

ON SEEING *THE EMBROIDERER, OR METTE GAUGUIN*

By Nancy Chen Long

After the divorce, I took a class in art appreciation
to occupy my head. We studied Gauguin.
While everyone else was taken in by his use of color
and image after image of nude Tahitian beauties,
I couldn't stop staring at his wife Mette, embroidering.
I'd seen it before, as a painting of a woman
in obedient domesticity.
Now, she was a wife in situ, posing
while her husband withheld the sun

to blot out her face. He rendered her featureless.
She became more mask, a quiet interruption
in the wallpaper. Instead of needlepoint,
I started to imagine that she would have wanted
to leave, stroll down the banks of the Seine,
smolder along the soot-like evening,
reclaiming that textured glow some of us feel
as we fall under the whitewash of summer.

I scarcely glanced at the other paintings,
those fine features of Tehamana—
the Tahitian who became, at fourteen, mother
of Gauguin's youngest son, whom he named Emile,
after his oldest son Emile, who lived in France
with Mette. The day Mette learned of his pubescent
other-bride must have been trauma,

the way it is when you learn of a husband's lover,
the way it is when a girl comes to your home
on a Sunday afternoon in August
while you're outside gardening
and you think it odd
that the dog seems to know her
as he trots up the driveway to greet her,
and the weight of summer humidity
has caused you to be slushed in sweat
and you smile politely as she approaches.