

Designing Indigeneity: French Polynesian ‘Tifaifai’ as Homelands and Knowledge Systems

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In a Tortoiseshell: *This is not only an exemplary R3, but also a phenomenal research paper in general. The piece is **expertly structured, argued coherently**, and uses an **unorthodox** (yet well-explained) **method** to analyze specific cultural artifacts. The overarching question is identity formation through artistic creation in French Polynesia, a provocative topic that is — as the author claims at the end — not exclusive to this part of the world.*

Feature

In French Polynesia, the homeland-centric term “indigenous” has never had a stable definition. Before the imposition of French influence, Polynesia was far from a cohesive homeland. In fact, the term “Polynesia” applies to a vast triangular zone (delineated by New Zealand, Hawai‘i, and Easter Island) that encompasses a kaleidoscopic array of islands with diverse social systems and over thirty dialects.¹ France formally appropriated several Polynesian archipelagoes in the nineteenth century and packaged the manifold islands under a single title, “French Polynesia,” that belies the inherent range of homelands included within. As a byproduct of this externally enforced conglomeration of disparate homelands, contemporary French Polynesians grapple with the “indigeneity question,” which anthropologist Natacha Gagné has recently begun to investigate.²

Because French Polynesia itself is a product of French invasion and invention, it is unclear what it means to be “indigenous” to French Polynesia. Conceptions of indigeneity in the region are firmly rooted in the French language. For instance, in Gagné’s article “Brave New Words: The Complexities and Possibilities of an ‘Indigenous’ Identity in French Polynesia and New Caledonia,” she states that when France first took possession of Polynesian land in 1880, the archipelago’s inhabitants assumed the subordinate status of “*citoyens indigènes*,” or, indigenous citizens.³ Now, in the post-colonial context, many Polynesians continue to associate indigeneity with subordination while others embrace the name “*autochtone*,” the French term for indigenous, in an effort to advance their individual liberties.⁴ The central project of Gagné’s article is to examine the “indigenous strategy”—why, in some cases, French Polynesians embrace the indigenous “label.”⁵ Gagné’s scholarship offers a clear portrait of the problematic status of the term “indigenous” in French Polynesia, but her article makes a fundamental assumption: that indigeneity is a title to be claimed or rejected. In Gagné’s view, claiming indigeneity is a process of

¹ Kaeppler, *The Pacific Arts of Polynesia & Micronesia*, 4

² Gagné, “Brave New Words: The Complexities and Possibilities of an ‘Indigenous’ Identity in French Polynesia and New Caledonia,” 385.

³ *Ibid.*, 375.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 376.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 371.

“affirmation,” or of aligning one’s own identity with a particular category.⁶ The United Nations similarly presents indigeneity as a title that can be claimed by choice. While the UN has avoided defining the term “indigenous” explicitly, its Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues lists common factors among indigenous groups, notably the possession of “knowledge systems” and the “mainten[ence] and reproduc[tion]” of such “systems” over time.⁷ This approach to the indigeneity question is retrospective; it frames indigeneity in terms of past circumstances, preexisting homelands, and established means of understanding the world.

Just as Gagné characterizes indigeneity as a “label,” the UN presents the term “indigenous” as a static title that a group with a distinct “knowledge system” can choose to adopt. However, Dr. Claire Pajaczkowska, Senior Research Tutor in Fashion and Textiles at the Royal College of Art, offers an unconventional interpretation of knowledge systems that can be applied to further examine the indigeneity question. Pajaczkowska claims that “[t]o bring the semiotic method to textiles is to acknowledge the potential of textile as a complex cultural object of knowledge, as well as matter.”⁸ In light of Pajaczkowska’s theory, a semiotic interpretation of French Polynesian textiles provides an opportunity to reconceptualize indigeneity as a creative process. While Gagné and the UN factsheet characterize indigeneity as a title to be affirmed, I suggest through a semiotic analysis of French Polynesian quilts called *tifaifai* that textile artists can construct homelands and knowledge systems, thereby designing indigeneity through an active memory formation process that overcomes external sociopolitical circumstances.

Through this analysis, I aim to propose a new mode of understanding indigeneity that inheres in a cultural context. The objective of this paper is not to revise or modify the UN’s characterization of indigeneity. (In fact, the UN’s inclusive framework substantiates appeals to indigenous rights on a global scale.) Rather, through an examination of French Polynesia, a region in which the term “indigenous” is both externally derived and fraught with political baggage, I offer an interpretation of indigeneity as a regenerative identity formation process. The model for indigeneity set forth in this paper is intentionally atypical; I present the textile medium of *tifaifai* as a means of crafting, not affirming, indigenous identity. Ultimately, this study of French Polynesian *tifaifai* complicates contemporary scholarly discourse by reframing indigeneity outside of the political sphere and embracing diverse conceptions of homeland.

Approaches to the Indigeneity Question: A Closer Look

It may at first appear more intuitive to consider French Polynesian indigeneity *within* a political context because French administrative influence in the region has so directly prompted the “indigeneity question”; however, the essential drawback of viewing indigeneity as a politically actionable title alone is

⁶ Ibid., 385.

⁷ “Who are indigenous peoples?” United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. United Nations. Accessed April 11, 2016.
http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf.

⁸ Claire Pajaczkowska, “Tension, Time, and Tenderness: Indexical Traces of Touch in Textiles,” 146.

that such a framework fails to account for the nuances of post-colonial circumstances. An examination of *tifaifai* and its role in the “indigenous strategy” reveals that interpreting indigenous identity through a political lens enforces dichotomy rather than accommodating complexity. Within the past thirty years, French Polynesians in support of complete liberty from the French government have used material culture as a means by which to claim “indigenous” identity in the political sphere. In 1992, anthropologist Anna Laura Jones published an article in *Pacific Studies* recounting her research of the sociopolitical role of local women artists in French Polynesia. Jones found that “pro-French and pro-independence forces” had “adopted different definitions of what constitutes authentic Polynesian tradition.”⁹ In the process of advocating complete independence from France, the “Ma’ohi¹⁰ culture movement” had called for the “revival of indigenous customs” such as “voyaging canoes, thatched houses, [and] tattoo” while the “pro-French side” had promoted European-inspired crafts, including *tifaifai*.¹¹ Jones’s observations confirm that the title “indigenous” fails to address the multiplicity inherent in the notion of “authentic” French Polynesian heritage. Moreover, the “indigenous” arts movement, by positioning itself in opposition to post-colonial art forms, confined *tifaifai* to a “pro-French,” non-indigenous status seemingly at odds with Ma’ohi tradition. This political polarity enforced by the “indigenous strategy” veils French Polynesian *tifaifai*’s multifaceted origins; a more complete understanding of *tifaifai*—and, ultimately, of indigeneity—requires a departure from political contexts.

The history of the development of *tifaifai* in French Polynesia reveals that the craft, which Jones aligns with a “pro-French” perspective, had a firm basis in pre-colonial cultural practices.¹² *Tifaifai* represents an accumulation of artistic traditions, both Polynesian and European. Before European contact, women artists in Polynesia produced barkcloth panels by immersing tree bark in water, flattening the newly workable material with wooden mallets, then layering and dyeing the filaments to form designs [Fig. 1].¹³ In contemporary French Polynesia, *tifaifai* echoes the techniques and ceremonial roles associated with barkcloth. For instance, the *tifaifai* quilting process involves a balance between “stitched design” and “surface” design; similarly, barkcloth conflates cohesive, reiterative internal patterns with imprinted surface motifs.¹⁴ Furthermore, *tifaifai* features prominently in wedding ceremonies and funerals, the original social contexts of barkcloth creations.¹⁵ This translation of barkcloth methods into quilting began in the early nineteenth century, when Christian ministers first traveled to the islands.¹⁶ An appliqué style of *tifaifai* derived from the incorporation of Western floral and geometric surface design into existing barkcloth techniques [Fig 2].¹⁷ This synthesis between Polynesian and Western perspectives evident in

⁹ Anna Laura Jones, “Women, Art, and the Crafting of Ethnicity in Contemporary French Polynesia,” 137.

¹⁰ The term Ma’ohi refers generally to the native peoples of the archipelagoes that comprise French Polynesia.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Kaeppler, *The Pacific Arts of Polynesia & Micronesia*, 12.

¹⁴ Ibid., 97.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Joyce D. Hammond, “Tableau Style *Tifaifai* of French Polynesia: An Evolving Narrative Form,” 178.

¹⁷ Joyce D. Hammond, “*Tifaifai* in Tahiti: Embracing Change,” 44.

tifaifai suggests that pre- and post-colonial textile arts in French Polynesia are fundamentally and seamlessly linked. Just as *tifaifai* reflects both Polynesian and Western influence, the Ma'ohi movement's concept of a unified pan-Polynesian culture has derived not only from Ma'ohi practice but also from the condition of externally imposed nationhood. In fact, according to linguist and anthropologist Roger Keesing, regions in which individuals assert "unity and common cultural heritage" often "have acquired their reality only through the colonial process itself."¹⁸ It can be inferred from Keesing's statement that a nominal approach to indigeneity, by establishing a binary distinction between "native" and "outsider," fails to illustrate the inherent inseparability of the pre- and post-colonial worlds.

Because *tifaifai* synthesizes Western and Ma'ohi sensibilities, the medium enables artists to materialize the twilight world between France and Polynesia. This process of navigating and constructing homelands through textiles is most clearly discernible in an emerging subcategory of *tifaifai* called the "tableau" style, which features thematic scenes, departing from a longstanding tradition of decorative patchwork and appliqué techniques.¹⁹ Tableaux are diverse in their subject matter and expressive content, but those that feature landscapes are particularly illustrative of an active process of placemaking. Miriam Kahn, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Washington, asserts that "[p]laces are generated when... 'imaginaries' collide with material existence, each reflecting and recasting the other as in an endless hall of mirrors. Images in the mind are projected onto physical places, which in turn are shaped in the ways that most successfully respond to, and further rekindle, the imaginary."²⁰ Tableau *tifaifai* artists realize the prospect of designing indigeneity by engaging in a dynamic process comparable to that which Kahn describes, drawing upon both the popular imagination and their physical surroundings. Inspired in part by Western exoticist projections, *tifaifai* artisans integrate nostalgic reveries with allusions to a tangible, regional landscape to produce new homelands and knowledge systems.

The Semiotics of Textiles: *Tifaifai* Case Studies

In the vein of Pajaczkowska's claim that applying semiotic theory to textiles affirms their role as "cultural object[s] of knowledge," a semiotic analysis of tableau *tifaifai* landscapes sheds light on the knowledge systems that emerge from their creators' distinctive approach to place-making. A particularly vivid example is a cultural landscape by *tifaifai* artist Miri Vidal depicting the Opunohu Bay and shoreline of Mo'orea [Fig 3].²¹ The tableau appeared in the 2014 *Salon du Tifaifai*, an annual crafts fair in Tahiti that centers upon a thematic contest each year. In 2014, the *Salon* proposed a "free" theme, granting *tifaifai* artists unprecedented creative liberties [Fig 4].²² Due to this flexible theme, samples of *tifaifai*

¹⁸ Roger M. Keesing, "Creating the Past: Custom and Identity in the Contemporary Pacific," 26.

¹⁹ Joyce D. Hammond, "Tableau Style *Tifaifai* of French Polynesia: An Evolving Narrative Form," 177.

²⁰ Miriam Kahn, "Tahiti: the ripples of a myth on the shores of the imagination," 307.

²¹ Joyce D. Hammond, "Tableau Style *Tifaifai* of French Polynesia: An Evolving Narrative Form," 188.

²² Ibid., 190.

from the 2014 exposition are notably illustrative of the medium's potential to design subjective indigenous identities. Applying American logician Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic method to Vidal's tableau highlights the possibility of materializing and understanding intangible states of belonging. According to Peirce, the semiotic process of representation occurs in a "Triadic Relation" that involves interactions between three "correlates," the first of which is a "representamen," the second of which is an "object," and the third of which is an "interpretant."²³ The representamen, according to Peirce, "refers" to the object through signification.²⁴ Most representamens can be classified as "signs," and the interpretant of a sign is "a cognition of a mind" that takes on an intermediary position between sign and object; similarly, a "relation of thought" joins an interpretant to its object.²⁵ Synthesizing Peirce's definitions, the representamen serves as the most basic element of a given Triadic Relation and references, through some visual means, a separate idea or entity called the object. The interpretant is the mode of perception or reasoning that enables the sign to be translated into its object and vice versa. In the context of Peirce's semiotic theory, tableau *tifaifai*, including Vidal's landscape, are representamens. The object to which each tableau refers is a subjective vision of a French Polynesian homeland that combines tangible and intangible elements of the Polynesian landscape, from physical features of the environment to mythological associations. If the tableau itself is a representamen that signifies an imagined homeland, then its interpretant is the cognitive translation of a homeland into a fabric composition, or the mental image that the *tifaifai* artist summons as she assembles her creation. This triangle of signification is essential; it is the mechanism by which *tifaifai* artists craft semiotic knowledge systems and engage in the place-making process that Kahn describes, synthesizing the tangible and imagined worlds.

While a general application of Peirce's principles reveals the overarching framework within which *tifaifai* artists fashion homelands and knowledge systems, a closer examination of Peirce's definition of "signs" enables a direct analysis of the formal elements and expressive content of Vidal's tableau. Peirce subdivides "signs" into three categories of representation: the "Icon," which "refers to the Object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own and which it possesses"; the "Index," which "refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object"; and the "Symbol," which "refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas."²⁶ In other words, an icon visually resembles its object, an index reflects traces of its object's presence, and a symbol is abstractly indicative of its object's meaning, despite visual dissimilarity. Both iconic and symbolic modes of signification are at play in Vidal's tableau. For instance, the white flowers with long, rounded petals near the left-hand border of the tableau constitute visual icons of the *tiare* flower, a distinctive feature of the Tahitian landscape. At the same time, the flowers hold symbolic significance — Joyce D. Hammond, a cultural anthropologist and professor in the Department of Anthropology at Western Washington University, notes in her article "Tableau Style *Tifaifai* of French Polynesia: An Evolving Narrative Form"

²³ Peirce, "Nomenclature and Divisions of Triadic Relations, as Far as They Are Determined", In *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings (1893-1913)*, 290.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 291.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 290-291.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 292.

that *tiare* flowers often appear in *tifaifai* as symbols of the island of Raiatea in French Polynesia, where the flowers most commonly grow.²⁷ Moreover, Hammond notes that *tiare* imagery is closely linked to a mythical tale of unrequited love in which the tragic heroine commits suicide, extending her hand from the grave like a flower.²⁸ The *tiare* motif not only contributes visually to Vidal's interpretation of homeland by drawing upon a recognizable element of the Polynesian landscape but also advances a symbolic knowledge system rooted in popular mythology and patterns of conceptual association. In addition to *tiare* flowers, a distinctive icon in Vidal's tableau is the green silhouette of a breadfruit tree. When Hammond comments upon the symbolic significance of the breadfruit tree, she highlights its connotative role as an emblem of communal values, including intergenerational prosperity and selflessness.²⁹ Furthermore, an outrigger canoe towards the center of Vidal's composition evokes a long-standing Polynesian tradition of navigation expertise. According to historian Robert D. Craig's *Dictionary of Polynesian Mythology*, Polynesians could never have "settled these widely scattered islands had it not been for their expert knowledge of seafaring canoe construction and their ability to navigate by naked-eye observation."³⁰ The icons that permeate Vidal's tableau take on symbolic significance as fragments of disparate narratives. The tableau's system of signification is also a system of knowledge in that it establishes an ordered means by which to conceptualize the relationships between the elements of a homeland. An amalgam of regional specificity and abstract evocation, the tableau not only demonstrates Kahn's notion of "place" but also, in assembling a homeland that synthesizes multiple representative elements into a single visual program, constitutes the first step in the process-oriented approach to indigeneity.

The tableau's simplified visual forms may at first seem to uphold a mythologizing Western perception of the region, which would suggest that *tifaifai* is an act of political place-making. However, while the textile incorporates elements of exoticism into its overarching narrative, its aesthetic program is more complex than a romanticized, Western representation of the French Polynesian landscape. In Jones's description of the "pro-French" cultural tradition under which she categorizes *tifaifai*, she refers to "an idealized picture of rural Polynesian culture" that is "devoutly Christian; centered on the home, the garden, and the sea; and emphasizes values of modesty, generosity, and hospitality."³¹ Vidal's tableau features two-dimensional representations of a "home," in the form of a visually simplified hut with a burgundy roof and arched doorway, a "garden," comprised of the orderly outlines of fruit, flowers, and vegetation, and "the sea," a curvilinear panel of vibrant turquoise cloth. Such visually straightforward iconography may appear to uphold an external, Western perspective, embracing idealism and oversimplification. Moreover, a figure in the foreground resembling a nymph or Nereid surveys the landscape, encouraging exoticism by removing the scene from reality. These appeals to Western tendencies towards primitivism and exoticism seem to support not only Jones's association of *tifaifai* with

²⁷ Joyce D. Hammond, "Tableau Style *Tifaifai* of French Polynesia: An Evolving Narrative Form," 191.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 190.

³⁰ Robert D. Craig, *Dictionary of Polynesian Mythology*, xiii.

³¹ Anna Laura Jones, "Women, Art, and the Crafting of Ethnicity in Contemporary French Polynesia," 152.

bucolic romanticism but also Keesing's interpretation of place-making in Polynesia as an inherently political process of reconstructing the past. After conducting research in the Pacific in the 1980s, Keesing observed that "myths of ancestral ways of life" in the region often "serve as powerful political symbols."³² In fact, he claims, "portrayals that idealize the precolonial past" tend to "incorporate Western conceptions of Otherness, visions of primitivity, and critiques of modernity."³³ Based upon Keesing's claims, one could interpret the simplified hut, canoe, and vegetation in the tableau as "primitiv[e]" representations of a "pre-colonial past" and could feasibly equate the Nereid figure with "Western conceptions of Otherness." However, Vidal's work is neither a pro-French pastoral scene nor a politically strategic re-imagination of Polynesian history. Instead, her cultural landscape is a living nexus between visual perception and symbolic evocation that redefines indigeneity by integrating Western exoticism and commercial cloth technique with emblems of a pan-Polynesian cultural identity. Throughout the composition as a whole, these seemingly disparate elements echo one another on a formal level, establishing a harmonious and unified landscape. The leafy crown of the figure in the foreground, for instance, imitates the shape and orientation of the green breadfruit tree's lateral branches; the Nereid (a product of what Keesing would call the "Western imagination"³⁴) coexists with the breadfruit tree, an enduring symbol of Polynesian land and identity. Rather than advancing a strictly Westernized aesthetic program, Vidal's tableau, through Peircean signification methods, relays a multi-layered knowledge system that takes into account French influence, pre-colonial tradition, visual experience, and, ultimately, the tangible process of crafting a textile.

A tableau *tifai fai* created by Marguerite Biret for the 2014 *Salon* at first glance seems to appeal to the Western touristic imagination; however, its semiotic profile confirms its function not only in crafting but also in sustaining indigenous identity. The focal point of Biret's composition is a woman with long, thick black hair and a bronze complexion, wearing nothing but a crown of flowers on her head and a floral sash around her waist [Fig. 5].³⁵ This image of a semi-clothed woman in nature evokes Keesing's notion of a "vision[] of primitivity" and seems to present an idealized portrait of a pre-colonial state of being. Furthermore, the floral cloth wrapped around the woman's waist is an archetypal Polynesian accessory called a "*pareu*," which is included in Jones's description of "pro-French" crafts in French Polynesia.³⁶ In this sense, the figure seems to serve as a typifying icon and as a Westernized symbol of the islands. Enlisting exoticism, the image oversimplifies French Polynesian womanhood. Yet this vaguely mythical, reductive image is closely intertwined with additional Peircean representamens that allude to distinctive physical and conceptual features of the French Polynesian archipelagoes. For instance, like Vidal's landscape, the tableau brims with colorful and diverse plant life. A single, spherical breadfruit near the upper right-hand corner of the textile carries the same iconic and symbolic significance as the breadfruit tree in Vidal's composition, conflating the material and mythological worlds. In addition to breadfruit, the

³² Roger M. Keesing, "Creating the Past: Custom and Identity in the Contemporary Pacific," 19.

³³ Ibid., 29.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Joyce D. Hammond, "Tableau Style *Tifai fai* of French Polynesia: An Evolving Narrative Form," 180.

³⁶ Anna Laura Jones, "Women, Art, and the Crafting of Ethnicity in Contemporary French Polynesia," 137.

tableau features identifiable plants specific to the climate and terrain of Polynesia, including a banana tree, bamboo stalks, red Tahitian ginger (a tropical flower), and soursop (a large green fruit coated in bristles) [Figs. 6 and 7]. Alongside the mythologized female figure, these icons communicate a synthesis of Western and Polynesian sensibilities, crystallizing a homeland that fuses both realms. Moreover, the tableau includes several simplified icons of birds, both perched and in flight. While the birds visually diversify the surface pattern of the piece, they may also serve a symbolic semiotic function. According to Craig's dictionary, "[b]irds are regarded by the Tahitians to be shadows of the gods," and "[d]ifferent birds represent different gods."³⁷ In this sense, the motif may signify a history of Polynesian spirituality, expanding the language of icons and symbols that form the indigenous knowledge system of Biret's conception. The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues draws an association between indigenous knowledge systems and "a special relation to and use of...traditional land."³⁸ While the UN confines such knowledge to the navigation and mastery of long-inhabited physical territories, Vidal's and Biret's examples confirm that *tifaifai* artists can design a more flexible indigenous identity by establishing—through semiotic systems—"a special relation to and use of" conceptual homelands.

Sustaining Knowledge Systems: Memory Formation through *Tifaifai*

Biret's tableau not only exemplifies the semiotic process of crafting knowledge systems but also demonstrates that the memory formation process made possible by the medium of fabric provides for the "maintenance" of such knowledge systems over time — a definitive feature of the UN's conception of indigeneity. The Peircean system of icons and symbols that permeates the tableau as a whole appeals to collective memory and consciousness, drawing upon a program of images familiar to a French Polynesian audience, from attributes of the landscape to evidence of Western influence. However, while such signs constitute near-universal access points within a French Polynesian context, Pajaczkowska's strategy of applying Peirce's logic to the fabric arts outlines an individual process of memory-formation grounded in tangible experience. Her interpretation of Peirce's theory extends beyond visual iconography; in fact, Pajaczkowska claims that the medium of fabric itself is a representamen that can be subdivided into "icon, index, and symbol."³⁹ She emphasizes the potential of fabric as an indexical sign, noting that "the indexical serves to commemorate haptic presence" in that "the interplay between the absence of the contact and the presence of the sign...sets in motion the memory of a time in which tactile contact was present."⁴⁰ Her theory seems complex on the surface, but a definition of the term "haptic" clarifies the essence of her claim. According to Pajaczkowska, "haptic" describes the "sensory relationship that exists

³⁷ Robert Craig, *Dictionary of Polynesian Mythology*, 21.

³⁸ "Who are indigenous peoples?" United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. United Nations. Accessed April 11, 2016.

http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf.

³⁹ Claire Pajaczkowska, "Tension, Time, and Tenderness: Indexical Traces of Touch in Textiles," 139.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

between optical and tactile.”⁴¹ Given this definition, it follows that “haptic presence” refers to an artist’s physical engagement, both manual and visual, with a fabric medium. The core of Pajackowska’s argument is that fabric itself contains indications of an artist’s past engagement with the material and induces memories of the physical process of crafting a given product even after that process has taken place. “This play of memory,” she asserts, “serves to form a connection in consciousness, to the unconscious bodily memory of the past body.”⁴² If, as Pajackowska suggests, the medium of fabric can activate individual memory and consciousness, then the cognitive patterns associated with translating an imagined homeland into a tangible creation can be stored in the memory as knowledge systems and re-summoned by visual signals within the fabric itself. Pajackowska uses a “stitch” as her primary example of such a signal, or “indexical trace.”⁴³ As a result, her theory of fabric as an indexical representamen is particularly applicable to Biret’s tableau, which is covered in minutely detailed, stitched appliqué designs. The surface patterns in the waterfall and in the leaves that frame the tableau most clearly demonstrate *tifaifai*’s role as both a path to a semiotic knowledge system of icons and symbols and as an indexical mechanism of retaining those knowledge systems in the individual and collective memory.

While fabric artists may use *tifaifai* to design indigeneity in multiple forms and contexts, the inherent memory-inducing properties of textiles ensure the preservation of indigeneity as a self-reflexive process. Visual icons such as Vidal’s canoe and breadfruit tree can appeal to collective memory by recalling timeless, canonized values, myths, or traditions. Meanwhile, cues in the material itself, such as the elaborate stitching on the surface of Biret’s tableau, activate the individual memory, facilitating an intuitive awareness of the body and its creative processes, past and present. If each new tableau-style *tifaifai* produces a different evocation of past “haptic” experience, then the process of indigeneity is in fact a fragmented, regenerative one that begins anew with every tableau. In the process of placemaking, artists become indigenous to multiple self-constructed realms that build upon, echo, and diverge from one another over time, embodying the “hall of mirrors” effect that Kahn describes. This effect is only possible when *tifaifai* artists actively seek to create, remember, and sustain a vast spectrum of homelands and identities. Unlike Pajackowska, who characterizes the indexical nature of fabric as a byproduct of an artist’s physical engagement with a cloth medium, Australian textile researcher Emma Peters claims in her article “The mnemonic qualities of textiles: Sustaining lifelong attachment” that the memory-inducing properties of textiles can be actively harnessed even before the creative process begins. She claims that the fabric arts can advance a program of “emotionally durable design” that ultimately “sustains our identity through the memories” that textiles “represent.”⁴⁴ According to Peters’s argument, “memories” and “identity” are inextricably linked; in light of this proposal, the design of indigenous identity proves “durable” only if it is paired with a memory formation process, both individual and collective, that establishes veins of connectivity within a context of increasing variety. Counterintuitively, the potential

⁴¹ Ibid., 145.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 144.

⁴⁴ Emma Peters, “The mnemonic qualities of textiles: Sustaining lifelong attachment,” 92.

solution to the fragmenting indigeneity question over which scholars have puzzled in the recent past lies in another form of fragmentation—a means of constructing homelands and knowledge systems that embraces the multiplicity of indigeneity. While pluralistic conceptions of homeland may seem to produce fragmented identities, the memory formation process naturally facilitated by the fabric arts enables the maintenance of multiple iterations of indigeneity within the individual and collective conscience.

Conclusion

This study of tableau-style *tifaifai* in French Polynesia provides a lens through which to reconsider definitions of indigeneity outside of the region's fraught political atmosphere. In so doing, it models a re-imagination of the indigeneity question that must necessarily take place in a world of increasing globalization and entanglement. *Tifaifai* is only one manifestation of the distinctive role of textiles as access points to the elusive psychological homelands that fall between nations and traditions. Outside of French Polynesia, the fabric arts still have the potential to form the basis for a renewed, empowering conception of indigeneity. For instance, in an article entitled "Decorative art or art practice? The conservation of textiles in the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq," cultural heritage conservation specialist Dr. Anne-Marie Deisser and Kurdish anthropologist Lolan Sipan describe the role of decorative textile arts in the evolution of Kurdish identity over time. Because nomadic Iraqi Kurds have traditionally relied upon "[w]eaving and related crafts" for income, economic necessity led many Kurdish textile artists in the late twentieth century to incorporate other groups' iconographic programs into their work.⁴⁵ Due to the fragmenting consequences of the Iran-Iraq war, including forced migration, genocide, and cultural destruction, Kurdish cultural production has been notably challenged.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, because the decorative designs of Kurdish textiles have so closely depended upon the materials available in the nomadic artists' environment, these textiles constitute "living heritage"—dynamic maps of physical journeys and personal identity.⁴⁷ Kurdish textiles' function as expressions of changing homelands and external circumstances evokes Hammond's claim that "the tableau style of *tifaifai*" embodies "a tradition of change."⁴⁸ Across borders and cultural contexts, to reflect upon indigeneity as a creative process of active identity construction is to acknowledge the invaluable role of material culture in reifying the spaces between the fragments.

⁴⁵ Anne-Marie Deisser and Lolan Sipan, "Decorative art or art practice? The conservation of textiles in the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq," S80.

⁴⁶ Ibid., S81.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Joyce D. Hammond, "Tableau Style *Tifaifai* of French Polynesia: An Evolving Narrative Form," 185.

Appendix



Figure 1. Samoan barkcloth sample from the early 20th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Unknown artist. *Barkcloth Panel (Siapo)*. Early 20th century. Barkcloth, pigment, 139.7 x 114.3 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art. 1978.412.1702. <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1978.412.1702/>.



Figure 2. An archetypal example of appliqué-style tifaifai.

Hoata, Hermann. Digital Image. Available from: Hammond, Joyce D. "Tableau Style *Tifaifai* of French Polynesia: An Evolving Narrative Form." *TEXTILE: Cloth and Culture* 13, no. 2 (2015): 176-201. DOI: 10.1080/14759756.2015.1045198.



Figure 3. Tableau-style *tifaifai* landscape of the Mo'orea coastline by Miri Vidal.
Source: Photo by Joyce D. Hammond

Hammond, Joyce D. Digital Image. Available from: Hammond, Joyce D. "Tableau Style *Tifaifai* of French Polynesia: An Evolving Narrative Form." *TEXTILE: Cloth and Culture* 13, no. 2 (2015): 176-201. DOI: 10.1080/14759756.2015.1045198.



Figure 4. Salon du *Tifaifai* exposition 2014 in the Papeete town hall.

Fenua Communication. Digital Image. Available from: "16ème édition du salon du Tifaifai." *Tahiti Infos*, April 29, 2014. http://www.tahiti-infos.com/16eme-edition-du-salon-du-Tifaifai_a100065.html.



Figure 5. Tableau-style *tifaifai* by Margarite Biret featuring a woman in nature.

Hammond, Joyce D. Digital Image. Available from: Hammond, Joyce D. "Tableau Style *Tifaifai* of French Polynesia: An Evolving Narrative Form." *TEXTILE: Cloth and Culture* 13, no. 2 (2015): 176-201. DOI: 10.1080/14759756.2015.1045198.



Figure 6. Close-up of a budding Tahitian red ginger plant in nature.

Avichai. Digital Image. Available from: "The Hunt for the Rarest Flower in Raiatea Island." *X Days in Y: Inspirational Travel Itineraries*, February 27, 2016. <http://xdaysiny.com/raiatea-island-french-polynesia/>.



Figure 7. The “soursop,” a fruit highly valued in French Polynesia.

Bacon, Gregoire le. Digital Image. Available from: *Moana Voyages: Spirit of Tahiti*. <http://www.tahiti-and-vacation.com/blog/soursop/#.VygyA2QrJsM>. Accessed April 24, 2016.

Author Commentary

Charlotte Reynders

This research paper represents the culmination of the work I did in my freshman writing seminar, *The Fragmented Past*, which centered on the preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage over time. It was the thematic focus of this course that provided the framework for my research and writing processes. As I considered the concept of fragmentation from a cultural perspective, I developed an interest in its abstract realization in the contexts of identity and memory. I have always been interested in French language and culture, and I thought that French Polynesia might be a productive area of study because the region exists at the nexus of imposed and inherited identities. I knew from past studies of Art History that European artists, notably Paul Gauguin, had crafted mythologizing representations of the Polynesian islands in their work, and I wanted to further examine the legacy of French colonialism by researching the complex interactions between self-representation and external representation in French Polynesian material culture.

Among the most challenging aspects of my experience writing the paper was the task of establishing a clear scholarly conversation in which to situate my argument. Ultimately, the paper aims to draw a few seemingly separate discourses (namely, the discourses surrounding indigenous identity, the textile arts, and semiotic interpretation) into one conversation, but it took time for that conversation to materialize on the page. My writing seminar instructor, Professor Emma Ljung, played a central role in my process of clarifying that conversation. Inspired by her suggestions, I regularly engaged and re-engaged with my sources and mapped out the relationships between them in order to best understand how they were in conversation with one another. Professor Ljung helped me to set my argument in motion by encouraging me to introduce the link between textiles and knowledge towards the beginning of the paper. In doing so, I was able to immediately establish a parallel between the knowledge systems associated with indigenous identity and the knowledge systems expressed in French Polynesian *tifaifai*.

This project of staging my own conversation between disciplines was at first challenging, but it was ultimately a liberating step that carved a space for unconventional, exploratory analysis. As I suggest in the paper, my goal was not to subvert existing definitions of indigenous identity. Instead, I intended to propose a way in which to reimagine indigeneity through the lens of material culture. I hope that this conceptual model might prove useful outside of a French Polynesian context by further valorizing the expressive potential of the textile arts as modes of identity construction and memory formation.

Fellow Commentary

Natalie Berkman

In reading this particular piece, I found myself continually impressed by the maturity of the writing but it was hard to choose just one of the many successful aspects of the lexicon that the author, Charlotte Reynders had achieved. Her introduction skillfully crafts her **thesis** around pre-existing scholarship, interweaving sources as diverse as the anthropological studies of Polynesia, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and a scholarly work on indigenous studies suggesting the benefits of carrying out a semiotic analysis of textiles. The **orientation** for the reader covers quite a lot of ground, problematizing the geographic region of French Polynesia, introducing a variety of **key terms** that will later enable her to develop her argument around indigeneity and its artistic construction via Polynesian textiles, demonstrating political, historical, and cultural **motives** in its scope, and introducing her **evidence**, a French Polynesian quilt through which, the author claims, textile artists “...can construct homelands and knowledge systems, thereby designing indigeneity through an active memory formation process that overcomes external sociopolitical circumstances.” All the while, the author is realistic in her **scope** and ambitious in her scholarly **contribution**, claiming that “...this study [...] complicates contemporary scholarly discourse by reframing indigeneity outside of the political sphere and embracing diverse conceptions of homeland.”

With such a clear, direct, and effective introduction, I was sure I was dealing with a senior thesis in its final stages. Such maturity is not only witnessed in the piece’s style of academic writing, but Charlotte’s choice of subject, methods, and understanding of the greater scholarly conversation are components that many writers take years to develop. Imagine my surprise, then, when I learned that this paper was an R3 for a Writing Seminar. This paper was not only a model R3 but a model for scholarly work.

The reader of this paper will learn a great deal about French Polynesian culture through Charlotte’s skillful analysis of the *tifaifai*, the artistic process that creates these textiles, and the active process of identity formation that one can glean from them. Her skillful investigation into the images and symbols could satisfy an art historian’s methodology; her larger inquiry into questions of indigeneity and culture resonate with anthropology and cultural studies. Her semiotic analysis, however, has all the nuance of literary theory, intertwining reality and myth to further bolster her main argument. The most impressive aspect of this paper, I would argue, is in its larger implications, developed in the conclusion by the author, in which Charlotte encourages further scholarship on the fabric arts in other problematic cases of cultural contexts. Her suggestion that a similar study of Kurdish textiles is especially compelling not only for *Tortoise* readers but for scholarship at large.

Professor Commentary

Emma Ljung

Research is in many ways to boldly go where no one has gone before and, paradoxically, to tiptoe in the shadows of countless intimidating adventurers. Moreover, it requires constant reassessment of the surrounding terrain to avoid danger. A researched argument thus poses a triple challenge. In academic writing, we often talk about risk-taking in terms of the originality of a topic or the intervention an argument makes in a scholarly conversation, but we rarely draw attention to a much greater risk: the act of letting go of our own work. This third kind of risk-taking is seldom visible in completed papers, but it is perhaps the most important, because it is only through that kind of writerly behavior that the other two aspects of risk-taking ultimately lead to exciting, groundbreaking discoveries. While Charlotte's paper unquestionably makes visible the two first types of risk-taking, what may not be so apparent to her readers are the numerous moments in her research process that entailed substantial reconsideration of focus, evidence, and sources. For example, Charlotte's first pre-draft was entirely focused on Paul Gauguin. Its bibliography alone gave testimony to countless hours of research. But through that research, Charlotte had realized that there was little room for a new argument regarding Gauguin; his "terrain" was already overpopulated by "adventurers." At that stage of the research process, most writers would hold onto the researched material and simply tweak a Gaipa move, but to Charlotte, letting go of that trove of sources became a defining moment, because through her research on Gauguin she had discovered something weird: the indigeneity question. This phenomenon led Charlotte to *tifaifai*, which despite sharing its homeland of French Polynesia with Gauguin is one of those places where few scholars have gone before. That is what makes Charlotte's paper so impressive to me. By letting go of her initial research, she took the risk of starting out afresh—but it allowed her to do something profoundly original. This act of letting go was repeated numerous times, each time enabling Charlotte to make a bolder and more convincing claim. In so doing, Charlotte has herself become one of those intimidating adventurers in whose shadow we will tiptoe whenever we explore questions of indigeneity and homelands in the South Pacific. She thus reminds us that the ultimate risk-taking act of letting go is to do what research is really about: to search and search again.

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Bios

Charlotte Reynders '18 is a sophomore from Beverly, Massachusetts. An Art History major pursuing certificates in Humanistic Studies and French Language and Culture, she enjoys the interdisciplinary study of narrative in its various forms. Outside of the classroom, she is interested in promoting educational justice through civic engagement – she co-leads a volunteer organization called LEAP (Learning Enrichment in the Arts Program), which provides students in Trenton access to arts education on a weekly basis, and she works for a college advising non-profit called Matriculate. She wrote this research paper the spring of her freshman year.

Natalie Berkman GS is a PhD candidate in the Department of French and Italian in the final stages of her dissertation, which examines the mathematical methods of an experimental group of French writers founded in 1960. While originally from Buffalo, NY, she has enjoyed many homes — from her undergraduate years in Baltimore, MD to her experience abroad in France, Italy, and Germany, and especially her time in Princeton. In addition to her work with *Tortoise*, Natalie is also a Writing Center Fellow, a Graduate Fellow of the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies (PIIRS), and a Resident Graduate Student in Wilson College.