exotic paradise and brought more European attention to the island. Gauguin is as guilty as any artist who came before him or after him of transforming colonial subjects (Tahitians) into what Kahn calls “objects of curiosity.”<sup>31</sup> However, I would like to turn my attention to Polynesian art during the time as well as what has been created and sold since Gauguin’s time. Because so many different groups, even before the colonization of Polynesia and definitely up to the present day, occupied Tahiti, a rich but very unique artistic history has been created there. Before looking at Tahitian contemporary art it is important to see how their presence in the art world has evolved.

As previously mentioned, some of the first outsiders to spend an extended period of time on the island were those from the London Missionary Society in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During the time that LMS was in Tahiti and Polynesia they converted many of the islanders to Christianity. Through correspondence we have from missionaries, it is easy to see that they largely viewed the Polynesians as heathens.<sup>32</sup> While there, they preached against idolatry and tattooing practices because they believed these art forms were connected to pagan roots. The preaching of the LMS

---

<sup>30</sup> Colonial artists such as John Weber, John la Farge, and Henry Adams as well as numerous colonial photographers added to this oeuvre.

<sup>31</sup> Kahn. *Tahiti Beyond the Postcard*. 2011. 51.

<sup>32</sup> Edmond. *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin*. 1997. 98.



as well as the conversion of so much of the Tahitian population to Christianity forever changed the artistic culture of the island. According to Anna Laura Jones,

Some of the most prestigious craft specialties disappeared with the decline of traditional religion. The production of temples and religious statuary ceased completely after the mass conversions to Christianity ...traditional status ornaments such as fans, fly whisks, and featherwork also disappeared during this period.<sup>33</sup>

These objects and art works formerly made on the island in connection with their pre-contact way of life or their ancient religion have since lost most of their meaning. The success of the Christian conversion, paired with the 'collecting' by explorers and visitors of Polynesian art works and objects, left very little for either anthropologists looking for 'traditional' art or Polynesians searching for their own history.

With the first explorers and visitors to Polynesia there began a process of collection: collection of stories, of photographs, of objects, that would serve as a snapshot of a 'primitive' land for display back home. The LMS and other missionaries are definitely guilty of taking these objects back with them to Europe even though they regarded them as anti-Christian. However, perhaps more guilty of starting this process of collecting historical art works and objects were the early explorers and artists who visited the islands. The collection of historical objects by outsiders to take with them in order to create their own cabinets of curiosity at home was widely practiced. They would take pieces of Tahitian culture back with them usually after only gaining a minimal understanding of what these objects were used for. This was a process

---

<sup>33</sup> Jones. *Contemporary Folk Art in French Polynesia: A Dissertation to the Department of Anthropology and the Committee on Graduate Studies of Stanford University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degrees of Doctor of Philosophy*. 1991. 84.

that perpetuated the Western idea of the ‘Other’ as mysterious and exotic and left historical Tahitian culture and beliefs largely as a mystery.

An example of one 19<sup>th</sup> century collector is Frank Burnett, born in Scotland, who immigrated to Canada and worked various jobs throughout his lifetime that allowed him to spend twenty years travelling in the South Pacific. During his travels he brought nearly twelve hundred objects back from the Pacific to display in his personal museum.<sup>34</sup> He was a collector who transitioned from the unconcerned 19<sup>th</sup>- century practices to the new practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that required more attention to how objects were collected and their history. Some of his collecting was done in a reckless spirit of opportunism. One of his writings notes “‘ransacking most of the principle houses, and securing all the articles I could find that were of any interest to me ...’” This statement would be worrisome to a 21<sup>st</sup>-century museum.<sup>35</sup> Philip J.C. Dark says in a footnote that ‘ransacking’ had a different connotation during the period but this still leaves what actually happened a mystery. Burnett was in no way a trained academic, but he was a curious tourist and collector and his records are for the most part detailed. Most of Burnett’s collection was donated to the University of British Columbia where, according to Dark, “difficult questions about acquisition practices and ownership,” were “simply not asked.”<sup>36</sup> Burnett lived “in the spirit of a different time”<sup>37</sup> and provides an example of somewhat early collecting processes that left a lot to be questioned, but not a lot of answers when it came to the history, function, use, and possible religious connection of objects.

---

<sup>34</sup> Dark. *Pacific Art: Persistence, Change and Meaning*. In *The Spirit of a Different Time: The Legacy of Early Collecting Practices in the Pacific*. Carol E. Mayer. 2002. 221.

<sup>35</sup> Dark. *Pacific Art: Persistence, Change and Meaning*. 2002. In *The Spirit of a Different Time: The Legacy of Early Collecting Practices in the Pacific*. 222.

<sup>36</sup> Dark. *Pacific Art: Persistence, Change and Meaning*. In *The Spirit of a Different Time: The Legacy of Early Collecting Practices in the Pacific*. 2002. 222.

<sup>37</sup> Dark. *Pacific Art: Persistence, Change and Meaning*. In *The Spirit of a Different Time: The Legacy of Early Collecting Practices in the Pacific*. 2002. 219.

Ralph Linton, one of the great figures in the development of the field of anthropology is another example of a later visitor to the islands in the 1920s. During his lifetime he was known for taking a special interest in ‘primitive art.’ Through his career the term ‘primitive’ art was the categorization for “art coming from Africa, Oceania, North American Indian art and the Middle and South Americas,”<sup>38</sup> and even though today one would rarely hear the art found in these places being termed as ‘primitive,’ “the world of dealers have found it more advantageous to stick with [the term] to sell their pieces rather than ride with less emotive differentiations of the arts of different people.”<sup>39</sup> Dark’s contribution to the book, *Pacific Art: Persistence, Change and Meaning*, looks at the progression that has taken place in the case of Pacific art. He looks at how the museum’s responsibility has changed and works of art once termed ‘primitive,’ from different places are put together in different ways that require a viewer not to look at them purely through a Westerner’s lens. This is a concept that is widely accepted now, but for a long time many museums refused to look at the art from this viewpoint, or perhaps simply could not think of a better and more subjective way to present these objects. Since Linton’s time, discussion of postcolonial theory has placed the question of categorization and presentation of objects found in the colonized world in question.

One development in the past fifty years for Tahiti was the creation of The Museum of Tahiti and the Islands that officially opened in 1979. This museum is supported by the French government but is to be used as a public institution that would teach and instill the “cultural policy of the territory.”<sup>40</sup> The territory funds the museum, while assistance is still given from the French government. An article written by the then- curator Anne Lavondes describes the desire

---

<sup>38</sup> Dark. *Pacific Art: Persistence, Change and Meaning*. 2002. 14.

<sup>39</sup> Dark. *Pacific Art: Persistence, Change and Meaning*. 2002. 17.

<sup>40</sup> Lavondes. “The Museum of Tahiti and the Islands: Towards Realistic Policies and Practice.” 1981. *Journal Museum International* Vol. 33. Issue. 2. 118.

to find objects, especially mundane ones that have been collected and forgotten, to display in the museum in order to educate those on the islands about cultural customs of the past. She notes how difficult it has been to learn that “in those countries where there are numerous museums, and objects are piled up in the storerooms, how much indifference and ignorance there is, whether intentional or not, of the existence of small museums in tropical countries.”<sup>41</sup> Lavondes stresses the difficulty that small museums have especially upon opening to gather enough objects on loan to facilitate educational discourse. She points out the paradox that comes along with loan requirements when a new museum leases objects (such as your institution has to prove to have correct climatic conditions and a good record).

Another point that Lavondes makes in her discussion of The Museum of Tahiti and the Islands is the long history of taking objects out of Tahiti and the cost it had on their society. Lavondes looks at the difficulty of obtaining mundane objects to display in order to give some historical education as discussed above, but she also touches on the absence of any benefit Tahiti received during archeological research. She states that “archaeological objects and also documents (lists of their genealogies written down by the Polynesians) were exported for the purpose of scientific study by research workers,” yet, “not only do the results of the work carried out by these various expeditions not always reach Tahiti, but in addition it is often very difficult, if not impossible, to get back the original documents or objects that were removed.”<sup>42</sup> Lavondes describes the volatile nature of these past collecting practices, such as the ones discussed above, and recognizes the ongoing struggle that Tahiti will face in order to gain a better cultural understanding of its past. She tries to remain non-accusatory but when discussing museums that

---

<sup>41</sup> Lavondes. “The Museum of Tahiti and the Islands: Towards Realistic Policies and Practice.” 1981. *Journal Museum International* Vol. 33. Issue. 2. 118.

<sup>42</sup> Lavondes. *The Museum of Tahiti and the Islands: Towards Realistic Policies and Practice*. 1981. *Journal Museum International* Vol. 33. Issue. 2. 120.

have collected pieces of third-world art, perhaps opportunistically such as the Museum of British Columbia that acquired Mr. Burnett's collection (without asking a few important questions about his process of collection) she has understandable difficulty. She gives an example of the American Museum of Natural History in New York and her request to them to loan or return some objects they collected while excavating the Marquesas and their response to her that the museum cannot lend "previously illustrated materials."<sup>43</sup> She illustrates the paradoxical and frustrating status that third-world museums and cultural centers occupy when trying to explore their own culture and being met with rejection from collecting institutions that most likely obtained their objects from these places illegally.

#### **Chapter IV**

##### *Polynesia and Tahiti Occupying a Postcolonial Space*

The social and political climate of Tahiti has obviously evolved since Gauguin's time on the island. During his time in Polynesia even he spoke about the nature of the colonial society as mirroring the class system back in France, perhaps hinting at the possibility of Tahiti's decline into a similar bourgeois society as well. Since his time there Tahiti experienced internal and external strife. Polynesians up to the present continue to be controlled and exploited by France. Even though the United Nations General Assembly placed French Polynesia on the list of territories that should be decolonized in 2013 and requested that French "facilitate rapid progress ... towards a self-determination process,"<sup>44</sup> Tahiti remains under French control. In his book, John Connell summarized the island life as the result of centuries of colonialism transforming, "unspoiled cultures, whilst indigenous history was erased in favor of a legacy of western

---

<sup>43</sup> Lavondes. "The Museum of Tahiti and the Islands: Towards Realistic Policies and Practice." 1981. *Journal Museum International* Vol. 33. Issue. 2.120.

<sup>44</sup> "French Polynesia profile- Overview." BBC News. March 17, 2015.

representation,”<sup>45</sup> that has left the South Seas seeming to be “both an untouched paradise yet shaped by the visits of island explorers and dreamers,”<sup>46</sup> and one can see how Polynesians deal with the effects of colonialism in their society.

The ‘spectre of inauthenticity’ has become embedded in the discourse of islanders. In the rejection of western perception – and the racism, colonialism and marginalization that were part of this – a more idyllic, pre-colonial space was created that had striking parallels with the islands and islanders that Europeans believed they had discovered in Polynesia.<sup>47</sup>

Today Polynesians are trying to recode their culture to satisfy contemporary ancestral pride in the best ways they can after years of having their traditional culture suppressed by outside influences and beliefs. In Tahiti Polynesians have begun to recode based on heritage.

Even in the last hundred years Tahiti has continued to feel the consequences of the colonial presence on their nation. Since France has not released control of Tahiti or helped the “self-determination process,” France remains in control.<sup>48</sup> As a result, in the 1960s France established the Centre d’Expérimentation du Pacifique on the island. At these facilities, “France conducted 41 atmospheric tests on the Mururoa atoll and neighbouring Fangataufa from 1966.”<sup>49</sup> This testing occurred through 1996 and was met with large and violent protests in Papeete, the capital of Tahiti. The pro-independence party in Tahiti vehemently objected to the testing while other parties backed the autonomy granted by France. This continuing differentiation in politics creates instability in the fight against colonial exploitive forces. Since the atomic tests were

---

<sup>45</sup> Connell. *Island Dreaming: The Contemplation of Polynesian Paradise*. 2013. 569.

<sup>46</sup> Connell. *Island Dreaming: The Contemplation of Polynesian Paradise*. 2013. 569.

<sup>47</sup> Connell. *Island Dreaming: The Contemplation of Polynesian Paradise*. 2013. 573.

<sup>48</sup> “French Polynesia profile- Overview.” BBC News. March 17, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> “French Polynesia profile- Overview.” BBC News. March 17, 2015.

performed in Tahiti, there has been a severance package introduced for anyone who worked in the weapon test sites. What atomic testing did bring to Tahiti during that time were jobs, an increase in commodity culture, and further economic development.

In Anna Laura Jones' time spent in Tahiti researching for her doctoral dissertation, she identified the same divisions. It seems that there is a separation between those who stand up against colonial forces and those who believe the colonial presence is for the better. During Jones' time in Tahiti she noted one way Tahitians have chosen to show this division. She found there is now a diverse population in Tahiti and there are labels given to designate those of Polynesian descent and those that are of mixed ancestry. A 'Demi' is a person who has Polynesian ancestry mixed with another, usually used to refer to European-Polynesians. It seemed to her to be important to decipher distinctions between Polynesians, Europeans, and Chinese. By creating markers such as these to divide and identify those living in Polynesia, the locals have taken back a sense of identity. The term Demi is not a highly regarded signifier as it may have been in the past. Jones explains that before the 1970s and 80s Demi may have signified a higher class or level of education that was respected. However, Polynesians today align the Demis with those who have acculturated into Western lifestyles. Polynesians largely criticize Demis for "violating egalitarian norms by acting proud, and Demis [look] down on Polynesians for living in such a backwards way."<sup>50</sup> Tahitians seem to continue to deal with their colonial past by trying to reclaim a sense of identity, and in many ways they have started to valorize their ancestral identity, aligning those of Polynesian descent with generous, pious, and humble characteristics and adversely aligning those of a different descent as selfish, greedy, and proud.

---

<sup>50</sup> Jones. *Contemporary Folk Art in French Polynesia*. 1991. 13.

## Chapter V

### *The Contemporary Movement*

In my research I encountered a few different categorizations of modern or contemporary Polynesian art. Philip J.C. Dark submits seven different developments in Polynesian art: one, putting ‘old’ and ‘new’ side by side; two, using old forms as national symbols; three, creating a synthesis of new that puts the artist between two worlds; four, re-immersing in old forms of art to create new expressions of it with modern creativity; five, creating art for travellers; six, a replication of local arts for local consumption; and the seventh, expressing an artistic heritage with local folk art.<sup>51</sup> In her time spent researching in Tahiti, Anna Laura Jones broke these categorizations down further in order to look at different art forms that use these developmental concepts. She looked at the difference between two types of tradition in Tahiti, the “rural Tahitian lifestyle of the past hundred years, including a strong faith in Christianity,” and the second type of traditionalism that she calls the ‘revitalization movement,’ which has also been called “the Ma’ohi movement ... [that] looks to Tahitian culture as it existed at the time of European contact in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century for its model of Tahitian tradition.”<sup>52</sup> Both Jones’ and Dark’s observations identify a reemergence of ‘traditional’ Tahitian culture and the reclamation of historical practices. After spending time in Polynesia both Dark and Jones attested to the interplay between customs brought to Polynesia by colonial influence, and a desire by native islanders to reclaim a sense of history and identity in their artistic practices. This chapter will be broken up into two subsections. The first section will discuss the visual arts in Polynesia

---

<sup>51</sup> Dark. *Pacific Art: Persistence, Change and Meaning*. 2002. In the Spirit of a Different Time: The Legacy of Early Collecting Practices in the Pacific. 34.

<sup>52</sup> Jones. *Contemporary Folk Art in French Polynesia*. 1991. 7.



including tourist art, cultural centers, and traditional art forms. The latter will deal the rich verbal and literary tradition that has budded in the South Pacific.

Along with the increase in pride in their culture discussed above, Polynesians have begun to look more to their ancestors in order to gain inspiration for their art. One movement that Jones identified was the Ma'ohi movement. This movement “rejects the Tahitian culture of the Christian and colonial period and defines tradition as customs from the pre-contact period.”<sup>53</sup> It is often aligned with the independence movement because this movement has adopted the term Ma'ohi as well, and as a movement they appeal to a “pan-Pacific, Third World identity in their search for support for the independence struggle.”<sup>54</sup>

There are many different ways in which the Ma'ohi movement as well as others attempts to recode Tahitian art. As with any movement there are protagonists and antagonists – the Ma'ohi movement is met with opposition from different groups. One of the biggest opposing forces it encounters in particular would be that of the ‘rural tradition,’ of those who prefer how they have lived in the past century (post-contact).<sup>55</sup> Many of this group have religious objections to the creation of art made before missionary contact. When discussing the postcolonial space of Tahiti, space refers to a place or idea, “simultaneously a locus and a medium (a thing and a process) that can become both a site and a symbol of political struggle.”<sup>56</sup> It must be noted that not every Tahitian is in opposition to the effect of the colonial presence and what it has meant for them. The postcolonial space that Tahitian art occupies is in flux, even as a large portion of the Tahitian population is beginning to look towards their ancestral roots and gain momentum through these outlets.

---

<sup>53</sup> Jones. *Contemporary Folk Art in French Polynesia*. 1991. 14.

<sup>54</sup> Jones. *Contemporary Folk Art in French Polynesia*. 1991. 14.

<sup>55</sup> Jones. *Contemporary Folk Art in French Polynesia*. 1991. 8.

<sup>56</sup> Kahn. *Thaiti Beyond the Postcard: Power Place, and Everyday Life*. 2011. 164.

Many different obstacles affect the potential future of art in these places, including how to interpret and understand fine art coming from areas of postcolonial space. Some people such as researchers and anthropologists have chosen to try to identify how certain artifacts were used in order to interpret and preserve this history of material things. There are very few contemporaries that can trace a record of art and culture to the past before colonialism and therefore many are trying to preserve these memories and traditions that may be able to be passed on. As Gauguin had already begun to experience, globalization has a huge effect on culture, and will undoubtedly morph the art and culture of the postcolonial space. Looking at tourist art, market economies, the dependence on global markets and modern goods, we can see the undeniable effect of globalization on these cultures that are fighting to hold on to their historical definition of place.

The tourist market, as in Gauguin's time, seems not be of too much concern. The demand for cheap goods to sell to tourists is still high and this will not likely change. Rather, the promotion of cultural centers that allow Polynesians the freedom to explore and express their creativity is what needs to be promoted, and not because we could lose what used to be considered 'primitive' art to the Western world, but because these practices are what root cultures and allow them to write their own narrative of space. Contemporary art in places like Tahiti and other South Pacific islands needs to be promoted from these cultural centers as well as world wide in order to allow cultures to redefine a space that has been for decades looked at from the perspective of 'primitive,' or remembered as the 'exotic paradise' that Gauguin mythically created for them. The long-lasting impact of Gauguin's perpetuation of the 'exotic paradise' myth can be seen in postcards and even in the fine arts of the last fifty years. To view an example of a modern image taken from the Western gaze I turn to photographer Burt Glinn and his 1960s

French Polynesia photo series. The photograph *Burt Glinn and Friend* (1960) (Fig. VI) is representative of how little the depiction of Tahiti has changed. When one compares this modern representation (from a Western view) to *Lady in the Water* (*Vahine i te pape*) (Fig. VII) from 1891, it becomes apparent that the exotic nature and the emphasis on the possibility of ‘willing women’ in Tahiti has not changed.

Perhaps partially due to this myth, tourism is still a huge economic drive for Tahiti today. After a century of postcard depictions of this ‘utopic’ paradise, and with the inception of international air travel and cruise ships visiting the islands, there was an influx of tourism from across the globe. With this tourism there is art made especially for tourists, as both Dark and Jones related. Tourist objects do not necessarily have to use native materials, carry any meaning, or even be made in Tahiti, because those who consume them just see these works as ‘primitive,’ when in reality they could have been made in China out of cheap materials and sold to visitors. However, tourism brings more than money to Tahiti. Tourists come curious about this mysterious land. Partially in order to accommodate tourists and partially as a way to revitalize their culture, the Tahitian government started a project to create a cultural center and restore ancient *marae* sites.

A project that was undertaken between 2000 and 2001 was the remodel and construction of a cultural center at one of the largest *marae* sites in Tahiti in Maeva. In her book Miriam Kahn explains how construction changed this space, “from the villagers’ ‘place’ to the government’s ‘place’ – [and] offers insights into how local and territorial politics play critical roles in these transformations.”<sup>57</sup> She looks at the *marae* (traditional ceremonial meeting or sacred spaces in which Tahitians would remember their ancestors) sites in Maeva and the

---

<sup>57</sup> Kahn. *Tahiti Beyond the Postcard*. 2011. 156.

construction of the Fare Pote'e, a cultural center to educate visitors about the ancient *marae*. This place is situated in a village where the villagers have lived around the *marae* since their construction. Even though these sites "have not been used regularly for religious rituals since the missionaries suppressed non-Christian beliefs ... they continue to be deeply respected places that mark the presence of deities and ancestors."<sup>58</sup> This space still has meaning and connection for the villagers as well as other Tahitians as it provides a connection to the past. These *marae* are still "prominent features in the Tahitian landscape, physical remnants of ancient, sacred sites that today still provide Polynesians with an emotional and spiritual sense of identity and historical continuity."<sup>59</sup> For Tahitians these sites represent their ancestors; they are not used for religious practices but give a tie to their ancient past that, as discussed above, has been largely taken from them through collection and destruction. These sites are ones that have mostly remained on the island and can still give insights into their past (Fig. VIII). They are very different from the colonialist fantasy image found in Gauguin's painting *Parahi Te Marae (There is the Marae)* (Fig. IX.), which appropriates eclectic sources from the Marquesas Islands, rather than Tahiti itself, and provide an important link to Tahiti's pre-contact past.<sup>60</sup>

In an effort to create a better understanding of past cultures on the island of Tahiti the government has taken over the Maeva site. They have become the ones in charge, along with historians, ethnographers, and anthropologists, who take on the responsibility of decoding and making sense of this space in a way that can be understood by both islanders and tourists alike. When the government gave this site its facelift, they completely rebuilt two of the *marae*. Even though the majority of the island of Tahiti now identifies as Christian, the locals still regard the

---

<sup>58</sup> Kahn. *Tahiti Beyond the Postcard*. 2011. 160.

<sup>59</sup> Kahn. *Tahiti Beyond the Postcard*. 2011. 159.

<sup>60</sup> Varnedoe. "Gauguin." In *Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup> century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. vol.1. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 2002, 192-95.

*marae* with respect. Kahn relates a conversation with one of her friends, a Seventh Day Adventist who said, “It’s okay to clean up the *marae*, to pull out the weeds and pick up the trash. But it’s wrong to disturb them thus much. They are living *marae*. These are our ancestors.”<sup>61</sup> This conversation could relate the sentiments of many Tahitians. The colonizers brought with them a new religion to follow, and took many of their objects for museums or destroyed them so there would be no idolatry, but there is still a level of connection and respect that Tahitians have with their history, their past, and their ancestors. Although the new *marae* site serves as a cultural center that displays ancient *marae* (along side rebuilt *marae*) and holds the Fare Pote’e cultural center, this site simultaneously displays how the drive for increased tourism has crippled cultural practices and native thought regarding ancient structures and art forms.

The Maeva *marae* site is an example of the Society Islands trying to decode and recode this historical space in order to allow people to understand part of Tahiti’s rich culture. Yet the Tahitian government’s way of doing this can be seen as very disrespectful to some islanders. Artists such as those who identify with the Ma’ohi movements and other contemporary artists who attempt to revive ancient art like tattooing practices are the ones trying to decode their colonial past and reestablish a contemporary art culture. It is they who fight back against the deterioration or morphing of history.

Along with these cultural centers and developments made to further understanding of past customs in Tahiti there is also a long history of Tahitian artisans and different types of art and objects that continue to define the Tahitian lifestyle. Customary fabrics as well as traditional home décor continue to be present in Tahiti. These types of self-consciously traditional art forms

---

<sup>61</sup> Kahn. *Tahiti Beyond the Postcard*. 2011. 175.

have been passed down by ways of elders and other teachers, ministers, and popular media.<sup>62</sup> I think it is important to look at some examples of this ‘self-consciously’ traditional style. Since the growth of the Tahitian infrastructure, especially after the late 1960s and 70s with the growth in population due to atomic testing, there was an increase in demand for craftsmen and the revival of the arts like sculpture, tattooing, dance, and music. I would like to explore how in all of these art forms there is an interesting play between creating something novel and creative, and the drive to be traditional.

Looking at contemporary Tahitian dance it must be acknowledged that many of these dance groups are often hired to perform at tourist destinations and resorts. In this guise they are put on display, similar to the dancers brought to the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1889. However, today many of the dance groups have tried as best they can to emulate traditional dance groups and explore Tahitian folklore. As a way to take back control of their traditional practices, dance is now taught in public schools, at church, and can be learned by watching local groups perform at the annual Heiva i Tahiti festival, which translates to “The Celebration of Life,”<sup>63</sup> that used to happen one day per year as a celebration of France’s national holiday, Bastille day. Since 1977, when Tahiti gained greater autonomy Heiva i Tahiti serves instead as a celebration of Tahitian culture that showcases Tahitian dance and music groups as well as traditional sporting practices and that lasts almost the entire month of July. Through their education of the youth, Tahitians are reinstating a cultural practice that was largely lost during Christian conversion. Tahitian dancers create dances and costumes intended to impress viewers

---

<sup>62</sup> Jones. *Contemporary Folk Art in French Polynesia*. 1991. 185.

<sup>63</sup> “Heiva I Tahiti.” *Tahiti Tourisme North America*. 2015. Web. 28 October 2015.

as well as display traditional roots.<sup>64</sup> In order to ground themselves in tradition they ironically sometimes must turn to early illustrations of Tahitian dancers from explorers' journals.<sup>65</sup>

Tattoo practices, which did not particularly interest Gauguin, have also been revived on the island. One Maori and an American are credited with bringing back the art of tattooing with bone needles to the island in 1982.<sup>66</sup> Tattooing had continued to be practiced in other parts of Polynesia through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but in Tahiti Marquesan tattoo artists as well as Samoan and New Zealand themes supplemented the revival of this traditional practice. In Tahiti the Tahitian tattoo artists have adopted the pre-contact title of tahu'a. Many of these artists continue to practice other traditional arts or ceremonies and have gained support from traditional dance groups, artists, as well as prominent Demi families.<sup>67</sup> Their work is associated with the revitalization of pre-contact culture and due to this there is also a resistance to their art. Today the Tahiti and Her Islands Museum hosts a Polynesian tattoo convention where this cultural practice is taught and explored by Polynesian artists as well as others from around the world.

Another art form being practiced today in Tahiti is sculpture. When Gauguin visited, he did his own 'primitive' sculptures in the absence of local traditions that had died out. Jones credits the revival of interest in this art and the rejection of the creation of tiki figures and nightlights to the increase in building as well as the formation of the Centre Métiers d'Arts in Maaao that opened in 1981.<sup>68</sup> The Centre Métiers d'Arts teaches men and women how to carve objects like traditional Maori feather boxes, jewelry, stone adzes on wooden handles, and a different *umete* (bowls). However, similar to the challenges that the other artists discussed above

---

<sup>64</sup> See Figures X and XI.

<sup>65</sup> Jones. *Contemporary Folk Art in French Polynesia*. 1991. 93.

<sup>66</sup> Jones. *Contemporary Folk Art in French Polynesia*. 1991. 89.

<sup>67</sup> Jones. *Contemporary Folk Art in French Polynesia*. 1991. 90.

<sup>68</sup> Jones. *Contemporary Folk Art in French Polynesia*. 1991. 86.

face, there is a lack of reference when it comes to specifically Tahitian art forms. Instead this center teaches students art forms taken from the Marquesas and other Polynesian islands rather than the pre-contact style of the Society Islands (including Tahiti). Their teaching method is to provide students with the technical means to understand the tools and techniques used to develop their own style while mixing these different cultural influences.<sup>69</sup> Due to the fact that there is little reference of specifically Tahitian sculptural practices pre-contact, Tahitians are left to create eclectic works that stem from different traditions but seem to make a new style of their own due to the lack of historical reference that other Polynesian nations still possess (at least in part). Some examples of this style can be seen in Figures XII and XIII.

Te Ao Mā'ohi is the phrase that has been suggested as the replacement for the term French Polynesia if France ever releases its claim upon the islands<sup>70</sup>. The Maohi are the people that occupy this space. Besides the visual art movements that aim to recode 'traditional' art, there are also many vibrant literary voices in this space who relate their feelings regarding colonialism and the effects the French had on their culture. One such artist is Sia Figiel, a female Polynesian novelist and poet. Figiel's writing addresses certain myths that were widely regarded by the western world as fact because of a number of artists who upheld a romantic vision of Polynesia. Some elements of her writing especially deal with: "the obsession with Samoan and Polynesian (female) sexuality within European discourse; the internal gender politics of Samoan society; and the influence of Western education, media and consumer capitalism upon young Samoan women."<sup>71</sup> This particular theme in Figiel's writing is representative of the frustration

---

<sup>69</sup> Website for the Centre Métiers d'Arts.

<sup>70</sup> Manoa Journal, Vol. 17. No. 2. 2005. University of Hawai'i Press. *Te Ao Ma'ohi: An Overview*.

<sup>71</sup> Keown. *Postcolonial Pacific Writing: Representations of the Body*. 2009. 38.



that many Polynesians have regarding the colonial lens and the effect colonists had on their homelands as well as on the views surrounding their society.

As a modern Polynesian woman writer, Sia Figiel feels the need to address the “European literary and intellectual legacy in the Pacific,” and she does this through reconstructing her female characters as embodiments of the women she sees in her daily life, as the antithesis of how they are represented through European accounts and history. She draws attention to how the attitudes of the past, “race-relations politics in the nineteenth century in particular, are still extant in contemporary Western society, [and] epitomized in the tourist industry, which exploits European (mis)conceptions of an explicit link between tourism and voyeurism.”<sup>72</sup> She counters this by creating characters who dispel or challenge the representations of Tahitian people created years ago by artists like Gauguin, and through the literature of Loti and Herman Melville. Figiel, as a Polynesian woman has obviously taken offense towards the negative stereotypes of the sexually promiscuous women in this exotic paradise that have continued through today.<sup>73</sup>

Sia Figiel’s work is in many ways the recoding of past colonial authors such as Loti, whose work was dispersed in France in an effort to encourage citizens to go to Polynesia to help colonize. It was literature like Loti’s that most likely influenced people like Herman Melville and Paul Gauguin to travel to Polynesia as discussed earlier. As Figiel would claim, all of these artists are guilty of creating stories that upheld the myth of Polynesia. The myth, the depiction of a “sexual paradise which does not exist,” is the stereotype that Figiel tries to deconstruct. Figiel is an intellectual woman who understands the repercussions of Western artists’ colonial depictions of her home and especially of her sex. Michelle Keown’s book *Postcolonial Pacific Writing* describes the vicious cycle that was created by men like Gauguin, the “western male

---

<sup>72</sup> Keown. *Postcolonial Pacific Writing: Representations of the Body*. 2009. 42.

<sup>73</sup> See Glinn, French Polynesia Photo Series, 1960.

who comes to Polynesia in a search of sexual gratification, staking his claim to the territory by burdening his island lovers with (hybrid offspring),”<sup>74</sup> not to mention syphilis, and how these men formed connection to the exoticism of Tahiti through fathering often-illegitimate children. As a way to counter this cycle and perpetuation of myth, Figiel’s depiction of women in her writing are often very pious; they embody “a society where female chastity is strictly enforced.”<sup>75</sup> I see Figiel as a contemporary artist rejecting the colonial lens that has fallen over her people and decoding the myths perpetuated by earlier artists like Gauguin. I believe that due to the hegemony of Gauguin’s work as visual image, the strongest subversion of its mythology has come in the form of words.

Another strong example of a literary artist counteracting the Western view is Selina Tustala Marsh, another Samoan writer. She looks at the spectacle that “guys like Gauguin” have created surrounding the South Seas. Her poem below attests to the anger Polynesians feel as a result of European white males, “desiring em young,” that resulted in people like Gauguin bringing his “syphilitic body downstream,” to test hypotheses about the uncivilized.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Keown. *Post Colonial Pacific Writing: Representations of the Body*. 2009. 44.

<sup>75</sup> Keown. *Post Colonial Pacific Writing: Representations of the Body*. 2009. 48.

<sup>76</sup> Banivanua Mar and Edmonds, *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity*. 2010. Selina Tustala Marsh, *Guys Like Gauguin*. 25-26.

“Guys Like Gauguin”  
a poem by Selina Tustula Marsh

Thanks Bougainville  
for desiring em young  
so guys like Gauguin could dream  
and dream  
then take his syphilitic body  
downstream to the tropics  
to test his artistic hypothesis  
about how the uncivilized  
ripen like paw paw  
are best slightly raw  
delectably firm  
gangling like garden prepubescent buds  
seeding nymphomania  
for guys like Gauguin

thanks Balboa  
For crossin Isthmus  
Of Panama  
In 1513  
And pronouncing our ocean  
the South Seas  
hey thanks, Vasco  
for making us  
your underbelly  
the occidental opposite of all  
your nightmares  
your waking dreams  
inversion of all your laws  
your darkest fantasies

thanks for seeing the earth as a body  
the North as its head  
full of rationality  
reasoned seasons  
of meaning  
cultivated gardens  
of consciousness  
sown in masculine  
orderly fashion  
a high evolution  
toward the light

thanks for making the South  
an erogenous zone  
corporeal and sexual  
emotive and natural  
waiting in the shadows  
of dark feminine instinct  
populated by the Africans  
the orient, the Americas  
and now us

### **Findings and Conclusion**

Through my research I have explored the long lasting effects of colonialism on Polynesia and Tahiti. I have argued that although it has taken over a century since Gauguin visited, contemporary Tahitians are recovering and articulating their own cultural identities and voices. Many factors contribute to the current postcolonial society Tahiti has created. Up through today Polynesians are still finding ways to code, decode, and recode their cultural space. Different

historical sites are being revisited to try to find understanding in the roots of their pasts that have been lost or obscured by years of colonial influence. There is revitalization in many Tahitian art forms and cultural practices. I have explored the revitalization of forms like dance, music, tattooing, sculpture, as well as literature. The renewed interest in these art forms has contributed to further interest from Tahitians who look to the pre-contact period, including dancers, sculptors, and tattoo artists who look for stylistic suggestions from the past. Ancient sites are being restored and examined by Polynesians rather than only by outsiders. Cultural centers are also being focused on in order to facilitate the increase in interest about the past. These places provide education for Polynesians and visitors alike that could help shape a better understanding of a long misunderstood culture.

All of these creative practices open up the doors for Polynesia to reclaim and construct a contemporary global identity that counters that of past Western views. Through visual artists like Gauguin and literary compositions from other colonial Europeans there has been a mystified, exotic, and sexualized view of Tahiti distributed for centuries. In a postcolonial world but still living under the French government, Polynesia finds itself in a difficult cultural space. I argue that through different art forms as well as the expansion of an interest in cultural centers for education, Tahiti is fighting back in order to regain an artistic identity. These artists who fight back in different ways do the coding, decoding, and recoding. As Kahn articulates, “the coding systems themselves, are continually changing. This is how places change in response to internal and external forces,”<sup>77</sup> and how I argue we can tell that Polynesians are working towards positive change.

---

<sup>77</sup> Kahn. *Tahiti Beyond the Postcard*. 2011. 166.

In this exploration I have discussed how colonialism has affected Polynesia in different ways. The conversion from polytheistic religions to Christianity, the rejections of indigenous art forms, the collection practices of colonizers and visitors, and the misrepresentation of native culture have all impacted art in Tahiti and the islands of the South Pacific. However, I would like to posit that because of Tahitians' unique history and these external pressures on their society, they have opened themselves up to create a new and diverse artistic culture. Due to the reasons discussed above, Tahiti has lost so many references that could provide links to its past and give Polynesians living in the postcolonial world insights into its artistic history. Because of this sad fact Tahitians look to other Polynesian cultures as well as colonial accounts of the period of contact in order to draw inspiration for their contemporary art. The hybridization that categorizes their art today is not 'traditional,' but could be seen as the 'tradition' of Tahiti, a place plagued with external forces that caused them to lose most of the meaning of their proto-historic style.<sup>78</sup> Without a complete understanding of the pre-contact period, Tahitians are forced to draw from these other sources and rely on their own creativity to determine how best to represent the contemporary Tahitian society. Many of the movements in Tahitian art are currently looking for roots to their past in order to situate their art historically and it is ironically through this necessarily hybrid exploration that I argue Tahiti has created a style that is uniquely "theirs."

As a postcolonial space, French Polynesians still struggle with their colonizers, as they have not yet been granted their independence and found how to situate themselves in this space. The history of this place is marred with violence and opportunistic European practices and through modern times we still see colonizers such as nuclear testers exploiting their land. It is

---

<sup>78</sup> On postcolonial cultural hybridity and the possibilities of identity and agency on the part of the colonized, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. N.Y.: Routledge, 1994.

significant to see how even in a modern discussion of French Polynesia many people still regard the space with a colonial lens as the myth of the ‘exotic paradise’ lives on among other places in tourism. I argue that Polynesian literary movements possess the most powerful oeuvre to counter these colonial myths that artists like Gauguin have helped secure around the South Seas. After looking at a few examples of Polynesian authors, we can see the strong verbal push against this colonial view as visually depicted and those who have perpetuated it throughout history.

I believe that Tahiti and Polynesia have a long way to go, yet will continue to try to develop an artistic identity, one that most likely uses a hybridization of other cultures, techniques, and modern materials in order to create a unique artistic presence. Moving forward, it may be important for the art world to acknowledge the absence of a strict ‘tradition’ in order to fully appreciate their new tradition of art. As someone who has not experienced their culture, I do not wish to generalize their art in any way and I acknowledge that there remains opposition to this new ‘traditional’ art, but through my research and vicarious consumption of others’ first-hand experiences, I feel as though a new cultural understanding may be available in Tahiti. Today there exists a demand for the revitalizations of past art forms that are uniquely ‘Tahitian’ to be shared in a way that contemporary Polynesians can understand and then share with outsiders, rather than outsiders forcing their view of Tahiti onto this space. Tahitians are thus able to claim their own postcolonial identity and have found their subaltern voice.

## Works Cited

- Andersen, Wayne. "Gauguin and a Peruvian Mummy." *Burlington Magazine* 109.769. Apr. 1967. 238.
- Banivanua Mar, Tracy, and Penelope Edmonds. *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. N.Y.: Routledge, 1994.
- Braun, Barbara. "Paul Gauguin's Indian Identity: How Ancient Pottery Inspired His Art." *Art History*, vol. 9 (March 1986), 36-54, specifically looking at 50 on diffusionist theories linking Peru and Tahiti.
- Brettell, Richard et al., *The Art of Paul Gauguin*. Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1988, cat. no. 64, catalog entry by Françoise Cachin.
- Brooks, Peter. "Gauguin's Tahitian Body." *The Yale Journal of Criticism*; Spring 1990. 51-77.
- Childs, Elizabeth. *Vanishing Paradise: Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti*. Berkley and Los Angeles, CA: Univeristy of California, 2013. Print.
- Connell, John. "Island Dreaming: The Contemplation of Polynesian Paradise." *Journal of Historical Geography* 29.4 (2003) : 554-581. Web. 10 Aug. 2015.
- Dark, Philip J.C., et al. *Pacific Art: Persistence, Change and Meaning*. Honolulu : University of Hawai'i Press. 2002.
- Edmond, Rod. *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin*. Cambridge, U.K.; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1997. Print.
- Eisenman, Stephen. *Gauguin's Skirt*. New York : Thames and Hudson, 1997.
- . *Paul Gauguin: Artist of Myth and Dream*. Skira. New York, 2008.

“French Polynesia profile – Overview.” BBC News. BBC, 17 March 2015. Web. 1 October 2015.

Gauguin, Paul. *Noa. Noa: The Tahitian Journal*. Dover Publication; New Edition. 1985.

Gauguin, Paul. *Paul Gauguin's Intimate Journals*. Trans. Van Wyck Brooks. New York : Crown Publishers 1936.

“Heiva I Tahiti.” *Tahiti Tourisme North America*. 2015. Web. 28 October 2015.

Jones, Anna Laura. *Contemporary Folk Art in French Polynesia: A Dissertation to the Department of Anthropology and the Committee on Graduate Studies of Stanford University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degrees of Doctor of Philosophy*. Diss. Stanford University, 1991.

Kahn, Miriam. *Tahiti Beyond the Postcard: Power, Place, and Everyday Life*. University of Washington Press, Seattle. 2011.

Kahn, Isabelle. “Gauguin’s First Stay on Tahiti, Society Islands, 1891-93.” Suzanne Greub, *Gauguin Polynesia*. 2011. 169.

Keown, Michelle. *Postcolonial Pacific Writing: Representations of the Body*. London : Routledge. 2009.

Lavondes, Anne. “The Museum of Tahiti and the Islands: Towards Realistic Policies and Practice.” 1981. *Journal Museum International* Vol. 33. Issue. 2.

Pollock, Griselda. *Avant- Garde Gambits: Gender and the Colour of Art History*. New York : Thames and Hudson. 1993.

Solomon-Godeau, A. “Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivism in Modernism.” *Art in America*, vol. 77. July 1989. 118-129.



Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

"Te Ao Ma'ohi: An Overview." *Manoa Journal*, Vol. 17. No. 2 2005. University of Hawai'i Press. Web. 28 September 2015.

Varnedoe, Kirk. "Gauguin." In *Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup> century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. vol.1. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 2002, 192-195.

## Images

Figure I: Unknown Photographer. *Exposition Universelle 1889, Danseuses Javanaises*. Digital image. *Les Expositions Universelles*. N.p., n.d. Web.

Figure II: Gauguin, Paul. *Spirit of the Dead Watching (Manao Tupapau)*, 1892. Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y.

Figure III: Manet, Edouard. *Olympia*. Digital Image, 1863. Musée d'Orsay.

Figure IV: Gauguin, Paul. *Arii Matamoe (The Royal End)*. 1892, Digital Image. The Getty Museum, Los Angeles. 2008. Web.

Figure V: Gauguin, Paul. *Jug in the Form of a Head*, Self-Portrait, glazed stoneware, 1889, Museum of Decorative Arts, Copenhagen

Figure VI: Title Page Image: Glinn, Burt. *French Polynesia. Tahiti, Burt Glinn and Friend*, 1960. Magnum Photos, New York. Digital Image.

Figure VII: Anonymous. *Lady in the Water (Vahine i te pape)*, in *Album Godey, Le croiseur Duchaffault*, compiled by 1891, albumen print. Cabinet des estampes, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

Figure VIII: Baumgartner, Heidi. "Marae Fare King Vaiotama Maeva, Huahine." Photograph. *Tahiti Heritage*. 2010. Web.

Figure IX: Gauguin, Paul. *Parahi Te Maraé (The Sacred Mountain)*, 1891. Digital image. Philadelphia Museum of Art. 1980. Web.

Figure X: Notre Blog EspiritTiare. "Heiva 2015 97." Photograph. 20 July 2015. Web.

Figure XI: Vahinetane, C. Tahiti Ora, Meilleur Groupe de Danse Heiva. Video still. *YouTube*. Youtube, 7 July 2014. Web.

Figure XII: Artist Unknown. Wooden Sculpture. *Sculpture*. Centre des Métiers d'Art.

Figure XIII: Artist Unknown. Wooden Sculpture with Paint. *Sculpture*. Centre des Métiers d'Art.



Figure I



Figure II



Figure III



Figure IV



Figure V



Figure VI



Figure VII



Figure VIII



Figure IX



Figure X





Figure XI



Figure XII



Figure XIII