Confronting Colonial Imaginings of Tahiti: An Examination of Painted and Photographed Representations of Māhū and Raerae

Shanice Wolters, University of Victoria

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Transgender studies, Queer Theory, Art History, Colonialism, Portraiture

ABSTRACT

In 1891, the French post-impressionist artist Paul Gauguin left France for Tahiti in search of a "primitive," exotic, and utopian life that was untouched by European technological developments. Much to his dismay, the romanticized paradisiac idyll that Gauguin had imagined had been largely colonized by France. Therefore, Gauguin moved to the less populated village of Papeari, where he took to writing about and painting misinterpretations of the culture that he had observed. Several of Gauguin's paintings from this period have been theorized to depict māhū subjects.

In Tahiti, māhū is recognized as a valuable third gender category used to describe those who draw on both masculine and feminine gender signs and practices. Māhū is often discussed alongside raerae, who are transgender women. This article analyzes both Gauguin's portrayal of māhū subjects and the ways in which two contemporary artists have represented māhū and raerae subjects, specifically in response to Gauguin's work.

In 2019, Kehinde Wiley, a Black American artist, painted a series of portraits for an exhibition in Paris entitled "Tahiti." In this series, Wiley, and a group of māhū models worked together to counter-pose the visual codes within Gauguin's paintings. Additionally, in 2019, Namsa Leuba, a Swiss-Guinean photographer, created a photo series entitled "ILLUSIONS: The Myth of the 'Vahine' through Gender Dysphoria." In this collection of images, Leuba collaborated with māhū and raerae models to challenge Gauguin and his search for the "primitive." This article applies queer theory and visual analysis to explore how Paul Gauguin propagated colonial hegemonic ideologies of gender and sexuality, and further how Wiley and Leuba's painted and photographic representations of māhū and raerae subjects are capable of confronting, challenging, and resisting such portrayals and the narratives that they perpetuated.

In 1891, one year after Tahiti became a French colony,[1] the French post-impressionist artist Paul Gauguin fled from what he deemed the rotten civilization of France[2] to Tahiti, in search of "savage" and "primitive"[3] subject matter. It was Gauguin's belief that Tahiti would provide an exotic utopian life that was untouched by European technological developments. Much to his dismay, the romanticized paradisiac idyll that Gauguin had envisaged was, at this point, greatly affected by France's purchase of what became known as French Polynesia. Therefore, Gauguin took to fetishizing, exaggerating, and misinterpreting the culture that he had both observed and lived amongst.[4] Several of these paintings, in addition to pieces of Gauguin's writing, have been hypothesized by historians to depict māhū subjects.[5]

The term māhū has been translated to English to mean "half-man, half-woman."[6] In Tahiti, māhū is recognized as a valuable third gender category used to describe "Polynesians[7] who draw on a combination of masculine and feminine gender signs and practices, but who are represented as behaving more generally

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[1] Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the Postcard: Power, Place, and Everyday Life* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 45.

[2] George T. M. Shackelford, "Introduction" in *Gauguin: Tahiti* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2004), 4.

[3] In this paper I put words such as "primitive" and "savage" in quotation marks to indicate that their meanings are derogatory and should not be understood as a resolute truth.

[4] Kahn, 45.

[5] John Richardson, "Gauguin's Last Testament," *Vanity Fair*, 31 January, 2015. https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2004/02/gauguin200402.

[6] Deborah A. Elliston, "Queer History and Its Discontents at Tahiti: The Contested Politics of Modernity and Sexual Subjectivity," in *Gender on the Edge: Transgender Gay and Other Pacific Islanders*, eds. Niko Besnier and Kalissa Alexeyeff (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 34.

[7] My use of "Polynesians" in this article refers to people Indigenous to the Society Islands in French Polynesia, particularly Tahiti.

in the manner of their sexed-body opposite."[8] Māhū are often discussed alongside raerae[9] who are transgender women,[10] often presented in the context of their sexual relations with men. Further, raerae have what Deborah Elliston writes as an interior femininity that they push to the exterior through, for example, feminine dress.[11] Raerae emerged as a label to distinguish the more "feminized māhū from other, regular māhū."[12] Further, the term "raerae," which etymologically traces back to the 1960s, was originally employed as a pejorative label for māhū sex workers; consequently, yet unjustly, raerae often experience extreme societal marginalization due to their historical and sexual associations with French patrons.[13]

In this essay, I explore the ways in which three artists have represented both māhū and raerae subjects within painted and photographic portraits. In response to Gauguin's work, in 2019, Kehinde Wiley, a Black American artist from San Francisco, painted a series of portraits for an exhibition entitled "Tahiti - Kehinde Wiley" (18 May–20 July 2019) which was displayed at the Galerie Templon in Paris. In this series, Wiley and a group of māhū models worked together to counter-pose and challange the narratives within Gauguin's paintings of gender liminal subjects.[14] Additionally, in 2019, Namsa Leuba, who is a Swiss

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[8] Ellliston, 34. There is very little scholarship in English on masculine presenting māhū or transgender male Tahitians; therefore, in this paper, I primarily focus on feminine presenting māhū and transgender women (raerae).

[9] "Raerae" also appears in texts spelled as "rae-rae."

[10] "ILLUSIONS: The Myth of the 'Vahine,'" Namsa Leuba, http://www.namsaleuba.com/illusions.

[11] Elliston, 46.

[12] Ibid., 42.

[13] Makiko Kuwahara, "Living as and Living with Māhū and Raerae: Geopolitics, Sex, and Gender in the Society Islands," in *Gender on the Edge: Transgender Gay and Other Pacific Islanders*, eds. Niko Besnier and Kalissa Alexeyeff (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 93.

[14] Naomi Rea, "Artist Kehinde Wiley's Latest Paintings Are a Progressive Riposte to Paul Gauguin's Primitivist Portraits of Tahitians," *Artnet News*, May 17, 2019, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/kehinde-wiley-tahiti-gauguin-1546054.

Guinean photographer, created a photo series entitled, "ILLUSIONS: The Myth of the 'Vahine' through Gender Dysphoria." In this collection of photographs, Leuba collaborated with māhū and raerae models to attempt a metamorphosis and "challenge the visual codes initiated by Gauguin and his search for the primitive."[15]

This paper examines the history of prejudice against Tahiti's transgender community. I employ queer theory and visual analysis to comment on how Wiley and Leuba's painted and photographic representations of māhū and raerae subjects are capable of confronting, exposing, and challenging the colonial hegemonic ideologies of gender and sexuality propagated through colonialism and within the work of Paul Gauguin.

To my knowledge, there is little academic literature in English about the māhū and raerae people of Tahiti. I therefore wish to make it explicitly clear, specifically as a cisgender Canadian woman, that I do not aim to speak on behalf of the māhū and raerae communities. Rather, my objective is to utilize my knowledge of both history and art history to report and critique on how Western contact has impacted the lives of Tahiti's transgender and third-gender community, and how contemporary artists are working with this community to create visual images that oppose the believed truths that developed from this history and its continued legacy. In *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution,* Susan Stryker states it can be difficult to use the term transgender to discuss gender practices across cultures.[16] Stryker writes that the term transgender

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[15] "ILLUSIONS: The Myth of the 'Vahine,'" Namsa Leuba, http://www.namsaleuba.com/illusions.

[16] Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* (New York: Seal Press, 2007), Chapter 1: Contexts, Concepts and Terms, https://bellasartesprojects.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SusanStryker-TransgenderHistory_TheRootsofToday'sRevolution-SealPress2017.pdf.

can "function to flatten out and overwrite cultural difference – even becoming part of the practice of colonization, where Eurocentric ways of making sense of the world are put onto other people."[17] I acknowledge the limitations of the English language and it is not my place, nor my intention, to modify the meanings of ethnically specific or subcultural terms such as māhū or raerae to adhere to the English language.

Even the use of the term "gender-nonconforming," which is often used to describe māhū as well as raerae, begs this question: what is a conformed gender and how does that extend beyond Western cultures and the ways in which Eurocentric gender ideology concerns and observes masculinity and femininity? Māhū, for example, were a part of Polynesian life far before Europeans reached the shores of Tahiti, and have remained so. Thus, I will refer to māhū as people of the third gender and raerae as trans women.

Further, in *Transgender History,* Stryker writes that despite English being the most common language in the United States (and congruently, in Canada), it also does not always allow us to refer to others without gendering them.[18] Therefore, the use of they/them/their pronouns when the gender of the person who is being referred to is unknown, or if they have gender-neutral pronouns, is becoming increasingly common. I have studied the work of scholars and artists who refer to māhū by both she/her pronouns and he/him pronouns. However, there is a broad spectrum of sexuality and gender identity and therefore, māhū are not a monolithic group, and just like transgender women, those who are gender-nonconforming, and/or non-binary, they do not all use a single set of pronouns.

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[17] Ibid, https://bellasartesprojects.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SusanStryker-TransgenderHistory_TheRootsofToday'sRevolution-SealPress2017.pdf.

[18] Ibid.

Thus, when referring to māhū in this essay, I use they/them/their pronouns and when referring to raerae I use she/her pronouns.

In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, Riley Snorton explores Greg Thomas' arguments against Michel Foucault's thinking on coloniality and race, particularly Foucault's examination of the history of sex, and how it refuses to understand sex categories as categories of the empire.[19] In this text, Snorton quotes Thomas who states, "the colonial vocabulary of sex is part and parcel of the modern production of heterosexuality as a defining feature of Occidentalism."[20] Further, in *The Invention of Gender: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses,* Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí explores the centrality of the body in Western narratives and the ways that gender has been a crucial organizing principle within Western societies.[21] For example, Oyěwùmí explores how the differences and hierarchy in Western thought and society have been historically biologically determined and thus used to explain genetic inferiorities in organizing principles such as race, gender, and class.[22] All too often fear, and therefore colonial violence, was manifested when the heteronormative ordering of sex that was implemented in the West was disrupted. Thus, what follows is a critique of Eurocentric constructions of sex categories as implemented by the occident through colonization in Tahiti.[23]

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[19] C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 40.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1.

[22] Ibid.

[23] While this paper focuses on colonial settlers and their reactions to Tahitian māhū and raerae, I do not aim to suggest that gender non-conforming individuals from Western countries were nonexistent or unimportant.

During the 18th century, the French and British began to explore the Pacific Ocean in search of an exotic land biblically referenced as an early paradise.[24] In 1767, British Captain Samuel Wallis of HMS *Dolphin* and his crew arrived on the island of Tahiti, which was declared King George III Island and claimed for Great Britain.[25] Upon returning to England, Wallis and his crew circulated embellished stories about their encounters with primitive and "noble savages."[26] Also, in 1767, French explorers arrived in Tahiti, and in an attempt to romantically aestheticize Polynesians, they referred to the island as Nouvelle Cythère, after the birthplace of Aphrodite, the goddess of love.[27] The French also returned home and spread tremendously exaggerated falsities about Polynesians, and consequently "visions of a paradise of sexual abandon swept like wildfire through Europe."[28] This "uncivilized" image of Tahiti was condemned by French Catholic and British Protestant missionaries who arrived in Tahiti in 1797 and were determined to convert the Polynesians to Christianity.[29] Missionaries proceeded to prohibit traditional customs such as singing, dancing, and the worship of ancestral deities. Additionally, the māhū, who often took advisor and caretaker roles within their community,[30] and who are believed to have always existed and been respected within their society far before European contact, were banned by the missionaries.[31] Oyěwùmí writes, "… in the West, so long as the

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[24] Kahn, 32.

[25] Hampton Sides, "The Polynesian 'Prince' who took 18th- century England by Storm," *Smithsonian Magazine,* 13 Sept. 2021, *https*://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/polynesian-prince-who-took-18th-century-england-storm-180978618/.

[26] Kahn, 32–33.

[27] Ibid., 33.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., 38.

[30] Kuwahara, 93.

[31] Kehinde Wiley, Templon, https://www.templon.com/exhibitions/tahiti-kehinde-wiley-2/press/.

issue is difference and social hierarchy, then the body is constantly positioned, posed, exposed, and re-exposed as their cause. Society, then, is seen as an accurate reflection of genetic endowment — those with a superior biology inevitably are those in superior social positions."[32] A dangerous fear of deviation from these social categories implemented by the West is evidenced in a plethora of shocking reported encounters with māhū. In an 1801 journal entry, the missionary John Jefferson writes of witnessing sexual acts with māhū individuals, and others wrote vaguely of "abominable acts" and "practices too horrible to mention."[33] The documentation of māhū prompted Captain Bligh in 1789 to examine why, "in so prolific a country as this, men should be led into such sensual and beastly acts of gratification."[34]

The successful actions of the missionaries paved the way for a firmer establishment of colonial power and confinements.[35] Part of these colonial ideologies attempted to erase the forms of gender expression historically valued in Polynesian culture. While the oppressive powers of European ideologies did spread throughout Tahiti, the Indigenous Polynesian people of Tahiti at large, and the māhū more specifically, should never be disparaged for, by law, assimilating to European culture. In *Black on Both Sides*, Snorton examines Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry and the desire for a reformed and recognizable Other "as the subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite."[36] Snorton states that this desire "inflects and reflects colonial and imperial power."[37] However, the complex concept of cultural assimilation should be continually

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[32] Oyěwùmí, 8.

[33] These first-hand accounts are cited within Elliston, 36.

[34] Ibid., 37.

[35] Kahn, 39.

[36] Homi Bhaba quoted directly in Snorton, 157.

[37] Snorton, 157.

acknowledged as a reflection of oppressive constructs such as colonial and imperial power, especially in the context of laws and policies pertaining to one's gender identity and presentation. Māhū who subverted, and thus dangerously disputed, this surveillance that required them to present as a "male" were safer in the outskirts of Tahiti, perhaps in Papeari, where Gauguin lived for nearly two years.

In June 1891, Gauguin arrived in Tahiti where he rented a small house until 1893.[38] During this period Gauiguin completed nearly seventy painted works that depicted scenes of Polynesian daily life, ancient religion and contemporary costumes[39] in a primitivist style. For Gauguin and his contemporaries, primitivism was the representation of "otherness" enforced through appropriation of "primitive" artifacts, peoples, and cultures as models for their own work.[40] Gauguin's primitivist portrayals are therefore directly informed by his fantastical conceptions of the "primitive," in which Polynesians are the "savage" opposition to the "civilized" French. Moreover, since the primitive arcadia that he had imaged Tahiti to be was largely colonized, Gauguin was "left to invent, in his mind and with his paints, the "savage" culture he had hoped to find."[41]

Scholarship on Gauguin's Tahitian paintings often, and justly, problematizes his fictionalized, generalized exoticism of Polynesian women.[42] However, what is less discussed is Gauguin's representations of male subjects, who, as Stephen Eisenman notes, "display a gender ambiguity that reveals some uniquely Tahiitian sexual verities and some uncommon to European

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38 Ibid., 62.

39 Ibid., 62; 20.

40 Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson 1994), 74; 7.

41 Khan, 57.

42 Ibid., 70.

practices and traditions."[43] A close reading of Gauguin's Tahitian paintings and his autobiographical journal reveals what Lee Wallace calls "a hybridized form of sexual representation that could emerge only in the specific cultural context of the colonial Pacific."[44] As I shall argue, an anecdote within Gauguin's autobiographical journal, *Noa Noa:The Tahiti Journal* and his 1893 painting, *Pape Moe (Mysterious Water)* (Fig. 1) reveals how the gender-liminal male-bodied māhū elucidates the intricacies of colonial anxiety and sexual control.

Noa Noa was written upon Gauguin's return to Paris in 1893 and published in 1901 as part of his campaign to promote his Tahitian art, and therefore his image of Tahiti, to French audiences.[45] This pejorative and primitivizing text is understood, like many of his Tahitian paintings, to be "highly artificial."[46] I contend that, while this source is likely fictional, and certainly hyperbolic, an examination of its content reveals the ways in which Gauguin promulgated a colonial image of primitive "otherness" and inferiority that has been disseminated globally. In a draft manuscript of *Noa Noa*, Gauguin enumerates the following observations:

1. The androgynous side of the savage, the little difference between the sexes in animals.

2. The purity entailed by seeing nakedness and by the easy commerce between the sexes.
   The lack of knowledge of vice among the savages.
   The desire to be for a moment weak, woman.[47]

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[43] Stephen F. Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990), 20.

[44] Lee Wallace, *Sexual Encounters: Pacific Texts, Modern Sexualities*n (Ithaka: Cornell University Press, 2018), 115.

[45] Khan, 58.

[46] Wallace, 114.

[47] This excerpt from *Noa Noa:The Tahiti Journal,* is obtained from Eisenman, 113.

Here, Gauguin grapples with his attraction to the androgynous body, which he likens to the "purity" of an animal, a comparison that has been exhausted in 18th- and 19th-century primitivist writing and art as well as pseudo-sciences that perpetuated biological racism and eugenics. More revealing however, is the anecdote that is written beside these notes, whereupon Gauguin reflects upon his relationship with a "faultlessly handsome" young man.[48]

In this section of *Noa Noa*, Gauguin crafts a tale in which a young man, seemingly māhū, guides him through the forest to collect wood for carvings. Gauguin begins his recollections by describing how they "went naked, both of us, except for a loincloth…and two we certainly were, two friends, he was a quiet young man and I almost an old man in body and soul, in civilized vices… His lithe animal body had graceful contours, he walked in front of me sexless."[49] Eisenman provides a metaphorical reading of this anecdote, arguing that as Gauguin travels deeper into the Tahitian forest the "old sexual hierarchies of Europe" are consequently left further behind. As such, Gauguin experiences a liberation that beckons him into "an Indigenous zone of polymorphous sexuality" that concomitantly reveals his desire to be "weak, woman."[50] And yet, Gauguin's desire seems only conceivable to him if he assumes the position of a woman, thus transforming his same-sex desire into the paradigm of heterosexuality. Wallace contends however that Gauguin's desire for difference does not outrightly signify male and female difference, but rather domination and submission.[51] This hierarchical archetype is a symbol of power that is further evidenced in the

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[48] Ibid.

[49] This excerpt from *Noa Noa: The Tahiti Journal*, is obtained from Eisenman, 115.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Wallace, 120.

juxtaposition between his own "civilized vices" and the guide as a young "lithe animal."

Upon realizing his arousal to the "androgynous savage" Gauguin writes anxiously of a "presentiment of crime, the desire for the unknown, the awakening of evil."[52] This confessional desire, however, ceases the moment the young guide turns to face him, writing: "My companion turned at that moment, so that his chest was towards me. The hermaphrodite had vanished; it was a young man, after all; his innocent eyes resembled the limpidity of the water. Calm suddenly came back into my soul."[53] This "awakening of evil" dissipates and consequently he is put at ease, allowing him to "again admire, in front of me, the graceful curves of my young friend—and calmly: curves robust like the tree we were carrying."[54] Gauguin's anxiety about the māhū is revealed through a homosexual "desire for the unknown," therefore, voyeurism is only permissible when the guide is turned away and their maleness is made ambiguous. When the guide's frontality is revealed, the power hierarchy that Gauguin views as essential to a male/female sexual relationship becomes inconceivable. To quote Ann Stoler, "sexual domination has figured as a social metaphor of European supremacy."[55] *Noa Noa* is thus a social metaphor. The only way that Gauguin's desire can be subsumed is through an enactment of gender prescriptions and sexual control which emulates the very categories of colonized and colonizer.[56]

This metaphor is perceptible in the primitivist aesthetic of *Pape Moe (Mysterious Water)* (Fig.1), 1893, which was painted upon Gauguin's return to Paris

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[52] This excerpt from *Noa Noa:The Tahiti Journal,* is obtained from Wallace, 118.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ann L. Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 635.

[56] Ibid.

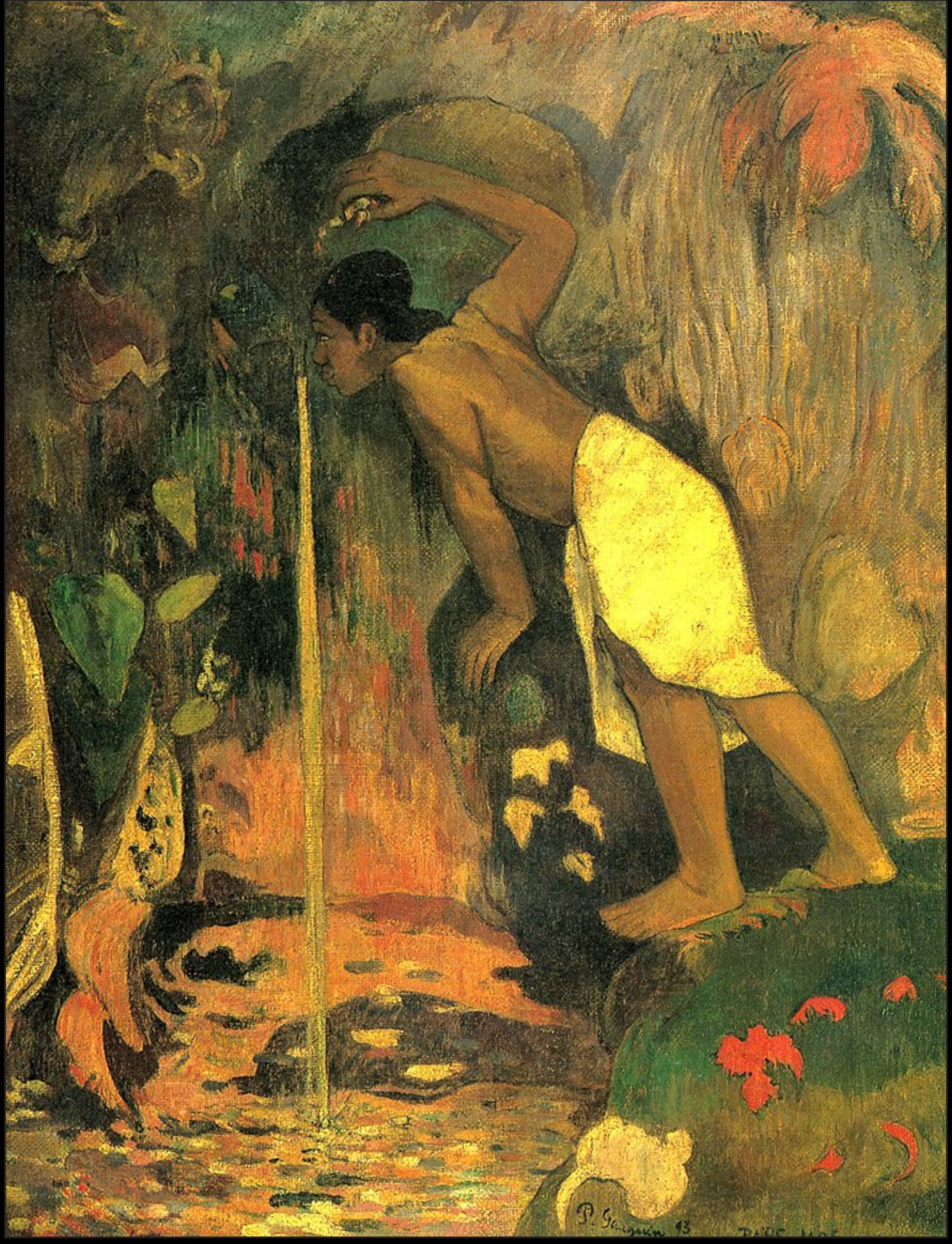

FIGURE 1: ***Pape Moe (Mysterious Water)*** **by The York Project (2002), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:File_Upload_Bot_(Eloquence).**

and is said to have been inspired by Gauguin's trip to the forest with the young māhū.[57] I contend that the word *Mysterious* embodies the mysticism and intrigue that Gauguin felt towards the guide, while the unusually dark colours of the Tahitian forest within the background of this painting are perhaps an intentional choice made to shroud the desire that became more visceral the deeper they went into the forest, away from "civilization."

In *Pape Moe,* the māhū, who is nameless just like most of Gauguin's Polynesian subjects, wears a white loincloth. They are bending over a river to drink from a waterfall, their long hair is pushed over their shoulder, and the "graceful curves" of their arm and back muscles are the most pronounced and discernible details of this work. Gauguin configures the object of his desire when they are at their most sexually pleasurable to him, and also at their most vulnerable: when their frontality is obscured and yet their ambiguity is still available for his gaze. In consequence, gender subordination and colonial authority is figured and personified through the ambiguous figuration of the subject.[58]

Within a colonial context, sexuality was viewed as the "most salient marker of Otherness," which is underpinned by aspects such as fear of "sexual contamination" and a moral breakdown of European colonial identity with a racist and classist core.[59] Gauguin's oscillations between desire and shame symbolizes the desire to colonialize the gender identity of the māhū. This is revealed in the composition, context, the colour symbolism, and the sexual objectification of the subject in *Pape Moe.* Ultimately, this painting reveals Gauguin

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[57] Mario Vargas Llosa, "The Men-Women of the Pacific: Paul Gauguin II," *Tate Ect*, 1 Sept. 2010. https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-20-autumn-2010/men-women-pacific.

[58] Stoler, 636.

[59] Ibid.

as a condemnatory onlooker whose settler-gaze "othered" the historically valued and respected gender identities that were being rapidly censored throughout this period.

As a response to his "awakening of evil," which was caused by his sexual desire for the guide, Gauguin chooses to fetishize the subject of the gaze through both writing and painting. After Gauguin's death, in 1903, he achieved "almost heroic status in the eyes of many artists."[60] Gauguin was a surveyor whose dangerous gaze has been globally celebrated as genius within the Western social and colonial context to which he conformed. As Khan argues, no one has played as powerful a role in propagating an idyllic version of Tahiti than Gauguin.[61] In 2019 two contemporary artists challenged the ways in which Gauguin depicted transgender and gender non-conforming Polynesians whose gender presentation and sexuality did not conform to limited and binarized European ideals.

Following a global critique of Gauguin's Tahiti portraits, an influx of museums are re-evaluating how, and if, they should exhibit Gauguin's work, which quite often ceased to name his subjects, and more concerningly depicted nude, underage girls.[62] Art historians argue that the problem of displaying Gauguin's art is that it can "frame the Pacific in this timeless, semi-damaged past."[63] Further, these representations relegate Polynesians to primitive taxonomies that can be both dangerous and damaging. Therefore, in response to Gauguin's primitivization of Tahiti, Kehinde Wiley collaborated with a group of māhū

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[60] Rhodes, 72.

[61] Khan, 56.

[62] Farah Nayeri, "Is It Time Gauguin Got Cancelled," *The New York Times*, Nov 18, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/18/arts/design/gauguin-national-gallery-london.html.

[63] Ibid.

models in 2019 to create an exhibition called "Tahiti" that comments on the tropes perpetuated by Gauguin.

In describing the objective of the exhibition Wiley stated that he intends to "interrogate, subsume, and participate in discourse about māhū, about France, and about the invention of gender."[64] Prior to creating these paintings, Wiley lived in Tahiti, and spent time scouting for models in nightclubs and as they walked down the streets.[65] In an effort to remain as collaborative as possible, Wiley told the models to wear whatever they pleased and pose however they felt most comfortable. In an interview about the exhibition, Wiley states that he originally suggested that the models recreate poses from Gauguin's paintings, but they all objected to that suggestion,[66] thereby demonstrating a firm desire to no longer be exoticized and reduced to the surveyed subject.

Wiley's collaborative practice can be described as the "right to look." Nicholas Mirzoeff writes:

> The right to look is not about merely seeing. It begins at a personal level with the look into someone else's eyes to express friendship, solidarity, or love. That look must be mutual, each inventing the other, or it fails. As such, it is unrepresentable. The right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity.[67]

Mirzoeff maintains that the right to look enacts an exchange in which one individual allows another to find you, and in doing so, you both find each other and yourself. Doing this requires recognition in the other.[68] Here, we see that

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[64] Kehinde Wiley, Templon, https://www.templon.com/new/exhibition.php?la=en&show_id=650&display_press=1.

[65] Fiona Mahon, "Kehinde Wiley's Portraits of Tahiti's Third Gender," *Hungertv*, May 24, 2019, https://www.hungertv.com/editorial/kehinde-wileys-portraits-of-tahitis-third-gender/.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Right to Look," *Critical Inquiry*, 37, no 3 (2011): 473.

[68] Ibid., 474.

while Gauguin surveys his subjects in works such as *Pape Moe*, Wiley enacts the collaborative right to look.

Each of the works within "Tahiti" is predicated on the right to look. In a statement about his exhibition, Wiley writes that these paintings

> …engage with the history of France and its outward facing relationship to black and brown bodies, specifically relating to sexual proclivity. Gauguin features heavily in the imagination of France and her global interface – with that comes an entire history of complicated gazing. I interrogate, subsume, and participate in discourse about Māhū, about France, and about the invention of gender.[69]

While certainly all the pieces in "Tahiti" are visually rich and worthy of visual analysis, this paper focuses on the ways in which *Portrait of Tuatini Manate, III*[70] [not illustrated; see note below], 2019, challenges and resists the colonization and transphobia that was perpetuated by European settlers and explorers. In *Portrait of Tuatini Manate, III*, Manate lies on a bed, they are topless and wear high-waisted pink pants and a crown of deep green leaves. The background of this painting and the bed on which Manate lays are covered in prints reminiscent of traditional Polynesian patterns. However, I argue that the most stunning attribute of this painting is Manate's direct and confrontational gaze which is sharply intense amongst the neutrality of their facial expression. Here, Wiley employs the direct gaze to reject dominant normative standards and binary oppositions and thus challenges the historical attempts to prohibit the expression of third-gender identities.

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[69] Kehinde Wiley, Templon, https://www.templon.com/exhibitions/tahiti-kehinde-wiley-2/press/. Every effort was made to contact the copyright holders of images reproduced in this publication. The author/journal would be pleased to rectify any omissions in subsequent editions of this electronic journal article should the copyright holders bring this to our attention.

[70] The author was not able to obtain copyright permissions for the use of the artworks by Kehinde Wiley; see https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/bj9d7a/kehinde-wileys-new-show-celebrates-the-transgender-women-of-tahiti.

Additionally, Manate's pose is relaxed, leisurely, and in many ways reminiscent of canonical European Renaissance portraits of the Roman goddess Venus; for example, *Sleeping Venus*, 1510, by Giorgione, *Venus of Urbino,* 1534, by Titian, and *Venus and Cupid*, 1525, by Lorenzo Lotto. In Roman mythology, Venus is known as the goddess of love, sexuality, and fertility. *Portrait of Tuatini Manate, III* reimagines and expands the notion of the goddess in art history, specifically a goddess who personifies attributes often associated with femininity such as love, sexuality, and fertility, to include trans people and challenge gender ideologies concerning the bipartite limitations of masculinity and femininity.

The power of the gaze becomes more conspicuous through a comparative analysis of what may have acted as the specific inspiration for Wiley's Tahiti paintings. *The Call*[71] [not illustrated; see note below], 2019, arguably bears resemblance to *Three Tahitian Women* (Fig.2), 1896, by Gauguin. The most telling difference is the contrast in eyes. While the models on the left stare directly and intentionally at the viewer with their backs straight and gaze concrete, the three Tahitian women show no clear acknowledgement that they are the subjects in Gauguin's work.

[71] As in note 70 above. See https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/bj9d7a/kehinde-wileys-new-show-celebrates-the-transgender-women-of-tahiti.

FIGURE 2: *Three Tahitian Women* by Postdlf, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Postdlf.
CC-PD-Mark, PD-Art (PD-old-100-expired) and PD-Art (PD-old-auto-expired).

Further, the poses, gaze, and the use of colours in Wiley's portrait, *The Siesta*[72] [not illustrated], 2019, can be compared to Gaugiun's 1892 painting *Parau api (What news?)* (Fig. 3). However, again, it is the contrast of the gazes that makes clear Gauguin's role as a surveyor rather than a collaborator. He is seemingly unnoticed by the subjects, whereas in Wiley's work not only do the subjects acknowledge his presence, but they also see and communicate so directly with the viewer—making Wiley's objective of counter-posing the colonial narratives all the more tangible. These comparisons are nuanced enough as to not be viewed as an easy imitation, which the models firmly opposed, but still similar enough to unquestionably confront Gauguin's work and its abiding consequences. This is the very intention of the series.

[72] As in note 70 above. See https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/bj9d7a/kehinde-wileys-new-show-celebrates-the-transgender-women-of-tahiti.

FIGURE 3: ***Parau Api (What News ?)*** **by DcoetzeeBot, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:DcoetzeeBot.**
CC-PD-Mark and PD-Art (PD-old-100-expired).

One of Namsa Leuba's objectives in her series, "ILLUSIONS: The Myth of the 'Vahine,'" was to present an "ideological challenge to the visual codes initiated by Gauguin in his search for the primitive."[73] These "docu-fiction" photos were captured in Tahiti, and were taken after extensive discussions with the models. In an interview about "ILLUSIONS," Leuba states that several of the models, at first, felt uncomfortable after having tense experiences with voyeuristic photographers.[74] It should be noted that the discomfort that the models felt is both valid and historically rooted, for Gauguin was a voyeur and surveyor whose depictions of Tahitians had an enduring impact. In "ILLUSIONS," the models sit or stand amongst green Tahitian landscapes, they are covered in bright body paint and wear outfits donning traditional Polynesian patterns. The objective of this exhibition, while challenging Gauguin's primitivism, is to also apply a "positive, glamorous approach [that] allows eclectic stories to shine, including histories of homelessness and conflict, along with journeys of acceptance from families and culture."[75] "ILLUSIONS," also includes raerae models. Raerae, who quite often work as sex workers, continue to face a great deal of hostility due to their "unapologetic sexuality," which is viewed as objectionable because it continues to conflict with aspects of the sexual morality emphasized during the population of the missionaries.[76] While the māhū are regarded as "untouched by Western sexual identities and forms,"[77] raerae are contrastingly viewed by some as incompatible to the Polynesian worldview[78] and are therefore, at times, viewed

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[73] "ILLUSIONS," Leuba, http://www.namsaleuba.com/illusions.

[74] Matthew Ponsford, "Vivid portraits shine light on Tahiti's 'third gender,'" *CNN*, March 18, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/style/article/namsa-leuba-photographer/index.html.

[75] Ponsford.

[76] Aleardo Zanghellini, "Sodomy Laws and Gender Variance in Tahiti and Hawai'I," *Laws* 2, no. 2 (2013): 64.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid., 63.

as being culturally inauthentic, immoral, and complicit to colonization because of their contemporariness and associations with French patrons.[79] To quote Makiko Kuwahara, "*raerae* who actively imitate 'foreign' clothing, makeup, and comportment, and who make their living being intimate with foreign men, have come to symbolize all that is wrong with contemporary life. Tourism and sex work are viewed as important consequences of globalization."[80] This, too indicates the complex ways in which sex work, power, sexuality, class, and colonialism interact and overlap to create dangerous realities for those who exceed the gender binary.

A particularly powerful photograph from this series is *La femme à la papaye, Illusions, Tahiti* (Fig. 4), 2019, which depicts a model holding a cut papaya and standing against a dark green tree fern. Her body has been painted purple, she wears a pink and black wraparound skirt—colours that are often coded as "feminine." Upon her head is a crown of flowers, and covering her chest is a coconut bra. One of the most metaphorically rich features of this photograph is the use of the cut papaya, which the model shows directly to the camera. The papaya, which is often used in art as an allegory for the vagina, acts to confront the term "vahine" within the title of this exhibition. "Vahine" broadly translates to "woman, wife, mistress, female lover."[81] In Leuba's exhibition description, she states that the "myth of the "vahine," is historically rooted in the West's search for the "original" and "authentic," which was thought to be found in faraway cultures, with a connection between the body, soul and land."[82] The use of the papaya acts to challenge the assumption that a vagina equates to "authentic" womanhood. In a powerful statement, the model not only reconfigures the term

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[79] Kuwahara, 94–96.

[80] Ibid., 111.

[81] Elliston, 42.

[82] "ILLUSIONS," Leuba, http://www.namsaleuba.com/illusions.

FIGURE 4 Namsa Leuba, *La femme à la papaye, Illusions, Tahiti*. Tahiti. Fibre pigment print black frame, 60 x 80cm, 2019. Ikon Namsa.
Source: Photo courtesy of Namsa Leuba.

"vahine" but broadens its definition to include trans women, thus confronting colonial projection of sexual exploitation as well as trans-exclusionary taxonomies of gender.

Additionally, like *Portrait of Tuatini Manate, III*, the most striking feature within *La femme à la papaye* is the direct gaze of the model whose sclera (or white outer layer of the eyeball) contrasts strikingly with the dark purple painted onto her body. The subject's stance is firmly planted and, like the models in Wiley's paintings, her fixed gaze offers no apology, suggesting complete agency over herself and her identity. This photograph can be directly compared to Gauguin's 1899 painting entitled *Two Tahitian Women* (Fig. 5). In *Two Tahitian Women*, the woman in the foreground holds a papaya and is topless, and the second woman stands in the background with one of her breasts exposed. Both women's eyes are averted, and their bodies seemingly shroud away from the viewer in guarded, yet emotionless stances. It is the juxtaposition between *Two Tahitian Women* and *La femme à la papaye* (Fig. 4) that demonstrates how much power and assertiveness is held in the fixed and direct gaze. What Leuba describes as Gauguin's search for the primitive is challenged in these photographs. The sitter presents herself to the viewer to be looked at, thus challenging and confronting the visual codes of Gauguin's primitivism.

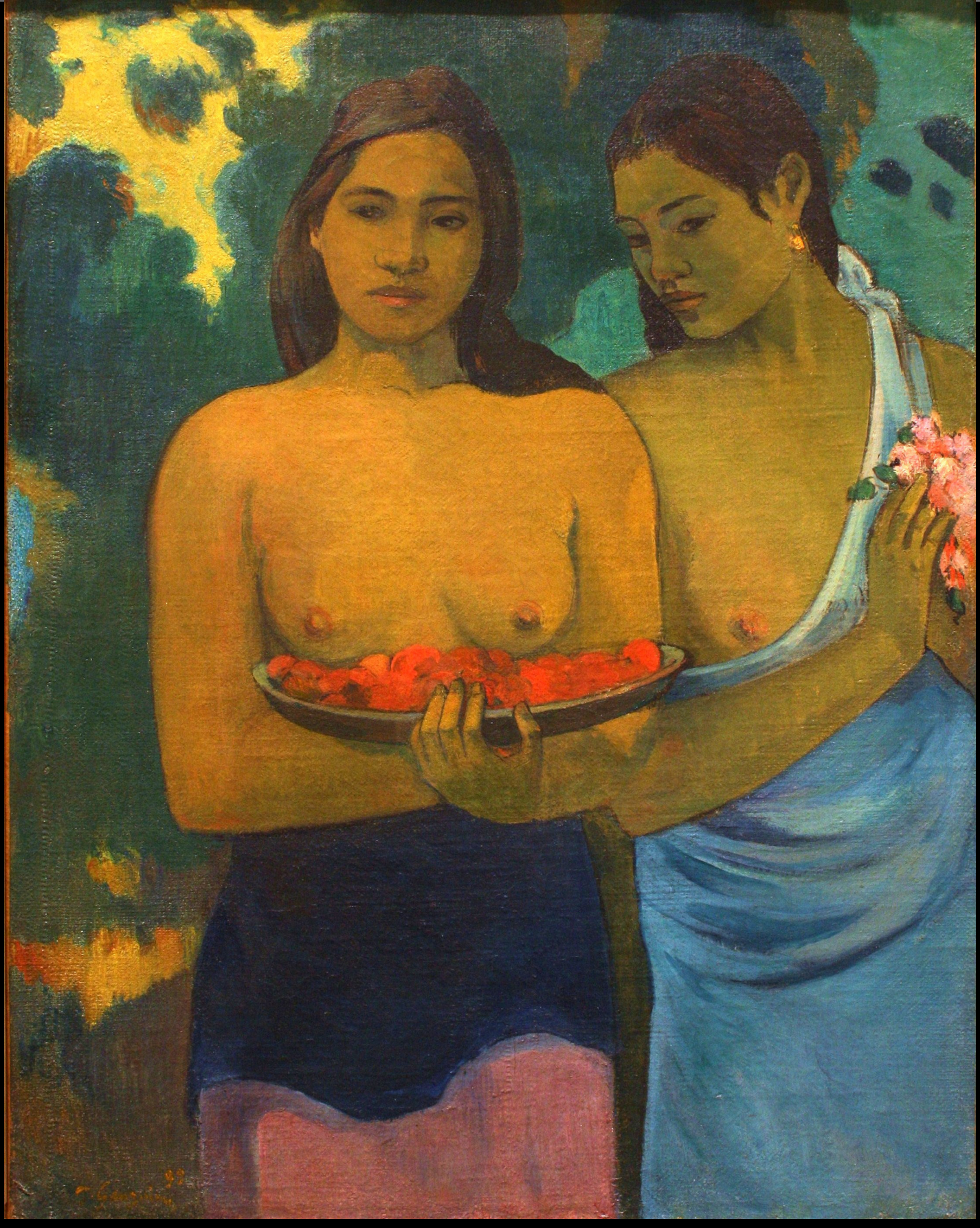

FIGURE 5: ***Two Tahitian Women*** **by Postdlf, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Postdlf.**
CC-PD-Mark and PD-Art (PD-old-100-expired).

To conclude, it has been over 250 years since Samual Wallis and his crew arrived in Tahiti, promulgating the fallacy of a primitivist utopia marked by an abundance of sex and occupied by a primal innocence and naïveté.[83] These exotic narratives about Tahiti circulated throughout Europe, fueling fantasies and conflicting with religious beliefs.[84] Tales of "sexual depravity" led to the imposition of European ideologies by colonists such as voyagers and missionaries who consistently reported scandalized judgments of, for example, māhū sexual expression and practices.[85] In 1891, these myths and stories had reached Gauguin, who fled France in search of this mythologized primitive paradise. Disappointed by the impact that colonization, and therefore "civilization," had on Tahiti, Gauguin reinforced this romantic vision in his embellished journal, *Noa Noa*, and in over seventy exploitative and colonial paintings. Gauguin's Tahitian period has since become known as "one of the most mythologically potent episodes in the history of Western art."[86]

In *Noa Noa* and *Pape Moe*, Gauguin acts as a voyeur projecting an exotic fantasy onto the māhū guide, who like most of Gauguin's subjects, shows no indication that Gauguin's colonial gaze is both immortalizing him and simultaneously reducing him to a nameless object to desire, gaze at, mould how he pleases, and share with the world. As Brooks argues, "Gauguin is just one more pawn in the long cultural history of 19th-century exoticism, itself closely allied to colonialism, to the domestication, exploitation and commodification of the exotic."[87] An analysis of *Noa Noa* and *Pape Moe* reveals how Gauguin's portrayal of

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[83] Peter Brooks, "Gauguin's Tahitian Body," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 3, no. 2 (1990): 55.

[84] Khan, 37.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid., 56.

[87] Brooks, 52.

the māhū elucidates the intricacies of colonial fear and fantasies about gender and racial difference, and the desire for sexual control.

Gauguin's fame has inspired many European and American artists to go to Tahiti with the intention of creating "Gauguin-inspired images on canvases of their own."[88] However, in recent years, Gauguin's oeuvre has been increasingly critiqued by feminist, anti-racist artists and scholars, as a collection of prejudicial attempts to barbarize and sexualize Polynesian people for the gratification of European audiences. Through a collaboration with māhū and raerae models, Kehinde Wiley and Namsa Leuba have both successfully explored and rebuked the colonial gaze and acts of surveillance propagated by colonial settlers and challenge the continuance of transphobia across continents. For example, *Portrait of Tuatini Manate, III,* recalls European Renaissance portraits of the Roman goddess Venus with a direct and confrontational gaze that challenges the bipartite ideologies of gender throughout western art history as well as the sexual objectification of Gauguin. Further, the direct gaze and cut papaya within *La femme à la papaye* confronts the legacy of colonial sexual exploitation, rejects the search for the primitive, and challenges the lineage of "visual codes" propagated by Gauguin.

[88] Ibid., 58

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