

The Empire Bites Back? Writing Food In Oceania

Jean Anderson, Victoria University of Wellington

Food is a fundamental part of any culture, to the extent that certain dishes and beverages are seen, rightly or wrongly, as markers of national identity: moussaka and retsina for the Greeks, snails and wine for the French, sauerkraut and beer for the Germans, and so on. While there is some obvious stereotyping at work here, these foods do reflect traditional practices related to geographical availability of ingredients. Following Mary Douglas, Luce Giard notes these as the primary and secondary influences in the creation of 'local' cuisines:

The first level stems from the *natural history* of a society (the available animal and vegetable species, the nature of cultivated land, the climatic conditions), but this level is not easily distinguished from the *material and technical history* (techniques of clearing, plowing, and irrigating, the improvement of animal and vegetable species, the introduction and acclimatization of species borrowed from other geographic regions, the increase of yields thanks to fertilizers and soil enrichment, the ways of preserving and preparing foodstuffs, etc). (1998: 171, emphasis in original)

This clearly echoes Brillat-Savarin's well-known 1825 proclamation 'Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es'¹, or as Giard puts it less concisely, 'Eating, in fact, serves not only to maintain the biological machinery of the body, but to make concrete one of the specific modes of relation between a person and the world, thus forming one of the fundamental landmarks in space-time' (1998: 189). David Bell and Gill Valentine take this as a basic premise in *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat* (1997), explicitly linking food with the construction of what they refer to as place identities.²

¹ 'Tell me what you eat, I will tell you what you are.'

² As will be evident later, this concept of space-time is also central to differences across generations in the representation of traditional pre-colonised food practices and more contemporary, often urbanised ones.

If we are what we eat, and food therefore marks out our identity, the who, where and when of us, it should come as no surprise that food and eating within the colonial and postcolonial context form a conflicted interface between indigene and coloniser. Much of the scholarship on food and identity has focused on intercultural eating as a consumption-appropriation of Otherness by the dominant nation: Ben Highmore (2008) analyses the role of curry-eating in contemporary Britain, and on a more personal level Lisa Heldke's *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer* (2003) equates the notion of food adventure, the consuming of unusual dishes, with cultural colonialism. For other commentators examining the impact of imported food practices on indigenous societies, the profound disruption brought about by colonisation is a key focus. Writing about Belize, Richard Wilk describes a 'dietary *diglossia*,' with the elite and the upwardly mobile avoiding 'the taint of local produce and cooking' (2008: 99) seen as a *basolect*, in favour of 'a high-ranked foreign standard *acrolect*' (102, emphasis in the original). Susanne Freidberg describes import dependency—the 'wheat trap'—in Burkina Faso in terms of consumers wanting to 'breakfast on baguettes and Nescafé, even though millet gruel would have been much more prudent' (2005: 23).³

Crucially, as Michela Canepari and Alba Pessini explain, food in many societies is not merely constitutive of individual identity but 'an expression of the way members of a particular community relate to each other, thereby pointing to ... the values they assign to space and time, which in their turn imply particular orientations towards values such as individualism, communalism and so on' (2011: 21). Bruno Saura underlines the importance of shared meals in his discussion of Tahitian poet-activist Henri Hiro's reminder of the lost pillars of his culture: land, family, home and food, and in particular the invitation to passers-by to come and eat (2008: 173–75). Communal eating and equitable sharing of foodstuffs as previously practised in that culture are described by social anthropologist Christophe Serra Mallol as traces of a survival mechanism and as a traditional means for creating and reinforcing social connections (2010: 130–31).

The colonised Pacific

Around the globe, this displacement of indigenous alimentary practices has had far-reaching consequences. Within the Pacific region, in smaller island territories lacking

³ Freidberg also points out the influence of global marketing and the fact that traditional food cultivation or gathering and cooking required timeframes no longer possible in increasingly urbanised societies (2005: 23, 29).

extensive agricultural resources, the conflict between local and imported foodstuffs is especially problematic: take the example of Chamorro poet Craig Santos Perez's 'Spam's Carbon Footprint,' an ironic 'celebration' of the fact that Guam is the Spam-eating capital of the world, a consequence of the presence of US troops and their army rations during World War II. Similar commentary on the incursion of imported foods can be found in Tahitian writer Jimmy Ly's (2006) description of hormone-inflated American chicken in his text 'Mon cousin Pouen et le Tyson des coqs de combat,' or in the product-dumping debates resulting from the exportation of banned, 'reject' foodstuffs with high fat content, such as muttonflaps and turkey tails, into island markets where they were initially marketed and hence perceived as exotic delicacies.⁴

The changes brought about by this culinary colonisation are often designated in medical research as a 'dietary transition' or 'nutrition transition' (Thow *et al.* 2011: 18, 21, 37), terms that refer in fact to the negative impact of imported foodstuffs on the health of island populations. Their effect has been such that it might even be described in terms of a 'fatal impact' (Moorehead 1996; Howe 1977),⁵ a concept largely discredited in research into colonisation generally, but that is arguably still playing itself out in terms of food and diet-related problems such as diabetes and cardiac disease. Tongan-Fijian writer and scholar Epeli Hau'ofa, for example, refers to 'a new and deadly culture of food consumption' (2003: 23). The presence of US troops in New Caledonia and French Polynesia during World War II, followed by the influx of military and support personnel for the installation of the Centre Expérimental du Pacifique and its nuclear testing programme in French Polynesia,⁶ accompanied by increased importation of European foodstuffs, add further dimensions to the problematic relationship between food and colonisation in the region. Kathleen Riley describes Marquesan 'adaptation' in terms that indicate the impact not only on physical health but on cultural values as well:

With the money Marquesans learned to make, they also learned to buy flour, sugar, oil and canned beef, and later baguettes, frozen chicken thighs, and processed snack foods. From this transformed diet, Marquesans developed diabetes and rotten teeth. Meanwhile, though the population as a whole grew fatter, fat lost its status as a sign of prestige as French ideologies of beauty were imported along with high-fat cheese and high-carb beer and wine. (2011: 114)

⁴ The coercive nature of food-based economic relations is clearly evident in Samoa's admission to the WTO only following its lifting of a ban on the importation of turkey tails in late 2011. See: Stuff.co.nz.

⁵ The term 'fatal impact' refers to the negative results of colonisation (generally contagious diseases and alcoholism) on indigenous peoples, thought to lead inexorably to their extinction.

⁶ The CEP was set up in 1964 and tested nuclear devices on Mururoa and Fangataufa from 1966 to 1996.

Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington's *Cheap Meat: Flap Food Nations in the Pacific* (2012) blames Tonga's 60 percent adult obesity epidemic and associated health problems on economic colonisation by Australia and New Zealand, confirming the findings of Evans *et al.* (2001) a decade earlier. Nor is this an isolated problem: similar trends have raised concerns with North American Indian and Inuit populations.⁷

The medico-sociological verdict seems clear: the introduction of European foodstuffs through colonialism and particularly from the mid-twentieth century onwards has been a largely negative experience, not merely in terms of health implications but also in undermining important cultural values. Drawing on a range of fictional texts by Oceanian writers, mainly from the French-speaking Pacific, this essay will examine the ways in which they use their fiction to reflect on the meaning and function of food in relation to indigenous identity, in particular in the face of colonisation and the belief that modernisation will lead to the adoption of metropolitan food practices. While the number of authors is relatively limited, it includes all the leading names in francophone Pacific fiction, alongside pioneering Māori writer Patricia Grace. She is included here partly because of the clarity with which she links food and identity issues, providing a useful baseline for comparison with other writers given that Māori migrated to New Zealand from Raiatea in the Society Islands, and share many cultural practices with Tahitians.

Eating (in) Oceania

Grace's first novel *Mutuwhenua: the Moon Sleeps* (1978) illustrates precisely the link between food and identity by underlining culinary differences between a young Māori woman's family and the possible expectations of the Pākehā man who will later become her husband: 'My father told Graeme and Toki to sit down and have some kai. I was glad we were having stew and peas and potatoes and kumara that night. If we'd been having fish-heads or pork-bones or baked eel I would have worried in case Graeme thought our food strange' (1978: 19). Although the local is represented here by the kumara (sweet potato, invariably in New Zealand referred to by its Māori name), it is seen as part of 'ordinary,' non-marked (that is, non-ethnic) fare, as opposed to other dishes that are part of Māori cuisine but not commonly consumed by other New Zealanders. Since the protagonist of the novel, Ripeka/Linda is, as her dual name

⁷ See Goetz (2012) for a layperson's introduction.

indicates, caught between two cultures, Māori and Pākehā, it is hardly surprising that in her hypercritical eyes food reflects this division. This is further reinforced by an explicit association between traditional foods and the older generation, as an ambivalent Ripeka inspects some of the provisions her grandmother is preserving: ‘The pipi and wizened paua threaded on cotton, a pot of new season’s karaka berries, and a pot of the old. Two kina steeping in a bowl of water, and strips of shark hanging to dry. All the stinks mixing thickly, heavily, as though in a great acrid pudding’ (Grace 1978: 70). Viewed from this perspective, food is clearly a marker of cultural identity, although we should note that there are important divisions reaching beyond the simple opposition of traditional foods and apparently ethnically ‘neutral’ (European) ones: the grandmother’s space-time is clearly different from that of her children and grandchildren, as younger generations are arguably more affected by colonised food.

In *Hombo*, a study of young Tahitians whose lives are thrown into chaos by modernisation in the 1950s and 1960s, Chantal Spitz refers to this dramatic change as the abrupt move from ‘le temps du minutieux temps de la culture’ to ‘le temps du temps pressé’ (2012: 69, 53),⁸ where effort and energies are channelled into the acquisition of money and material goods rather than into supplying the food needs of the wider family group, and the rhythms of nature are lost. This jarring contrast between tradition and modernity is reinforced by the terms in which the schoolteacher berates those pupils who revert to the forbidden Tahitian language in the classroom: ‘Vous êtes vraiment nuls. Ce n’est pas la peine de venir à l’école vous n’apprendrez jamais rien. Vous devriez retourner dans les plantations de taro ou de pastèques’ (63).⁹ Food cultivation, rather than being a valuable contribution to the needs of the community, here becomes a kind of dumping ground for those who fail to achieve a suitable (colonised) Frenchness. The local heritage is denigrated in favour of a more ‘modern’ lifestyle.

Spitz’s most recent novel, *Elles. Terre d’enfance* (2011) illustrates a similar separation between indigenous and more eurocentric foods: the narrator’s mother, who is of mixed race, refuses to allow certain Tahitian foods in the house:

⁸ ‘The time of the painstaking time of cultivation / culture’ and ‘the time of hurried time.’ (Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.)

⁹ ‘You’re completely hopeless. There’s no point in coming to school you’ll never learn anything. You should just go back to the taro or watermelon fields.’

Le samedi mon père déjeunait seul dans la cuisine extérieure où se préparait le *mā'a tahiti*. J'ai appris plus tard ... que la gamelle contenait du chien
 que ma mère refusait qu'on mange du chien à sa table
 comme elle refusait qu'on y mange du *fafaru*
 raison pour laquelle il déjeunait chez Tihoni le dimanche (180, original layout and emphasis)¹⁰

The point here is not how canine protein came to be introduced into the Pacific, but rather that the practice of consuming dog meat, along with the strong-smelling fermented fish, have become grounds for cultural differentiation along ethnic lines within the family. The conflict between local/paternal culture—Wilk's *basolect* (2008)—and the mother's expectations of foods more in line with European tastes (*acrolect*), along with other divisive factors in the girl's upbringing, contribute to ongoing identity issues and cultural confusion.

Conflict or coexistence?

While conditions vary from country to country for indigenous peoples of the anglophone and francophone Pacific, it is clear from the examples cited that there is a shared perception of conflict between farmer-hunter-gatherer and wage-earning shopper, between traditional and urbanised food practices.¹¹ Food, in other words, is seen as a domain in which many of the acknowledged (and unacknowledged) effects of colonisation are enacted. These range, I now argue, from describing the replacement of the local and the imposition of the exotic, through a degree of hybridity in food practices, to a more explicitly presented resistance. These responses can be seen in the treatment of food in other literary works of the francophone Pacific, which run the gamut from an apparently simplistic juxtapositioning to a more adversarial situation.

The approach taken by Tahitian writer Rai Chaze initially appears to be limited to the simultaneous presentation of a range of foods laid out before an old woman: 'La cousine Tafifi revient avec le pot de lait chaud ... Elle pose l'eau, le pain, le beurre, le pu'a rôti, le pâté de tête, le ma'oa taioro, le pâté rose, les pattes de cochon et les firifiri' (1990: 28).¹² The bread in question (a baguette) finds itself surrounded by traditional dishes, a 'frottement,' a term meaning 'rubbing' or 'friction' used by Martiniquan writer Edouard

¹⁰ 'On Saturdays my father ate lunch by himself in the outside kitchen where *mā'a tahiti* (Tahitian food) was prepared. I found out later that the lunchbox contained dog meat that my mother refused to allow dog meat to be eaten at her dining table just as she refused to allow anyone to eat *fafaru* (fermented fish) there which is why he ate lunch at Tihoni's on Sundays.'

¹¹ In the case of French Polynesia arguably multiple 'colonisations' have had impacts on tradition; much of Spitz's writing in fact references the nuclear installation and concomitant influence on Tahitian society.

¹² 'Cousin Tafifi comes back with the jug of warm milk ... She puts down the water, the bread, the roast pu'a, the head cheese, the ma'oa taioro, the pink pâté, the pigs' trotters and the firifiri.'

Glissant (1990) to describe intercultural contact. We might read this food reference in the same way as the multiple cultural influences that have already been listed in describing the contents of the old woman's sitting room—a picture in a Chinese lacquer frame, a portrait of de Gaulle, a photograph of the protagonist as a young Asian-eyed beauty, and a bread-board with English words carved onto it, inherited from a red-haired ancestor. Chaze's purpose seems to be one of straightforward representation of multiple influences, a quiet statement of hybridity. If there is any criticism, it is in a somewhat prosaic reference to the distant crying of a baby: 'Il crie pour un sein qu'on ne veut pas lui donner parce que le docteur dit que ce n'est pas l'heure' (32).¹³ Even here, however, the rigid practices of European child-feeding are implicitly rather than explicitly condemned. It is not until the closely following passage describing the killing and cooking of a dog that the very real divergence of beliefs and practices emerges.¹⁴ A better-informed reading, however, would have registered the invitation to come and eat, *Haere mai e tāmā'a*, the 'quintessence de la politesse tahitienne' (Saura: 175),¹⁵ as anchoring the text firmly in a Mā'ohi esthetic of community and the tradition of food-sharing, which the Mormon visitors appear to rebuff in their refusal.

Another writer who apparently proposes a peaceful *métissage* of foods and food production is New Caledonian Claudine Jacques.¹⁶ Her short story 'Kenu' In' features an elderly Kanak farmer from the island of Maré whose driving passion in life is opera: this taste for things European runs also to his Lamborghini tractor and the house he has built for his family (although he himself prefers to sleep in a traditional *case*). He has accumulated a certain amount of wealth due to his hard work and decision to grow avocados, despite opposition: 'on l'avait traité de fou celui-là qui abandonnait son champ d'ignames pour un pied d'avocat' (88).¹⁷ This exotic and high-priced crop allows him to live in relative comfort and, most of all, to indulge his passion for European

¹³ 'He's crying for the breast he won't be given because the doctor says it isn't time.'

¹⁴ Dog meat was a traditional food source for Tahitians and other Pacific islanders but the killing of 'pets' was and is seen by Europeans as cruel.

¹⁵ 'The quintessential expression of Tahitian manners.'

¹⁶ Jacques was born in Belfort, France, in 1953 but has lived in New Caledonia since early adolescence. A non-indigenous writer, she is included by virtue of her status as a leading author of the French Pacific.

¹⁷ 'They called him a crazy fool for turning his back on his yam field in favour of an avocado seedling.' Although avocados were first introduced to New Caledonia in 1863, production did not become commercialised until the early 1980s with the first orchards in Mare (see: 'Destination Loyalty Islands' 2013). The old man's use of a CD walkman (launched in 1984) confirms a likely setting of the late 1980s for the story.

music, although it also requires him to abandon an important part of his culture, the *igname* that is considered human and central to Kanak culture (Godin 2008).

This admittedly brief analysis might lead us to conclude that Franco-Pacific peoples have survived the arrival of Europeans in the same way they survived before contact—their ‘frottement’ with other Pacific peoples over the centuries—through creolisation, by adapting themselves. Raylene Ramsay (2003, 108) comments on some of Jacques’s earlier work that ‘Les aliments dans les nouvelles de Jacques reflètent le caractère métissé de la vie calédonienne.’¹⁸ A similarly positive perspective on *métissage* is key to Le Clézio’s reading of the survival of Pacific peoples in his study *Raga*, which claims that in spite of some negative impacts, the arrival of Europeans has had benefits:

surgissent alors tous les bruissements du monde, les rêves, les dieux nouveaux, venus danser sur les plages pour plaire aux gens des îles, les chants nouveaux, les musiques nouvelles. Quelques gadgets qui peuvent rendre la vie plus facile. Parfois, des médecines, des recettes, une pommade pour cicatriser les plaies, un cachet pour calmer les maux de ventre. (2006: 129)¹⁹

For (external) observers like Le Clézio and Jacques, nutritional hybridity is to be seen as an advantage, a sign of progress and a successful integration of indigenous and colonial elements. Elsewhere, as in Chaze’s text, any criticism is implicit rather than explicit, amounting to a quiet juxtaposition of the two traditions that leaves the reader to draw his or her own conclusions, but requiring an insider’s knowledge of the indigenous culture to fully appreciate the subtext.

Biting back

While this Glissantian relationship certainly appears to exist for some authors in the mixing of food practices, for others the situation is more problematic, with a more evident assertion of the need to maintain tradition. Both Spitz and Ly emphasise the negative aspects of the replacement of local or traditional foodstuffs by colonial substitutions. One of the most overtly resistant texts is Tahitian Moetai Brotherson’s *Le Roi absent* (2007), which differentiates clearly on a number of occasions between European and indigenous food.

¹⁸ Food in Jacques’s short stories reflects the hybrid character of Caledonian life.

¹⁹ ‘Then comes all the buzzing of the world, dreams, new gods, come to dance on the beaches and please the islanders, new songs, new musics. A few gadgets that may make life easier. Sometimes there are medicines, recipes, a cream to heal wounds, a pill to ease stomach pains.’

The novel is in two parts: for most of the first section, Vaki, a mathematically gifted but perhaps autistic selective mute from the Marquesas, follows a typical ‘native boy makes good’ *bildungsroman* trajectory: among the marks of his French education and social success—an elegant leather briefcase and a Mont Blanc pen, for example (Brotherson 2007: 237)—is a definite preference for European food and fine French restaurants. Indeed, he condemns his girlfriend Maggy’s insistence on eating at the foodstalls and cheap, greasy-spoon restaurants (‘gargotes infâmes,’ 239) frequented by locals. For Vaki, these choices are risible: ‘Cette forme de quête identitaire qui consiste à rechercher systématiquement l’opposé de ce que feraient les *Popa ’ā* me paraissait ridicule’ (244).²⁰

This attitude in the successful man contrasts strongly with the position he expressed earlier as a student in France: after bypassing a Parisian McDonalds, he joins in an anticolonial breakfast:

Cette journée était celle du patriotisme culinaire. Après avoir résisté à l’impérialisme américain, je n’allais pas refuser un ‘pied de nez au lait de coco’ au colonialisme métropolitain! ...

Accompagnés de riz chaud, les cubes de thon mélangés aux oignons, à la tomate fraîche et marinés dans du citron et du lait de coco se mangeaient avec les doigts. C’est à mon sens une question de respect pour les aliments que de les manger ainsi. Les couverts, surtout lorsqu’ils sont métalliques, sont une offense sensuelle faite à la nourriture. (Brotherson 2007: 179)²¹

A further meal is planned as a ‘real Polynesian breakfast’: in an ironic reversal, Tahitian students in Paris find substitutes for their traditional foods in the local market, a trade-off normally practised by expatriates in the tropics (Brotherson 2007: 189–90).²²

Brotherson’s fullest exploration of Tahitian food and its cultural importance, however, comes after Vaki’s release from prison. The island’s leading maker of *miti hue*, a traditional sauce made of fermented fish and coconut, falls victim to bureaucracy when the local council attempts to make him pay for his own spring water and disconnect his generator (285–90). In other words, the authorities are attempting to intervene in—and

²⁰ ‘The kind of identity politics that consists of systematically choosing the opposite of what the *Popa ’ā* [whites] would do seemed ridiculous to me.’ Maggy is of Mā’ohi (Tahitian) origin but has been adopted by a *Popa ’ā* family: her food choices are thus clearly linked to identity issues.

²¹ ‘This was the day for culinary patriotism. Having resisted American imperialism, I could hardly refuse to ‘give the coconut-milk finger’ to French colonialism! ... Served with hot rice, the cubes of tuna marinated in lemon juice and coconut milk and mixed with onions and fresh tomatoes were eaten with the fingers. To my mind this is a way of showing respect for the food. Cutlery, especially metal cutlery, is an offence against the sensuality of food.’

²² Locally available fish, *chinchards* and *éperlans*, replace Tahitian specialties *ature* and *īna’a*, respectively.

to profit from—the (modernised) processes of indigenous food production, to alienate the food producer from his resources.

Brotherson illustrates the ultimate consequences of this separation in a vivid, page-long meditation by Vaki on his inability to identify the food sources surrounding him as he retreats from society into a hermit's isolation. The protagonist's ignorance of the surrounding natural abundance is equated to a shutting down of his senses—he cannot see, smell, touch or hear what is laid out before him. The passage begins:

Quand tu es resté trop longtemps en ville, pire encore, dans l'univers artificiel de la prison, tes sens oublient.

Je ne voyais pas. Il était là, non loin, l'essaim gorgé de miel au creux d'un tronc de mǎpē. Elles étaient là sous les cailloux de la rivière, les grosses chevrettes. Ils passaient entre mes pieds, les gros poissons perroquets sur le récif frangeant. Je ne les voyais pas.

Je ne sentais pas. L'odeur du miri, dont les feuilles apaisent les rages de dent. La senteur des citrons sauvages, nichés dans la roche, une dizaine de mètres au-dessus de ma grotte. Le parfum vivifiant du re'a, ce gingembre local qui, écrasé, donne un jus vivifiant. Je ne les sentais pas. (299)
23

These examples clearly do not support the notion of a successful blending, but rather point explicitly towards loss and the need to resist (culinary) domination. As Stéphanie Vigier remarks, 'La représentation des goûts et [des] pratiques alimentaires dans la littérature océanienne est donc un des supports d'une réflexion portant sur l'aliénation et/ou l'affirmation culturelles' (2003: 116).²⁴ Food, therefore, is intimately connected to the positioning of indigene and coloniser within the social structures depicted.

In general, this is to the detriment of the former, reflecting a disconnection from environment and traditional culture, a state of 'gastro-anomie' (to put a postcolonial twist on Fischler's (1979) concept of modern alienation from industrialised food). However it may also provide a mechanism for revenge. A second New Caledonian example comes from the work of Kanak writer Déwé Gorodé. In the short story 'Où vas-tu, Mûû?' (1996), Mûû becomes pregnant to her white lover, Gilles, shortly before

²³ 'When you've lived too long in town or, worse still, in the artificial world of prison, your senses forget. I couldn't see. It was right there, a swarm of bees, swollen with honey, in the hollow trunk of a mǎpē tree. They were right there, under the stones in the river, big juicy prawns. They were swimming between my ankles, the big parrot fish out on the fringing reef. I didn't see them.

I couldn't smell. The scent of miri, whose leaves cure toothache. The perfume of wild lemons, tucked in between the rocks, a few metres above my cave. The lively tang of re'a, local ginger that you can crush to get a refreshing juice. I didn't smell them.'

²⁴ 'Representations of tastes and food practices in Pacific literature thus contribute to a reflection about cultural alienation and/or affirmation.'

his engagement to a more suitable partner, the daughter of the neighbouring French landowners. Gèè, Mûû's grandmother, deals with the unwanted pregnancy²⁵ before helping with the preparation of the traditional local dishes Gilles's family has chosen to offer at the engagement party. After spending the morning administering traditional abortifacients to Mûû:

[d]ans l'après-midi, grand-mère se joignit aux femmes de la tribu qui devaient préparer les bougnas pour les invités de Gilles et de ses parents, tandis que les hommes s'occupaient du bois et de la viande pour les rôtis, les brochettes et un méchoui ... c'est Gèè elle-même qui posa sur la grande table, entre des pétales de roses et un couvert étincelant, le plus raffiné des bougnas, celui destiné à Gilles et à sa fiancée. Puis elle s'éloigna rapidement dans sa robe popinée ... Je l'imagine encore sans peine, fragile silhouette furtive s'échappant de ce décor fabuleux dont le clinquant nous consume l'existence depuis trop longtemps. (1996:19–20)²⁶

This passage is worth considering in some detail, as it contains a cluster of allusions to colonisation. Gèè is wearing one of the loose garments, 'robe de popinée' known in English as mission or Mother Hubbard dresses, imposed by prudish colonisers. The menu includes *bougna* (an earth-oven cooked dish similar to other indigenous Oceanian traditionally prepared foods, here clearly commodified into spectacle by the French settlers, happy to use indigenous customs in this way, but not to consider intermarriage, as Mûû's cousin warns her early in the narrative).²⁷ In addition, the party features *méchoui* or spit-roast, a dish originating in North Africa, as its name indicates, another region colonised by the French.²⁸ A further reference to the elaborate setting, the 'décor fabuleux' of the party, is undercut by the condemnation of it as 'clinquant,' that is, as something falsely attractive that has preoccupied 'us' (the indigenous people) for too long.²⁹ When it is later revealed that Gilles was taken ill and did not survive the night, the implied connection is clear: having eaten unwisely of indigenous food, prepared by

²⁵ Space does not permit it here, but the medicinal and spiritual use of plant and other foods through traditional medicine also merits analysis.

²⁶ 'In the afternoon, grandmother joined the women of the tribe who had to make the bougnas for Gilles's and his parents' guests, while the men took care of the wood and the roasting meats, the brochettes and the spit ... it was Gèè herself who placed on the big table, between the rose petals and the sparkling cutlery, the most refined bougna of all, the one made specially for Gilles and his fiancée. Then she hurried away in her mission dress ... I can still see her in my mind's eye, a fragile and furtive shape slipping away from that fabulous setting whose glitter has been eating away at our existence for far too long.'

²⁷ This very blunt warning, coupled with the mention of Kanak land protests at the end of the text, arguably forms a frame directing the reader towards its strong anti-colonial message. While other texts by Gorodé (for example, 'La Saison des pommes kanakes' [1994: 72–73]) may lead to a more mitigated interpretation, evoking food practices within the indigenous community, 'Où vas-tu, Mûû?' seems less nuanced and has been selected for that reason.

²⁸ It should be remembered, too, that France originally tested its nuclear weapons in the Sahara (1960–1966), transferring the test site to the Pacific when the five-year grace period agreed on at the close of the Algerian War ran out.

²⁹ These references recall Spitz's rejection of the impact that materialistic European society has had on Tahitians.

the plant-savvy grandmother, the callous coloniser dies. The cluster of allusions has served to highlight the colonial relationship: young women who are used and abused, cultural feasts that are appropriated—betraying important indigenous customs associated with the sharing of food—may be avenged.³⁰ Food may be the instrument of that revenge, although Gorodé refrains from making any explicit link between the *bougna* and Gilles's death.

Food across cultures

Food in real life and, as we have seen here, in literature, is not solely 'about' nourishment: it is part of networks of connotations, emotions, and cultural values, and points towards elements that identify individual experiences and dominant group practice. Within each culture, or, arguably, within each age group within each culture, food, its preparation and its consumption equate to:

a subtle montage of gestures, rites, and codes, of rhythms and choices, of received usage and practiced customs ... without seeking to explain further, without noticing the profound meaning of differences and preferences, without putting into question the coherence of a compatibility scale (sweet and savoury, sweet and sour, etc.) and the validity of a classification of those things that are inedible, disgusting, edible, delectable, delicious. (Giard 1998: 171)

While this 'not noticing' may well apply in real life, when food appears in a fictional text it is endowed with symbolic meaning. As the examples noted in this essay show, food references not only contribute to the realism of the fictional world, evoking sights, smells, and tastes that may draw in or repulse readers, but as I have argued, activate a range of associations in each instance.

The mimetic function of fictional food reached a high point with nineteenth-century realism: in the French context, we might think of Zola's lengthy description of the cheese stall in *Le Ventre de Paris* (1873), or the lengths to which the Théâtre Antoine might go, serving real meals on stage. At the associative level, there is probably no more powerful example than Proust's madeleine and herbal tea.

However I would argue that it is neither the desire for realism nor the search for an individual's associated memories that is dominant here, but the political dimension. The ways in which Oceanian authors use food in their texts can be seen to serve a range of purposes related to their deeper responses to the colonial and indigenous divide. While

³⁰ As Ramsay (110) also points out, although not in connection with this short story, Gorodé's stories refuse the kind of hybridisation that Jacques explores in her work.

my focus has been on francophone authors, the initial examples drawn from Grace's work make it clear that there are common themes and experiences uniting indigenous Pacific writing across the English-French language barrier. The focus of these stories on the role of food and the (post)colonial conflicts evoked by food are indicative of both commonality and local cultural specificities.

Here, then, it is worth considering a few specific food references in order to explore the networks they evoke and their relevance to the concept of a shared indigenous Oceanian experience. *Karaka* berries (Grace) are in a sense a code for the secrets of traditional food knowledge. The ripe berries, the size of a small quail's egg and a bright yellow-orange in colour, have a heady, fruity perfume. They are toxic to humans and will lead to paralysis, muscular spasms and death if consumed without the proper, very lengthy, preparation known only to traditional indigenous cooks. Like the dishes prepared by Gorodé's grandmother, potentially toxic to the unwary, *karaka* berries can therefore be read as markers of a cultural boundary.

In many European countries, the dog is a trusted and faithful animal, 'man's best friend,' and in some (mainly urban) instances, all but a member of the family. In French Polynesia, however, and in other Pacific and Asian cultures, *chien* is a traditional food source, not unlike rabbit, goat or guinea-pig elsewhere. In Chaze's 'La vieille dame' and Spitz's *Elles, terre d'enfance. Roman à deux encres* (2011), the dog too becomes a cultural dividing line, alongside some of the more pungent traditional local dishes.

The *bougna*, as indicated earlier, is a traditional Kanak dish, prepared using a cooking method in which food is wrapped into securely tied banana leaf parcels and cooked in an earth oven. Like its Hawai'ian counterpart, the *lū'au*, with its *kalua* pig, the traditional Māori *hāngi* or Tahitian *ahimā'a*, the *bougna* feast has these days been commandeered to some extent for tourist consumption and entertainment. In this process, it loses its traditional association with communal eating and the provision of food for the extended family group. In Grace's *Mutuwhenua* the *hāngi* strongly marks indigeneity and a sense of community; in Gorodé's hands it becomes a potential opportunity for striking back.

Each of these food references indicates both a particular space-time and a network of

culinary practices deeply embedded in that space-time. Within the contexts chosen by the authors, they may also be read as marking significant cultural boundaries, the line between 'us' and 'not us.'

By way of conclusion

Richard Wilk has taken issue with what he describes as 'the now-traditional stories of authentic local food and cuisine either valiantly resisting, or being tragically displaced by foreign or global culture,' although he is also 'sceptical of more recent happier tales of creolization, hybridity and local appropriation' (2008: 93). His preference for seeing the local and the global as 'mutually dependent' (93) does not seem to be shared by the writers featured here, with the possible exception of the non-indigenous Claudine Jacques, whose central character increasingly adopts European values although maintaining some community practices: Chaze's more subtle working of contrasting food categories, in the end, strongly evokes indigenous cultural practices of hospitality and community.

It would appear that for indigenous writers of the Pacific, displacement and resistance are still key concepts, and that these concepts are closely tied to their exploration of identity issues. Vaki's nostalgic description of the bounties of nature going unrecognised by his westernised self in Brotherson's *Missing King* provides a powerful summary of the transition away from the sense of connectedness, through food, to land and community that is also a central theme of Grace's *Mutuwhenua*. Spitz differentiates between traditional foods of a more self-sufficient past and a metropolitan diet and lifestyle ('le temps du temps pressé') in both *Hombo* and *Elles*. Gorodé's depiction of the *bougna* as misappropriated entertainment and a possible instrument of revenge concludes with the issue of land disputes, thus highlighting the political focus of the work.

While there are obvious differences in the way these authors use food in their fiction, in every case the strategies employed invite a politicised reading, one that takes the reader deeper into identity politics. In all the examples examined here, and regardless of the status of indigenous peoples, be they Māori, Mā'ohi or Kanak, within their differing colonial or postcolonial countries, food is a pretext for and/or an illustration of cultural difference and the symbolic importance of alimentary practices in cementing identity and belonging. Only Jacques, a non-indigenous writer, attempts to position food fully

within a message of successful cultural hybridity. While a single example is clearly insufficient to hypothesise authorial ethnicity as a determining factor in such a strategic choice, it should at least give us food for thought.

Reference List

- Bell, D. & Valentine, G. (eds) 1997, *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat*. Routledge, London & New York.
- Brillat-Savarin, A. 1826, *Physiologie du Goût, ou Méditations de Gastronomie transcendante*. Online, available: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/22741> [Accessed 20 September 2012].
- Brotherson, M. 2007, *Le Roi absent*. Au Vent des îles, Papeete. (2012, *The Missing King*, trans. J. Anderson. Little Island Press, Auckland).
- Canepari, M. & Pessini, A. (eds.) 2011, 'Introduction,' in *Food in Postcolonial and Migrant Literatures / La Nourriture dans les littératures postcoloniales et migrantes*. Peter Lang, Bern: 19–34.
- Chaze, R. [M.]. 1990, 'La vieille dame' in *Vai, la rivière au ciel sans nuages*. Cobalt/Tupuna, Papeete: 25–34.
- 'Destination Loyalty Islands' 2013, Avocado Festival. Online, available: <http://www.iles-loyaute.com/en/Actualite/Fete?id=11> [Accessed 13 June 2013].
- Evans, M., Sinclair, R., Fusimalohi, C., & Liava'a, V. 2001, 'Globalization, Diet and Health: An Example from Tonga,' *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, vol. 79, no. 9: 856–62. Online, available: [http://www.who.int/bulletin/archives/79\(9\)856.pdf](http://www.who.int/bulletin/archives/79(9)856.pdf) [Accessed 12 June 2013].
- Fischler, C. 1979, 'Gastro-nomie et gastro-anomie,' *Communications*, vol. 3: 189–210. Online available: doi: 10.3406/comm.1979.1477 [Accessed 10 April 2013].
- Freidberg, S. 2005, 'French Beans for the Masses: A Modern Historical Geography of Food in Burkina Faso,' in *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating*, (eds) J. L. Watson & M. L. Caldwell. Blackwell, Malden, MA, & Oxford: 21–41.
- Gewertz, D. & Errington, F. 2012, *Cheap Meat: Flap Food Nations in the Pacific Islands*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Giard, L. 1998, 'Plat du jour,' in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 2, *Living and Cooking*, M. de Certeau, M., L. Giard, L. & P. Mayol, (trans.) T. J. Tomasik. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 171–98.
- Glissant, É. 1990, *Poétique de la relation*. Seuil, Paris.
- Godin, P. 2008, 'L'Ignome au cœur de la vie calédonienne' *Le Jour du Seigneur*, 24 juin. Online, available: <http://www.lejourduseigneur.com/Web-TV/Evenements/L-ame-de-la-Nouvelle-Caledonie/L-ignome-au-coeur-de-la-vie-caledonienne> [Accessed 10 April 2013].
- Goetz, G. 2012, 'Nutrition a Pressing Concern for American Indians,' *Food Safety News*, March 5. Online, available: <http://www.foodsafetynews.com/2012/03/nutrition-a-pressing-concern-for-american-indians/#.UcGHd-st09c> [Accessed 18 June 2013].
- Gorodé, D. 1994, 'La Saison des pommes kanakes' in *Uté Mûrûnû, petite fleur de cocotier*, Grain de sable, Nouméa: 69–78.
- _____. 1996, 'Où vas-tu Mûû?' in *L'Agenda*. Grain de sable, Nouméa: 15–21.
- Grace, P. 1978, *Mutuwhenua: The Moon Sleeps*. Penguin, Auckland.
- Hau'ofa, E. 2003, 'You May Not Eat Your Own Food,' in *Les Vivres et le vivre en Océanie/Food and Lifestyles in Oceania. Actes du colloque C.O.R.A.I.L 2002*, (ed.) S. Lacabanne. Université de Nouvelle-Calédonie, Nouméa: 19–23.
- Highmore, B. 2008, 'Alimentary Agents: Food, Cultural Theory and Multiculturalism,' *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 29, no. 4: 381–98.
- Heldke, L. 2003, *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer*. Routledge, New York & London.
- Howe, K. 1977, 'The Fate of the Savage in Pacific Historiography,' *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 11, no. 2: 137–54. Online, available: www.nzjh.auckland.ac.nz/docs/1977/NZJH_11_2_04.pdf [Accessed 2 June 2012].
- Jacques, C. 2007, 'Kenu' In' in *Le Cri de l'acacia*. Au Vent des îles, Papeete: 83–90.
- Le Clézio, J-M. G. 2006, *Raga: approche du continent invisible*. Seuil, Paris.
- Ly, J. 2006, 'Mon cousin Pouen et le Tyson des coqs de combat,' in *Histoires de feu de flamme et de femmes*. Papeete, à compte d'auteur.
- Moorehead, A. 1996, *The Fatal Impact: The Invasion of the South Pacific, 1767–1840*. Penguin, Harmondsworth.

- Ramsay, R. 2003, 'La Figure de l'incorporation. De la littérature orale aux écrits hybrides de Déwé Gorodé et de Claudine Jacques,' in *Les Vivres et le vivre en Océanie/Food and Lifestyles in Oceania. Actes du colloque C.O.R.A.I.L 2002*, (ed.) S. Lacabanne. Université de Nouvelle-Calédonie, Nouméa: 97–112.
- Riley, K. C. 2011, 'Learning to Exchange Words for Food in the Marquesas,' in *Food: Ethnographic Encounters*, (ed.) L. Coleman. Berg, Oxford & New York: 111–26.
- Santos Perez, C. 'Spam's Carbon Footprint.' Online, available: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/22011> [Accessed 4 June 2012].
- Saura, B. 2008, *Tahiti Mā'ohi: Culture, identité, religion et nationalisme en Polynésie française*. Au Vent des îles, Papeete.
- Serra Mallol, C. 2010, *Nourritures, abondance et identité. Une socio-anthropologie de l'alimentation à Tahiti*. Au Vent des îles, Papeete.
- Spitz, C. 2011, *Elles, terre d'enfance. Roman à deux encres*. Au Vent des îles, Papeete.
- _____. 2012 [2003], *Hombo, transcription d'une biographie*. Au Vent des îles, Papeete.
- Stuff.co.nz. 2011, 'Samoa rewarded for turkey tail turnaround.' 20 November. Online, available: <http://www.stuff.co.nz/business/world/6062457/Samoa-rewarded-for-turkey-tail-turnaround> [Accessed 8 June 2012].
- Thow, A-M., Heywood, P., Schultz, J., Quested, C., Jan, S. & Colagiuri, S. 2011, 'Trade and the Nutrition Transition: Strengthening Policy for Health in the Pacific,' *Ecology of Food and Nutrition*, vol. 50, no. 1: 18–42. Online, available: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03670244.2010.524104> [Accessed 2 June 2012].
- Vigier, S. 2003, 'Les Enjeux culturels et sociaux de la représentation du vivre et des vivres dans l'œuvre de Patricia Grace,' in *Les Vivres et le vivre en Océanie/Food and Lifestyles in Oceania. Actes du colloque C.O.R.A.I.L 2002*, (ed.) S. Lacabanne. Université de Nouvelle-Calédonie, Nouméa: 113–23.
- Wilk, R. 2008, 'A Taste of Home: The Cultural and Economic Significance of European Food Exports to the Colonies,' in *Food and Globalization: Consumption, Markets and Politics in the Modern World*, (eds) A. Nützenadel & F. Trentmann. Berg, Oxford & New York: 93–108.
- Zola, É. 2002 [1873], *Le Ventre de Paris*. Gallimard, Paris.