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Paul Gauguin and Charles Morice, *Noa Noa*. Edited and with an introduction by Claire Moran. Cambridge, UK: Modern Humanities Research Association Critical Texts, vol. 50, 2017. 96 pp. Table and bibliography. \$17.50 U.S. ISBN 978-1-78188-154-5 (pb).

Review by Heather Waldroup, Appalachian State University.

The artist Paul Gauguin (1849-1903) remains a conundrum for the twenty-first century. Primarily known for his paintings of Tahitian and Marquesan women, the artist's legacy continues to be informed by a popular romantic-primitive fantasy of the European man "gone native" in the tropics. Yet Gauguin—who spent his early years in Peru—also worked in many media and in many locations, including urban Paris, rural Brittany and Provence, the colony of Martinique, the Tahitian port city of Papeete, and the small outer island of Hiva Oa. His works are beautiful but troubling things, as feminist scholars such as Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Griselda Pollock, have pointed out since the 1980s: Gauguin's creations are deeply informed, in complicated ways, by colonialist and patriarchal discourses. He remains the subject of major museum exhibitions that explore these complexities, including but not limited to *Gauguin: Metamorphoses* at the Museum of Modern Art (2014), *Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist* at the Art Institute of Chicago (2017), *Gauguin and Laval in Martinique* at the Van Gogh Museum (2018), and the forthcoming *Gauguin: A Spiritual Journey* at the de Young Museum (2019). In addition, the recent anthology *Gauguin's Challenge: New Perspectives after Postmodernism*, edited by Norma Broude, offers fresh insights into Gauguin himself, his art, and his legacy.<sup>[1]</sup> With contributions from scholars in Europe and North America, *Gauguin's Challenge* reinforces ongoing scholarly interest in his work, along with the varied publics served by continued museum exhibitions.

In addition to his work as a visual artist, Gauguin produced a number of written texts. His most well-known (and in many ways, given its descriptions of his relationships with young Indigenous women, his most notorious) is *Noa Noa*, a largely fictional account written in the style of a travelogue. *Noa Noa* purports to describe his early days in Tahiti upon his arrival in the summer of 1891, with the intention of providing a framework, for his Parisian avant-garde audience, for receiving the works of art he produced between 1891 and 1893 (and later exhibited in Paris upon his brief return to the city). Appearing in numerous editions since it was first serialized in *La Revue Blanche* in 1897, *Noa Noa* is the type of text for which it is difficult to conceive an 'original', as it was produced in collaboration with the writer Charles Morice (1860-1919). The various formats, editions, and translations currently in circulation include transcriptions of Gauguin's original handwritten manuscript (now at the Getty Library), various versions of Gauguin's collaborations with Morice, Gauguin's illustrated text, serialized versions, and later drafts by Morice. Although frequently quoted by scholars both in support of Gauguin's project and as a form of critique, the lack of a definitive version of *Noa Noa* has led to confusion and misrepresentation of the artist and his work.

It is in this context that we might consider this new edition of *Noa Noa*, edited and with an introduction by Claire Moran. As Moran notes, the version of *Noa Noa* held by the Louvre, which bears the imprint of both Gauguin and Morice and which "remains closest to the original collaborative project," serves as

the source text for this publication (p. 4). In her introductory essay Moran stresses the significance of *Noa Noa* in that it “draws attention to the mythmaking, self-promotion, and self-stylisation that Gauguin so successfully managed and which has deceived both critics and the public for over a century” (p. 1). Taking the position that Gauguin’s writing should be considered in its own right, not as “merely autobiographical or explanatory guides to his painting” (p. 2), Moran argues that *Noa Noa* is a key element of Gauguin’s self-fashioning as “savage-painter for publicity’s sake” (p. 4). Although, I would suggest, there is somewhat an element of both autobiography and travelogue in *Noa Noa*, the text certainly remains an essential primary source for understanding both the artist and his legacy.

Moran’s introductory essay is itself a noteworthy piece of contemporary scholarship on Gauguin. Along with the work of Linda Goddard and Elizabeth Childs, both Moran’s essay and her very thorough and carefully edited new version of *Noa Noa* add to our understanding of Gauguin *as a writer*, in particular, the way he used writing as a mode of self-representation, not merely as a backdrop for his visual art. In addition, Moran consults both the Francophone and Anglophone scholarship on Gauguin: too often, the archive of literature on Gauguin has drawn on either one or the other, creating two branches of what should, ideally, be an international-global conversation, given its subject. This publication, with Moran’s essay in English and the primary source texts in their original French, makes an important inroad into bridging the gap between the two main linguistic camps of Gauguin scholarship.

One notable absence in Moran’s bibliography is some of the scholarship that centers Gauguin within Pacific history, such as Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk’s early but notable book, *Paradise Reviewed: an Interpretation of Gauguin’s Polynesian Symbolism*.<sup>[2]</sup> Another absence from this new edition are the illustrations that accompany various versions of *Noa Noa*. The author explains in a footnote that it was “not possible to include the images, which form an important dimension of the project” (p. 4 n. 21). While this is certainly understandable given the various complications and expenses involved in reproducing images (and likely would have made for a much more expensive volume), I would encourage any interested reader to consult these elsewhere along with a reading of the text. A digital version is accessible via the Museum of Modern Art’s interactive website for the *Gauguin: Metamorphoses* exhibition.<sup>[3]</sup>

The text also includes a reprint of Gauguin’s essay “Manuscrit tiré du *Livre des métiers* de Vehbi-Zumbul Zadi,” a “fictional text by an imaginary Turkish painter” (p. 14), in which Gauguin (voiced by Zadi) outlines his theories of painting. Given that this is a less-well-known piece of writing from Gauguin, Moran might have given the reader more of an introduction to this essay, expanding on both context and significance. Self-invention and self-representation are themes in much of Gauguin’s writing, as in his art, particularly his extensive self-portraits and his insertion, in many of his works, of symbols such as foxes and dogs that he uses to represent himself. A more clear explanation of why this essay was chosen over other of Gauguin’s works to accompany *Noa Noa* would give Moran’s argument regarding the artist’s impact as a writer additional depth. Still, access to this essay (not otherwise easily available) makes an important contribution to our knowledge of Gauguin’s written oeuvre.

Overall, however, these are very minor points of critique. In addition to her noteworthy introductory essay, through this edition Moran has made two valuable primary sources even more accessible to other scholars. This affordable text will be useful for scholars of fin de siècle French art and literature as well as students of French language, art history, and aesthetic theory, and will likely lead to new scholarship on Gauguin. Given the recent publication of *Gauguin’s Challenge* along with the continued interest in curatorial practice around the artist, Gauguin is clearly worthy of continued study. Moran’s text offers the opportunity to take this scholarship in fresh new directions. I would invite others going forward to consult Moran’s edition of *Noa Noa* as the definitive text for any study of Gauguin.

## NOTES

[1] Norma Broude, ed., *Gauguin’s Challenge: New Perspectives after Postmodernism* (New York and

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London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018).

[2] Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise Reviewed: An Interpretation of Gauguin's Polynesian Symbolism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983).

[3] See <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2014/gauguin/print-series>, accessed 14 October 2018.

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