

GAUGUIN, LINGUISTIC OPACITY, AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

DAVID CLARKE

Paul Gauguin's *Four Breton Women* (fig. 1), painted on his first visit to Brittany in 1886, may be interpreted as a painting concerned with the issue of linguistic otherness and opacity. It may be read as an attempt by Gauguin (1848–1903) to express a sense of linguistic exclusion from the remote Breton-speaking community in which he found himself in the village of Pont-Aven, or as specifying a sense of the otherness or autonomy of Breton culture (also conveyed by the distinctive costumes the women are shown as wearing). The women are clearly depicted as gathered in conversation—no activity of labor is taking place—and form an enclosed circle which excludes the spectator. We are not linked in

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Fig. 1. Paul Gauguin, *Four Breton Women*, 1886. Oil on canvas; 28 $\frac{1}{4}$ \times 36 in. (71.8 \times 91.4 cm). Neue Pinakothek, Munich. Image courtesy the Bavarian State Painting Collections, used under Creative Commons license CC BY-SA 4.0.

by any gaze from within the painting's space, and backs are prominently turned in our direction to signal our status as outsiders (the motif of the back being one which Gauguin has borrowed from Degas but here repurposes). A gaggle of geese is visible, which helps remind us of the sound of a conversation we cannot hear. In French as in English women can be disparagingly likened to geese, so that background motif asks to be read onto the foreground scene—as also involving communication which is indecipherable to the spectator's ears and experienced only as sound.¹

That Gauguin was experiencing a sense of linguistic isolation in the period after his arrival in Pont-Aven can be documented by a letter to his wife, Mette, from around July 25, 1886, in which he notes, “there are hardly any French people here.”² Other contemporary travelers also chose

to remark on the linguistic otherness of the region. Katharine Sarah Macquoid (wife of the painter Thomas Robert Macquoid) wrote in her 1877 travel book *Through Brittany* that the Breton language “is troublesome to learn, as there are several different dialects. In many villages in Finistère [the department of Brittany which includes Pont-Aven] only a few of the inhabitants speak French.”³ George Musgrave, in his *A Ramble into Brittany* of 1870, records an encounter with a Breton woman who is unable to speak French and notes, “it was singular enough to find so distinct a segregation still maintained between civilized France and what we might call its Welsh and Cornwall provinces.”⁴

Humphrey Lloyd Humphreys estimates that there were 1,320,000 Breton speakers in 1886 (the year of Gauguin’s painting), of which 51 percent spoke only Breton. Only 5 percent of the residents of Brittany at that time spoke French alone. He also notes that “knowledge of French spread earlier among men than among women” (a fact relevant to the consideration of Gauguin’s painting, which features only female subjects), and places the habitually or exclusively French-speaking population as “a small upper- and middle-class minority with noticeable concentrations restricted to towns and households of the landed aristocracy.” He believes that lower Brittany (where Gauguin was based) was largely populated at that time by people who spoke only Breton.⁵ This would likely have been particularly the case somewhere such as Pont-Aven, which didn’t get a railway link till 1903, and whose nearest harbor was Concarneau, about ten miles by road to the west.⁶ Widespread linguistic change only set in after the First World War, leaving around one hundred thousand people who spoke only Breton by 1950, out of a total Breton-speaking community of around a million, with Finistère the area where Breton survives most strongly as a spoken language today.⁷

Behind these statistics about shifting language use lies an intense battle between centralism and particularism, with the French state promoting linguistic uniformity and even today affording no official recognition to languages spoken in France other than French itself. This centralist logic can be particularly seen from the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras

onward. The education system became a key battleground when the French government took active steps to discourage the use of Breton in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as part of the process of constructing a modern nation-state. These issues were especially intense at the time of Gauguin's painting, because mandatory secular education had only recently been established by the Jules Ferry Laws of 1881 and 1882. Breton was banned in classrooms, and teachers were fined and pupils punished if they were caught speaking it. In 1885 (the year before Gauguin's painting) a system was introduced in which pupils caught speaking Breton were made to wear a symbol around their necks; this emblem was passed from one to the next, and the person wearing it at the end of the day was punished.⁸

Religious life provided the strongest public institutional refuge for the Breton language in the nineteenth century. When Gauguin painted his *Vision of the Sermon* (National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh) in 1888, during his second stay in Brittany, he would have been aware that the sermon given by the priest (depicted within the painting itself) would have been in Breton rather than French. The Prefect of Finistère in his 1887 report (that is, of the year immediately prior to Gauguin's painting) commented on specific instances where priests had used their sermons to try to influence voting in national legislative elections, in favor of what (from the state's perspective) would have been considered more conservative candidates. The minister of public instruction also commented that same year on the Breton clergy's active propaganda "in favour of the candidates hostile to our Republican institutions."⁹ Even in the late 1920s preaching was exclusively Breton in 474 parishes out of a total of 635, mostly the more rural, and it was only after 1945, as monolingual Breton speakers declined greatly in number, that priests switched to French as a medium.¹⁰

In painting his *Bonjour, Monsieur Gauguin* (Národní Galerie, Prague) in 1889, depicting a Breton peasant greeting him in French, Gauguin was perhaps attempting to specify a relatively atypical occasion when a local woman reached out to him in his own language (across the symbolic

barrier between insider and outsider represented by the gate between them), creating a sort of binary counterpart to the sense of exclusion represented in his earlier canvas, *Four Breton Women*. In this case, exceptionally, we are aware of the speech of a protagonist in a painting because her words are used as the work's title.

Overall, though, while Gauguin's paintings do arguably engage with the question of language use in Brittany, it is fair to say that he has failed to make any concern he has with this issue legible to the spectator, and has not marked out a distinct stand in relation to the matters at stake in the conflict for cultural space between French and Breton. Perhaps this is why, when he encountered a similar issue of power-laden language interaction after his move to the Pacific island of Tahiti in 1891, he adopted a different strategy to more clearly foreground the matter of linguistic incomprehension.

This strategy, seen in a great many of the works from his time in Tahiti, is to add an inscription onto the surface of the image in the local language. Such inscriptions, standing between the viewer and the figures depicted in the image, serve to produce an "alienation effect" (in the terminology of German playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht). Through their incomprehensibility to the metropolitan French audience to which these images were addressed, the Tahitian inscriptions introduce blind spots, aporia which undermine any sense of easy access to or mastery of the exotic world depicted. Written in the Roman alphabet, and thus inviting decipherment, they nevertheless frustrate it.

In certain cases, such as *Aha oe feii?* (*What! Are You Jealous?*), the linguistically opaque inscriptions on Gauguin's images can be taken as representing the first-person speech of a person depicted within the image (fig. 2).¹¹ This can help create a sense of the Tahitians represented in the image as active agents, rather than simply the passive objects of the viewing gaze. This reuse of the strategy for giving voice within the silent world of a painting which he earlier employed with *Bonjour, Monsieur Gauguin* is also found in *Ia Orana Maria* (*Hail Mary*). But here the inscription functions differently, because it is in a language other than



Fig. 2. Paul Gauguin, *Aha oe feii?* (*What! Are You Jealous?*), 1892. Oil on canvas; 26 × 35 ½ in. (66 × 89 cm). Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

French; it is also particularly prominent, given as it is against a brightly colored background (fig. 3). Again, non-Tahitian-speaking viewers (as almost all of Gauguin's intended metropolitan audience would have been) are allowed to hear the sound of a language they don't understand. Although we may take the phrase as a title for the painting, at the same time it is also understood as speech from the Tahitian figures represented within the image.

The question of clashing languages here, unlike in the Breton works, is read in the broader context of a clash of cultures. The Christian theme of the Annunciation is invoked in the painting, for instance. Gauguin's reference to non-Tahitian culture in this painting seems to be an allusion to the colonial and missionary overlay of native belief by French and Christian culture that Gauguin became acutely aware of following his arrival in Tahiti, and in due course came to actively contest (he published



Fig. 3. Paul Gauguin, *Ia Orana Maria (Hail Mary)*, 1891. Oil on canvas; 44 ½ × 34 ½ in. (113.03 × 87.63 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Sam A. Lewisohn, 1951.

a satirical broadsheet, *Le sourire*, monthly from August 1899 to April 1900). In Gauguin's *Ia Orana Maria* both imported and native culture are present, and are shown as imperfectly melded, as clashing. Within the world of the image, at least, it is not clear that the imported culture has successfully overcome the native one, which invites sustained attention through the opacity of the written inscription.

Gauguin had a sense soon after arriving in Tahiti that French and Tahitian culture were in contest, noting in a letter to his wife, Mette, of June 29, 1891, that the "land of Tahiti is becoming entirely French, and little by little all that old order of things will give place to new."¹² His specific concern for the Tahitian language is apparent, since in writing home he mentions the orations in Tahitian given by chiefs at the funeral of the king (Pomare V), and translates two Tahitian words. Later, in his manuscript "*Noa Noa*," he even fashions an image of himself as being in exile from the French language, writing at one point, "I hadn't spoken a word of French for two months."¹³ Gauguin may have overstated the degree of his understanding of Tahitian, but his conscious disaffiliation from the hegemonic tongue is clear. The Tahitian language, well-preserved at that time even if native life had been seriously impacted in other ways by contact with the Europeans, becomes a counterhegemonic resource in his art.¹⁴

This article has examined how the encounter with linguistic otherness is handled in the painting of Paul Gauguin, arguing that it is an underappreciated theme of his art. Initially surfacing during his time in Brittany, it returns more explicitly during his Tahitian phase, where new solutions to the challenge of figuring language difference appear, and where a conscious artistic stance toward the power-laden interactions of languages is more easily discerned. By suggesting that a positive politics of cultural difference can be discerned in Gauguin's works, the present text aligns itself with, and helps confirm, the more affirmative interpretations of his art that have emerged in recent years, following a period in the late twentieth century when his contribution was often viewed

negatively by major scholars, in particular with respect to his representation of women and non-Western cultures. By paying particular attention to occasions where communication fails, and where linguistic opacity results, I find common ground with scholars such as Dario Gamboni and Alastair Wright, who, addressing other dimensions of Gauguin's art than those which concern me here, have also found positive value in its ambiguity or the way it refuses to offer a clarified presentation of its subject.¹⁵

NOTES

1. Belinda Thomson notes that *oie* "was used to connote a silly woman," analogous therefore to the English term "silly goose." *Gauguin's Vision* (Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 2005), 136n15.
2. Gauguin to Mette, July 25, 1886, in *Paul Gauguin: The Search for Paradise: Letters from Brittany and the South Seas*, selected and introduced by Bernard Denvir (London: Collins and Brown, 1992), 24–25.
3. Katharine Sarah Macquoid, *Through Brittany* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1877), 11.
4. George Musgrave, *A Ramble into Brittany* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1870), 2:158. Eugen Weber quotes Guy de Maupassant's comment concerning his 1882 tour through Lower Brittany that in the course of a whole week one might not meet a single person in the villages who speaks a word of French. *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), 76.
5. Humphrey Lloyd Humphreys, "The Breton Language: Its Present Position and Historical Background," in *The Celtic Languages*, ed. Martin J. Ball with James Fife (London: Routledge, 1993), 606–43.
6. Thomson, *Gauguin's Vision*, 25. In Le Pouldu, a village Gauguin visited occasionally in 1886 and 1888, and where he stayed for a period from 1889 to 1890, his isolation from the French language would presumably have been even greater than in Pont-Aven. On poverty and underdevelopment in nineteenth-century Brittany, see Gwenno Piette, *Brittany: A Concise History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 102–3. Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, in a major early attempt to historicize discussion of Gauguin's

- Brittany, perhaps overemphasize the extent to which the region had already been integrated into the nation, focusing on issues of economics rather than those of identity. “Les données bretonnantes: La prairie de la représentation,” *Art History* 3, no. 3 (September 1980): 314–44.
7. Humphreys, “Breton Language,” 612; Michael Hornsby, “The Incongruence of the Breton Linguistic Landscape for Young Speakers of Breton,” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 29, no. 2 (2008): 127–38, esp. 129.
 8. On the French government’s active discouragement of Breton use in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, see Madeleine Adkins and Jenny L. Davis, “The Naïf, the Sophisticate, and the Party Girl: Regional and Gender Stereotypes in Breton Language Web Videos,” *Gender and Language* 6, no. 2 (2012): 291–308, esp. 294. See also Piette, *Brittany*, 105–6. For a broader study of the nation-building policies of the Third Republic and their impact on rural France, see Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*. On language, see esp. 67–94, and on language in Brittany in particular, see 74, 76, 82–84.
 9. Michael Orwicz, “Criticism and Representations of Brittany in the Early Third Republic,” *Art Journal* 46, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 291–98, esp. 295, 298nn40, 41. Orwicz gives useful background on the way issues of localism in Brittany were tied in with national political contestation between Opportunist Republicans and conservatives, particularly after the election of 1885.
 10. On religion and the Breton language, see Humphreys, “Breton Language,” 613, 617, 625–26, 633; and Piette, *Brittany*, 106–7. Weber notes that in Finistère alone, fifty-one priests had their salaries suspended for refusing to observe the 1902 government ban on Breton language sermons and catechism. *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 88.
 11. In this particular case Gauguin creates an ambiguity concerning the addressee of the speech. It can be read as speech from one of the two depicted women to the other (a conversation we are excluded from, and the topic of which we are unclear about), but alternatively it can also be plausibly read as a spoken challenge from within the painting to the outsider viewer. An analogous but more overt later reuse of Gauguin’s strategy of employing an intrusive linguistic inscription and a first-person voice is found in Barbara Kruger’s *Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face* (1981). A female viewer is able to gain agency by identifying with the active subject of the inscribed statement and not just with the objectified female presence depicted.

12. Gauguin to Mette, June 29, 1891, in Denvir, *Paul Gauguin*, 67.
13. Quoted in Denvir, *Paul Gauguin*, 73. An opposition between “the languages of Oceania” and “the European language of inflections” is posited by Gauguin in a letter to August Strindberg of February 5, 1895. Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 82–83.
14. On the vitality of the Tahitian language and the relatively limited penetration of French at that time, see Bengt Danielsson, *Gauguin in the South Seas* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1965), 82. Danielsson is a useful source in general on the Tahitian language and the question of how much Gauguin understood it. “Gauguin’s Tahitian Titles,” *Burlington Magazine*, no. 109 (April 1969): 228–33. On these topics see also Hiriata Millaud, “Les titres tahitiens de Gauguin,” in *Ia Orana Gauguin*, exh. cat. (Punaauiua: Musée de Tahiti et des Îles / Te Fare Iamanaha; Paris: Somogy Éditions d’Art, 2003), 81–89.
15. Dario Gamboni, “Gauguin and the Challenge of Ambiguity,” in *Gauguin’s Challenge: New Perspectives After Postmodernism*, ed. Norma Broude (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 103–28; Alastair Wright, “On Not Seeing Tahiti: Gauguin’s ‘Noa Noa’ and the Rhetoric of Blindness,” in Broude, *Gauguin’s Challenge*, 129–56. Broude’s introduction to the volume (1–12) offers a useful characterization of the currently fractured field of Gauguin scholarship, discussing the evolution of a critical feminist take on Gauguin in the late 1900s (1–3), as well as noting how the scholarly picture has since complexified. Her own essay for the volume covers much of the same ground in a more extensive way. “Flora Tristan’s Grandson: Reconsidering the Feminist Critique of Paul Gauguin,” in Broude, *Gauguin’s Challenge*, 69–100. This present study of cultural difference and its artistic expression continue a research theme which began with my work on Hong Kong art and cultural identity. David Clarke, *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002). For the role of language in figuring identity, see David Clarke, “Word, Image and Identity in Hong Kong Art,” in *A Glimpse into Hong Kong Art* by Lai Mei Lin (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Design Institute, 2017), 36–43. The current article draws on ideas first publicly presented in David Clarke, “Linguistic Opacity in Art,” conference paper, “The Sociolinguistics of Art,” School of English, University of Hong Kong, January 9, 2014.