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Abstract

Defining New Caledonian literature poses a number of questions and, in particular, the question of where and when to begin. In his seminal anthology of this literature, *Paroles et Ecritures*, Francois Bogliolo includes the considerable corpus constituted by Kanak oral tradition. Women have played a significant role in the transmission of these oral stories, and a number of contemporary written texts have revisited this tradition, for example, the novel by Claudine Jacques, *L'Homme-Lézard*, which proposes a modern interpretation of the lizard myth, known throughout the many language groups of Grande Terre and transcribed by the ethnologist and pastor, Maurice Leenhardt under the title of *Le Maître de Koné*.

STÉPHANIE VIGIER & RAYLENE RAMSAY

Women Writers in New Caledonia

Defining New Caledonian literature poses a number of questions and, in particular, the question of where and when to begin. In his seminal anthology of this literature, *Paroles et Ecritures*, Francois Bogliolo includes the considerable corpus constituted by Kanak oral tradition. Women have played a significant role in the transmission of these oral stories, and a number of contemporary written texts have revisited this tradition, for example, the novel by Claudine Jacques, *L'Homme-Lézard*, which proposes a modern interpretation of the lizard myth, known throughout the many language groups of *Grande Terre* and transcribed by the ethnologist and pastor, Maurice Leenhardt under the title of *Le Maître de Koné*.

Written literature, for its part, was initially produced by French people passing through New Caledonia: Louise Michel spent eight years in its penitentiary system, Jacques and Marie Nervat lived in the colony from 1898 to 1902. To the extent that the texts of these early temporary residents played a role in the construction of New Caledonian history and identities, they would appear to merit inclusion, most particularly, the work of the woman writer, Louise Michel, and the original perspective she brings to New Caledonia and to Kanak culture. Her feminism, anti-colonialism, and desire to promote Kanak education and culture create an aura around Michel and make her the founding figure of the line of female writers.

Louise Michel was detained in the penal colony from 1873 to 1881 for her role in the uprising of the Paris *Commune*. A fervent socialist, she continued to pursue her ideals in New Caledonia, where she was particularly sensitive to the injustices of colonialism. As Alban Bensa's study of the Kanak revolt of 1878 shows, she is one of only a very few political déportés to have supported the Kanak cause (2004 26). Louise herself, in her memoirs, claims to have sent a piece of her red Communard scarf to Ataï, the Chief who led the insurgents. Her vision of Kanak culture is a generous one, although it is also marked by the prejudice of her time which saw an image of the childhood of humanity in Kanak societies. Michel collected vocabulary, tales and legends that she published in two successive and different editions: *Légendes et chansons de geste canaques* in 1875, and, once back in Paris, *Légendes et chants de geste canaques* in 1885. In these texts, her anti-colonialist consciousness is doubled by a strong feminist sensibility. When Louise Michel presents a Kanak voice denouncing colonisation, she embodies this voice in the figure of Idara, a female equivalent of the old

Tahitian that Diderot evoked in his *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*. Idara is a takata, a healer, sorcerer or hypnotist.

She sits beneath the coconut palms, Idara, the prophetess...

Idara is the daughter of the tribes, she has fought with the braves against the pale men.

Idara is the mother of the heroes; it is she who binds their wounds with the chewed leaf of the vine cut by the light of the moon. It is she who gives them the warming bouis to drink; she again who sings them to sleep with the magic chant.

Listen old men, Idara is about to speak! ... (Michel 1996 32)¹

In the 1885 edition, Idara sings ‘the song of the whites’:

When the whites came in their great canoes, we welcomed them as *tayos*, brothers, they cut down the great trees to attach the wings of their canoes, and we didn’t mind this.

They ate yams from the *keulé*, cooking-pot of the *tribu* and we were happy for them.

But the whites began to take the good land which produces without being turned over, they took away our young people and women to serve them, they possess everything that we possessed.

The whites promised us the sky and the land, but they have given us nothing, nothing but misery. (Michel 1885 32)

In both versions of *Légendes* (1875) and (1885), as Emma Sinclair notes, ‘women feature prominently; as prophetesses, sorceresses with knowledge of the healing arts, warrior princesses, self-sacrificing mothers, and sacrificial victims’ (n.p.). Michel, she claims, extends her identification with the revolt of the oppressed French people battling the injustices of the Third Republic to the Kanak peoples struggling against colonial oppressors, then beyond this again, to the struggle of women for equality. The 1885 version of ‘Idara, the Prophetess’ includes a commentary on the status of women in Kanak culture that is not reproduced in the 1995 re-edition.

Idara is a popinée (woman), a némo nothing, and the tribes still tell her stories while treating their women like animals; human illogicality is the same everywhere, it is nonetheless to their credit that they do not flatter women in order to more easily deceive them [...]

As Sinclair concludes,

Michel’s romantic strategy for recreating the ‘genius’ of Kanak oral literature, her preoccupation with explaining the origins of the scourges of war and cannibalism in this society and the fact that her reflections and ideological perspectives are woven into the narrative, make it impossible to determine the full extent of her transformation of the original stories. (n.p.)

Michel’s choice of stories and reflections on gender, however, do appear to echo certain early and tentative ‘feminist’ preoccupations that infiltrate the most traditional stories of oral tradition. These include the possibility for a woman to reverse tradition by choosing her own husband; to remain in her own village after marriage in a viri-local society; or to take revenge on an errant husband by committing suicide and returning to haunt him! Despite its clear prescriptions

for women to ensure descendents for her husband's and her own families, or to 'serve the master' in a patriarchal society where public story-telling, as well as control of procreation, was a male prerogative, Kaapo Ciinyii, the daughter of the chief, plays an active part in initiating her own marriage in the following story told by Kaehen ('Martin') Daulo and published by the French ethnographer, Alban Bensa, in 1982:

Let me tell you the story of Kaapo Ciinyii, eldest daughter of the chief. She is weaving a mat. A shadow keeps creeping over her mat, and Kaapo wonders: 'This shadow over my weaving ... What can it be? [...]

First of all, she goes and digs up the tahinetōō yam plant and she cooks it. The yam is cooked, and she puts it in her basket. She makes some straps for the other basket — the ceremonial money basket — and slings it over her shoulder. She picks up her basket of food and sets off. She follows the Wéaga river, then she climbs the mountain, takes the path through the forest and comes out at a high place, a vantage point where she sits and gazes [...]

Udodopwé looks up towards her and sees her. He calls: 'Who's this, intruding on the vantage point? Usually there's nothing up there to spoil the order of my domain!' With these words, Udodopwé sinks to the ground. Then Kaapo Ciinyii says, 'Stand up, since you are here with your kin and lineage, and I have come here with mine'.

Udodopwé gets up and asks her: 'It's the first time you've been seen in these parts, who are your people?'

'I am Kaapo Ciinyii', she replies.

'I see! Well, this house is my house, I am Udodopwé! But there is no woman to rule in this household. Come down, this role is yours.'

Kaapo Ciinyii goes down to Udodopwé and settles there with him. Some time later, she is expecting a child. The baby is born. Time passes; she takes the blessing of long life and goes back up to her home. She makes her way up the Wéaga river valley, takes the path up to Ciinyii and reaches her father's house. She takes the gift that she has brought and offers it to him, 'Please give to my son the blessing of long life'.

Time passes. A-Ciinyii has grown old. One day he makes up his mind. He dispatches his servant, 'Go and find one of Kaapo's daughters and bring her back so she can look after me'.

The servant sets out and arrives at his destination, and finds the eldest daughter of Kaapo and the man from Pwobei. He calls out to her asking her to come and look after A-Ciinyii, her grandfather. She follows him back up to the heights of Ciinyii.

She remains to serve the master ... and she cares for him. She establishes a line of descendants there. They are the maternal kin of A-Pwobei (Udodopwe) and he himself has children and grandchildren borne to him by Kaapo his wife, Kaapo Ciinyii. And that's the story of Kaapo Ciinyii. (Bensa and Rivierre 136)

These texts reveal women's subordinate roles in a system of alliances by marriage controlled by men but also allow a glimpse of disorderly women who challenge social prescriptions. The following text from the island of Maré, first published in 1978, and recently recorded by Charles Illouz, tells of a woman who refuses her wifely food gathering obligations. Raylene Ramsay (2004) argues that, despite the inevitable punishment that follows the breaking of the rules, the complex and hermetic symbolism of this text is permeated by a powerful image of female bodily freedom.

A husband and a wife go off, to tend their fields in the sky. When evening comes, they go back down to their house. Then the wife says ‘Cook us something to eat on the fire, after that, I’ll go and do a bit of torch fishing.’...

Upon reaching the shore, she sets the torch alight then pulls out her eyes and walks, eyeless, towards the sea. There she begins to dance, throwing back her head and dancing along the beach, all the way to the end. She dances like this throwing back her head, rests a little, and then starts dancing again, with her head thrown back. Soon she hears the cockcrow: ‘It will soon be day!’ she thinks. So she goes and picks up her eyes and puts them back in place. And then she goes back towards the interior of the land, returns to her husband and lies down next to him. In the morning he asks: ‘How did your torch fishing go?’

‘Nothing’ she replies [...]

The events are then repeated.

Every day is the same, events repeat themselves in the same way, alternating between the couple’s daytime tending of their fields in the sky and the wife’s night-time dance. But one evening the husband decides to follow her, to find out why she never catches anything. ‘What is she up to, that she never catches anything? I’ll follow her.’ He gets to the sea and sits himself down on a rise to watch. His wife, down below, is busy dancing with her head thrown back. ‘So that’s why she never brings anything back, he says to himself, she spends all her time dancing with her head thrown back.’ So the husband goes and picks up the eyes and throws them into the sea where a picot fish eats them. Then he goes off home. Now the cock starts to crow. ‘It will soon be day’ thinks the wife. At once she starts seeking out her eyes but they have disappeared. ‘My eyes!’ she cries.

(As she cries out ‘My eyes!’, the storyteller pounces on the children and tickles them.)

(‘La danseuse aveugle’, [‘The Blind Dancer’] reproduced in Illouz, 12–13)

Despite the prevalence of stories that tell of the pleasure and especially the danger of women — spirits, the daughters of the North Wind, the shimmering woman from the Western regions, flesh-eating witches (Cainyo, Tibo), the eel-woman or animal fiancée who appears to represent misalliance — other texts tell of women who founded dynasties, travelling in the bellies of whales or eels, or of women who find their own husbands by transforming coconuts in the river, reversing the roles to remain in their own home, and turning the men into rocks at the river-mouth when they grow homesick and attempt to leave.

Apart from Michel and her particular re-telling of Kanak stories, during most of the colonial period women’s voices were virtually absent from the public forum. It was not until the 1980s that Déwé Gorodé continued the process with her figures of Kaapo, daughter of the chief or ‘legendary Princess’ as resistant woman and her rewriting of the origin myth, *Kēnaké* to give a place to women’s voices.² Marie Nervat, pseudonym of Marie Causse, constitutes something of an exception with her volume of poems *Les Rêves Unis* and a colonial novel, *Céline Landrot* published with her husband in 1904. This love story set against the background of a portrait of colonial society, may appear to be woman-centred. It is, however, largely constructed upon stereotypes of women, both romantic and realist ready-made clichés of the feminine.

The novel tells the stories of Victorine, a young peasant girl, condemned to twenty years imprisonment for the infanticide of a child born shamefully of her seduction by the middle-aged husband of her employer, and of François Landrot, an unruly young brawler from a peasant family in Lorraine who had inevitably finished up killing a man. Victorine jumps at the opportunity to commute her sentence by volunteering to leave her French prison for New Caledonia where, under the surveillance of the Little Sisters of Cluny at Bourail, she becomes the wife of the liberated convict. The couple's installation on a small land grant at Pouembout provides the background to a portrait of the social distinctions and gender roles in rural colonial society, and to the love-story of their daughter Lina and a Corsican libéré Bastiani. Despite her husband's violence and alcoholic rages that burn and disfigure her body and send her fleeing to spend the night with her children under the banyan tree — despite the 'double servitude of the female' (21) — Victorine brings up her children more or less happily. Perhaps because of her inferior social status, the pretty and generous-hearted Lina is no Mary Bryant but rather a figure of the negative stereotypes of the 'feminine' of her time. She emulates her first mistress, an administrator's wife from France, in her indolence, coquetterie, greediness, lack of moral courage and dependence on a man. Unlike her mistress, however, Lina is not pining for France; she is a daughter of the new land. In fact, while this novel, which is largely a portrait of raw life or 'low' society, appears to set out to demonstrate the heavy weight of convict origins borne by the country, its portraits of both women and men of all social origins are largely ironic or negative. Kanak women appear only briefly as lazy servants and are inevitably treated with scorn. Animal metaphors characterise women's bodies. 'Victorine Landrot, who had a child almost regularly every year, was the female whom the male enslaved, without ever receiving a caress or a kindly word' (31) and was 'like an animal, who resigns itself to abuse' (32). After her elopement to Nouméa with Bastiani, the libéré who had attempted to kill his rival, the free stockman Ferrier (whom her father had wanted her to marry), Lina, too, lives the life of 'a lazy animal', gazing out at the world often forbidden to her by her husband's jealousy with the eyes of a 'peaceful heifer' (138).

Like *Céline Landrot*, Catherine Régent's neo-colonial historical romance, *Justine ou Un amour de chapeau de paille*, published almost a century later (1995), exposes the social segregation and the entrenched attitudes that prevailed in the rural communities of free settlers, liberated convicts, and Kanak engagés at the end of the nineteenth century. The historian, Isabelle Merle, has suggested that it is this fierce hierarchy of 'class' (or origin) and race in the early colony that may explain the depth of racism and class distinctions that persist in the present. Unlike peasants in France, these settlers had access to servants — assigned indentured labour, convict labour or Kanak 'service' (prestations) — and the status that lay in the refusal to mix as equals with liberated prisoners.

This novel, too, is a love story, but one that is sympathetic to the heroine's project as Régent recounts an impossible affair between a daughter of a colonial dignitary and a 'straw-hat' — her father's house servant — (unjustly) deported for murdering the man who raped his sister. Like her earlier novel, *Valesdir*, this is a story that seeks to rehabilitate the idea of 'settlement', exalting in particular the pioneer spirit in women devoted to their husbands. Set in the Anglo-French condominium of the New Hebrides archipelago, *Valesdir* tells the story of the sacrifices made by the family of Charles Trenal and his Swiss wife, courageous in the face of disillusionment and broken promises by the French Society for the New Hebrides, battling a violent natural world at Epi, and struggling against the odds to make that French colony home. The book was written after Vanuatu became independent in 1981 and many descendants of settlers had been forced to leave. The themes of double allegiance (to old Europe at war and to their new adopted land); the support role of the tender, hardworking pioneer wife; and the subaltern natives in various stock roles, emerge as standard tropes of the (neo) colonial novel.

Régent's novels can be classed as neo-colonial romances but their underlying themes are also the necessity or inevitability of the breaking down of the barriers of class and race. Blandine Stefanson (1998) argues that by inscribing scenes of 'natives' working in the plantations — that is, on their own lands confiscated by colonisation, and thus contributing to development, consciously or unconsciously — Régent's novel creates ironic distances within the idealised settler project. Her women characters are stereotypical but they are also quiet and capable heroines.

In fact, it was not until the beginning of the political agitation that accompanied major social changes in the 1970s and the virtual civil war in the 1980s that women really became visible in New Caledonian society outside their roles as wives and mothers. In the Kanak world, this was particularly manifest in women's associations with the creation of the G.F.K.E.L. (Groupe de femmes Kanakes exploitées en lutte) in 1982 and in women's contribution to the independence struggle. The G.F.K.E.L., however, met significant resistance and was dissolved in 1986, after its representative was insulted and struck. Women largely supported the democratisation of New Caledonian society that followed the new Kanak claims and the 'Events' or 'Troubles'³ of the eighties, which in their turn have opened up new options for women's active participation in public life. Women's political representation becomes a significant reality, particularly at the local level, with the French parity law in 2001. In 2006, a woman President (Marie-Noëlle Thémereau) and Vice-President (Déwé Gorodé) are the leading figures in the New Caledonian government.

Women's writing bears the marks of this social and political commitment, most notably, the singular work of Déwé Gorodé with its central themes of attachment to the land and revolt against colonial injustice. Alongside this socio-

political project, however, the staging of women's often difficult lives remains central. Gorodé offers a strong denunciation of the sexual exploitation of women who are 'exchanged like pieces of Lapita pottery to seal an alliance, in between two wars'. 'Matrimonial pathways linking the clans', she observes, 'we survived as best we could a childhood and an entry into adolescence that was too often violated by the lecherous desires of old men.' 'Sharing, solidarity, humility, the word of women, conceived, nourished, and carried in our entrails of beaten wives' (*Uté Mûrûnû* 1984 20–21), is echoed in the work by women from other communities, for example, Bernadette H., author in 2005 of an autobiographic narrative entitled *Mon Soleil noir* [*My Black Sun*] and Anne Bihan's *V. ou Portraits de Famille au couteau de cuisine* [*V. or Portraits of the Family with the Kitchen Knife*]. The central themes of the latter — a tragi-comic poetic text for the theatre, performed in 2003 by *Pacifique et Compagnie* in the Mont-Dore Cultural Centre — are once again domestic violence and its origins in childhood abuse, the dramas of reconstituted families, and the bruises of parental abandonment. As Anne Bihan observes in her preface, this text also seeks to go further in the quest for a language 'that is able to speak of body, its violence and its desires, that have most often remained silent, the passions and the defeats for which it constitutes the theatre' as it records 'the cries of crucified love' (5). Like Gorodé's most recent text, *L'Epave* (2005), Bihan's texts also explore the intensity and contradictions of those bonds which constitute the mechanisms of domestic warfare and yet, despite abuse, keep a couple inextricably tied together.

Contemporary women's writing in New Caledonia also draw its themes and conventions from romantic exoticism as in the long novels of Arlette Peirano, or from the sense of being from outside, from somewhere else and the desire to be accepted in New Caledonia as a European from France, present in the poems and fictional writing of Catherine Laurent. But in its variety of forms, it most often derives from the desire to ask questions about New Caledonian history and society, the futures this history makes possible, and about women's place in a new decolonised society.

The project of Jacqueline Sénès in *Terre Violente*, inspired by the journalist's long stay in New Caledonia and recently made into a Franco-Australian film, is to sketch the outline of Caledonian history through the saga of a pioneer family — the story of their struggle with cyclone, locusts, plague. This affirmation of the courage of the small European settler family and its commitment to the land is balanced by the recognition of Kanak displacement and the power struggles within the colonial administration. More particularly, when the patriarch, John Sutton, is killed off early in the novel helping the local tribe fight the plague, Sénès is then free to give pre-eminence to the struggles of a woman protagonist, Hélène Sutton, now the surrogate head of the family — struggles that include the hard work of the mines, rape and disfigurement, and battle to keep the Sutton land. A number of other women writers (Ginette Harbulot and Fernande Leriche)

claim that their project is to transmit their memories and Caledonian memories to the younger generations in a more direct attempt to remember the colonial (and convict) past positively and honour the pioneers and founders of New Caledonian society of European origin.

Claudine Jacques is the major representative of a women's writing that presents a European perspective on the diverse territories and cultures of its communities in New Caledonia. Jacques explores the political contexts and the relationships between Kanak and European communities, in particular by staging the difficult relationship between a mixed Kanak and Caledonian couple during the period of the 'Troubles' in *Coeur Barbelés* and the socio-political consequences of a mysterious 'Cataclysm' in her futuristic novel, *L'Age du Perroquet-Banane*. Her collection of short stories (*A l'Ancre de nos vies*, *Ce ne sont que des histoires d'amour*, *Nos Silences sont si fragiles*) evoke the New Caledonian bush and the lives of its different communities through the destinies and affective family relationships of a range of diverse characters. In her novel, *L'Homme-Lézard*, and her collection of short stories, *C'est pas la faute de la lune*, she draws on Kanak cultural references. Cultural hybridity and biological *métissage* are the central preoccupations of Jacques' writing. The fantastic in which the stories of this collection bathe comes both from a European imaginary and from a Pacific imaginary which gives a central place to phenomena that a Western mind would label 'supernatural' ('It is not the Fault of the Moon').

In Jacques' exploration of the possibilities of individual and inter-cultural encounters, the grandeur and servitudes of the female body, the desire for love and for the destruction of the other, sexuality, incest, and sexual violence, play a major role. Her heroines, however, rarely find a happy ending in marriage and children, and more particularly, cross-cultural relationships are shown to be fraught with difficulty. Curiously, in these imaginative and innovative women-focussed novels, it is traditional female self-sacrifice that seems to offer the best solution to the difficult relation with the Other. The only way open in *L'Homme-Lézard* for the young Kanak character, Mandela, to exorcise the demon 'lizard' of drink and self-doubt that possesses her brother, is to become a sacrificial victim — in this instance of the race riots at the St Louis Mission. The female protagonist and Sage, the 'Librarian' in the apocalyptic novel, *L'Age du Perroquet-Banane*, will ensure the transmission of the knowledge she possesses and save the diminishing library of remaining knowledge only by allowing herself to be literally devoured by the fierce cannibal warriors from the mountain-peaks.

Claudine Jacques has also written stories for young people. This literature has been growing over the last few years, and demonstrates the desire of writers to present fictional representations of the country in which they live, its history and its cultures, to young New Caledonians. Among this work, the picture-books published in 2004 (*Méyènô*) and 2005 (*L'enfant-Kaori*) by two young Kanak women writers, Réséda Ponga and Maléta Houmbouy are particularly striking.

They play a concrete role in promoting Kanak languages and traditional stories: each of these stories is written in a Kanak language and translated into French (M'éyènò in A'jië, L'Enfant Kaori in Iaaï).

Women's writing in New Caledonia has been vitalised by this desire to re-appropriate and give value to a recovered historical and cultural past, and by the will to work through the social and political questions of urgency to the new country under construction. It is true that women's writing is no less vulnerable to stereotypes and ideologically based preconceptions than men's writing: both on the literary and on the political level intercultural and social dialogue must continue. Nonetheless, bearing witness to the diversity of Caledonian social and cultural experiences, literature written by women is fully part of the ongoing dialogue and of the construction of confident identities so essential to the present political gamble: to overcome the wounds and prejudices of the past and construct a 'common destiny'⁴ a destiny in which women will play equal if distinctive roles.

NOTES

- ¹ This edition draws on both the 1875 and the 1885 versions
- ² See Raylene Ramsay, 'D'éwé Gorodé The Paradoxes of Being a Kanak Woman Writer' in this volume.
- ³ The 'Événements' or 'Troubles' was the euphemistic name given to the often violent confrontation of the eighties between the Kanak community, a majority of whom favoured independence, and the European community, the majority of whom wanted New Caledonia to remain a French Territory.
- ⁴ This expression is found at the end of the Nouméa Agreement, signed in 1998 and continuing the Accords de Matignon that ended the 'Événements' or 'Troubles' in 1988. The Nouméa Agreement presents itself as a process of decolonisation, and recognises the 'dark shadows' of the colonial past of New Caledonia. It makes provision for increasing autonomy by the transfer of political authority and, at the end of a fifteen-year period, the participation of the Caledonian population in referenda on the question of independence.

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