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Abstract

The banana is a culturally important food in much of Africa. Originally an Asian food, it has been grown in East Africa since the time of Arabic trade. It forms a staple food for much of the African population (afrol News online); but the Mauritian writer, Lindsey Collen, takes a surprisingly lyrical approach to, 'A fruit that's also a vegetable. A vegetable that's also a staple. The most magic of all fruit, all vegetables, all staples' (247). Such praise for the banana recognises it as extraordinary; indeed, the abundant, common and often comically phallic banana is given iconic status in her novel *Mutiny*.

HELEN COUSINS

Banana Rebellion: Food and Power in Lindsey Collen's *Mutiny*

The banana is a culturally important food in much of Africa. Originally an Asian food, it has been grown in East Africa since the time of Arabic trade. It forms a staple food for much of the African population (*afrol News* online); but the Mauritian writer, Lindsey Collen, takes a surprisingly lyrical approach to, 'A fruit that's also a vegetable. A vegetable that's also a staple. The most magic of all fruit, all vegetables, all staples' (247). Such praise for the banana recognises it as extraordinary; indeed, the abundant, common and often comically phallic banana is given iconic status in her novel *Mutiny*. Collen employs the banana as a potent symbol of resistance to oppression. Out of context, the image of women prisoners taking one banana and raising a mug of tea in an oath of solidarity might appear more amusing than seriously defiant and, certainly, one of the attractions of Collen's writing is her capacity to explore important issues with a light touch. However, as the themes of the novel develop this culminating moment takes on a resonance as a powerful moment of female unity against injustice and repression.

Mutiny is the story of a prison breakout set in Mauritius. Three women, Juna, Leila and Mama Gracienne, share a cell in Porlwi women's prison. All three are held or have been convicted on dubious charges which makes the reader more sympathetic to their escape plans. Juna has been told that allegations have been made against her of framing another woman on a drugs charge; it seems more likely that her recent appointment to secretary of the trade union has prompted her arrest. Leila has broken into a drug dealer's house who has organised a contract killing on her father; she is a minor but she is in the adult prison as she attacked one of the policemen who arrested her. Mama Gracienne's beloved daughter, Honey, has died but no cause of death can be found; out of grief and confusion, Mama Gracienne has confessed to murder. Prison conditions are basic; the women are often cold and always hungry. They begin to share recipes as a way of sublimating those physical pangs and this begins to form a common ground between them from which rebellion can spring. When Juna receives a message from outside (from her politically active friends) about the twin cyclone moving towards Porlwi, they begin to plan for a mass escape to be effected when the eye of the storm passes over the prison. However, the authorities begin to suspect trouble and try to provoke internal violence, which could be ruthlessly repressed through cutting the banana ration from two to one a day.

For the inmates of Porlwi women's prison, the banana is essential nutrition where diet is very poor and limited. From this practical beginning, it becomes something more: as Juna, the narrator, points out, 'Bananas are more than gold in here ... bananas are holy' (100). Bananas are used as currency — one of the characters, Juna, gives up a banana a day for one week to another inmate in exchange for a pencil — but they are also invested with more than economic value. They are 'beautiful' and 'sacred', and have been won by a prisoner strike. As Juna explains, 'On the chunk of bread we get margarine. But *only since the hunger strike in 1979* ... Meat twice a week *only since then* too. And the *two bananas*. Inalienable right' (252).¹ The weekly ration of two bananas is the result of the prisoners hard-fought battle with authorities and it is the linking of bananas with the rights of prisoners and the justice they should have that makes the banana such a significant symbol in the novel.

Food, as mentioned earlier, is a weapon in the struggle for domination in Collen's narrative. Its lack caused the strike of 1979 and withdrawal of food is commonly threatened by the prison guards, who are known as Blue Ladies. Prisoners are told that if they 'put a foot wrong' or 'don't watch [their] tongue' they will be reduced to 'bread and water' (55, 186). It is a given that these guards 'control every crust of dry bread we get in here.' (75) Even with the additions of meat and margarine, the prison diet is restricted to barely adequate levels, partly one assumes for economy but also it appears as a deliberate ploy to oppress the prisoners' spirit.

Juna notes: '[w]e are always hungry, all of us.... We *think about food* all the time' (252). With their minds focused on their aching stomachs, the prisoners have no space to consider defiance or rebellion. At best they are reduced to petty complaints and bullying directed at their peers more often than at the Blue Ladies who have the power to punish fairly arbitrarily. Quite literally, they are 'driven nuts by food' (75) and by talk of it: "'I'm hungry,'" [Leila, Juna's cell mate] says. "I'm starving." These words drive me mad' (21–22).

Food as a tool of control is not limited to prison in the Mauritius of the novel. In colonial times starvation was a punishment for slaves. In 'Green Square ... [called] *execution square* ... they used to chop the heads off male slaves and hang the female slaves to starve in public' (216). In contemporary Mauritian society (when this novel is set), people are no longer publically executed by starvation but Collen makes her opinion clear that those in power still make decisions that result in some people dying through lack of food. In the novel, Mama Gracienne has lost two children as infants; she had been visiting Mauritius with her two young sons when the Chagos Islands were 'closed' and the inhabitants evicted so that the British could rent them to America (Baird, 2002). Mama Gracienne cannot return to the rest of her family and soon her two little boys die of diarrhoea — which one assumes was brought on by the malnutrition and disease that comes with homelessness and deprivation. Collen makes the claim that starvation now

occurs in the name of economics as policy makers 'cause starvation. *En masse*. They lower wages and sack people, with intent. They raise prices and close factories. Leaving the little children to suffer without *give us this day our daily*' (274). Collen's comments would seem to be directed at Mauritian legislators and industrialists, and outside agencies (such as The World Bank) who offer help attached to imposed conditions of restructuring. They remain free despite the personal costs which can be associated with their decision making; in fact, their actions are often publicly praised as improving the economy.

More specifically, food of a particular kind is linked with corruption. Juna tells her cell mates the story of how her father '*got corrupted*'. He stands as a Bicycle Party candidate in local elections. This is a democratic grassroots political party where adults — men and women — can debate and '*come to conclusions*' (44). He is elected as a Village President but one day is invited, along with other Village Presidents, to a meeting with the rich and powerful Dr Bythee. Bythee imposes his own autocratic decisions on the meeting regarding an area representative, clearly choosing someone whom he knows will concur with the Government line. The meeting has been set up as a meal, apparently innocent enough, but the setting is intimidating: 'Each man takes a seat regretfully at the enormous oval table. Napkin, what to do with it. Cutlery frightening them' (47). When Juna's father tries to instigate a discussion, he is silenced: "Don't want to make a *meal* out of it." The literal and indulgent meal that follows, brought in by 'Servants in white livery' (48), seals the decision and binds these men in complicity. From this point on, Juna feels that she has lost her father and he is lost himself. Significantly, the Blue Ladies are also '*overfed*', connecting them with this privilege and corruption; but tools of control can be grasped and used by the oppressed too.

At the beginning of the novel, Juna finds a way of using food against the authorities through games she plays with her cell mate, Leila, in order to survive the boredom and stress of imprisonment. Initially these games are not food related, consisting of the 'question-and-answer game' (19), where conversation between them proceeds through one asking questions to draw out the meaning of the others' deliberately veiled comments and training exercises. In these they march and run on the spot; this game develops into Leila boosting Juna up to the cell window where she begins to file away one of the bars in preparation for their escape. Juna is aware of the prison authorities' deliberate intention to occupy the prisoners' minds with thoughts of food and hunger. The new game that Juna introduces is one of exchanging recipes between herself, Leila and the third occupant of the cell, Mama Gracienne, an older woman. This game starts as a way to 'pass the time' (21); the rules are that recipes discussed must proceed alphabetically and that 'we can't talk about being hungry all the time ... we've got to *ration* ourselves' (22). By controlling talk about food and hunger, Juna begins to diffuse the maddening effect.

The food has resonance with characters' moods; the first two recipes requested by Leila are bitter dishes of aubergine and gourd rings. It is recognised by Juna that Leila 'can't bear to think of anything sweet' (22). However, the food here is necessarily imaginary and the recipes have a more subversive intention:

Concentrate all out on food. Tell recipes to lighten the weight of the boredom. Talk about food to quell the pangs of hunger that gnaw at the pits of our stomachs, talk to tame the obsession with eating....

Then forget about food. Ban the subject all together. (25)

In this way, the mind is freed from its obsession with food. Space is made in the prisoners' minds for those thoughts of rebellion and escape that the prison authorities would like to suppress. By recipe number five (Edible Elephant Ear), Leila tells Juna she has been practising the recipe Mama Gracienne told her — 'trying to remember it off by heart for when she gets out' (206). For Leila, the concept of being outside, the idea of escape is now in her consciousness, and from the idea can spring the action.

However, this is not the only purpose of the recipes in the novel. Traditionally in Mauritius, women are the home keepers of the society (Matusky, 2006). Food production, provision and preparation has been the domain of women, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa (Africaguide, 2006). In a situation where these women could so easily fight, bully and destroy each other, Collen uses the sharing of recipes to create a bond between the women within this cell. By setting her novel in a prison, Collen creates a micro society where it is in the authorities' interests that the women prisoners are at odds with one another. When Juna is put in the first cell with two old hands, her 'instinct says *don't give in, fight them*' (8). Individuals have to struggle in a hierarchy and those at the bottom are bullied and harassed. Juna's involvement with the trade union has raised her consciousness about the importance of solidarity and she gradually realises that this is equally as important in prison. She is supported in this by her politically active friends outside, particularly Boni, who do not abandon her. Boni had warned Juna to be careful when she became secretary; helps Leila to give herself up; and sends a message to Juna via Mama Gracienne when she hears Mama Gracienne is about to confess to the murder of her daughter. Boni ends up in the prison too and is instrumental in helping Juna build unity between all the prisoners.

Collen frequently explores the notion of female solidarity in her novels. It is often suggested as a tenet of African feminism that traditional structures have created a commonality between women which fosters a spirit of co-operation.² However, in this text Collen suggests that this is not a given. In the prison, the inmates will have to find common ground if they are to resist the injustice of their situation. Furthermore, the female guards are in no way aligned to the women they guard. In fact, they are barely human. Juna describes them variously as encased in artifice: 'starched and dyed ... [with] false teeth' (52); reeking: 'the smell of all the blue lady's lotions and potions ... It stinks' (116); and inhuman: 'Extra-

terrestrial' (52), 'robot-like' (121) and 'like a corpse' (146). They are never seen to eat, despite being 'overfed'.

By aligning themselves with institutional authority, these guards have made themselves as trapped as the inmates. Juna sees right from the beginning that they are '*just as much imprisoned as we are*' (4). This provokes no sympathy in Juna; in fact she hates these guards (3). As mutinous feelings grow with the cyclone's development, the guards become more imprisoned than the inmates. They have accepted responsibility in exchange for privilege and now they are duty bound to stay and guard the prisoners. Juna's recipe game which, she says 'we are bound to play' (252), binds the prisoners to a different responsibility: first by acknowledging a common anger about the lack of food, then by directing that anger first at the overfed Blue Ladies and then, more generally towards a legal system that, from Collen's point of view, is designed to oppress the poor rather than punishing criminals. Short interleaved chapters throughout the novel quote laws copied by Juna from legislative documents in the prison library. These relate to stories the characters tell of their own experiences and of others they know and show how circumstances of poverty have often led to trouble with the police and arrest. Their agenda (a free choice) is to leave whilst the Blue Ladies agenda (imposed upon them) is to remain inside.

The sharing of recipes also binds the women together as family. Although a cultural history of women as home-makers who take responsibility for the preparation of food would suggest that the women of Mauritius usually learn recipes from other women, particularly from their mothers and grandmothers, when Leila asks to be told how to prepare fish pickle, Juna observes that she 'want[s] to know how to choose and prepare the fish ... and make the pickle. Nobody ever shows me anything;' by which she implies a lack of mothering (244). Indeed, Juna has earlier described herself as 'born without a mother' (193) as her mother died soon after her birth. The sense of loss is exacerbated by her father's refusal to explain consistently how this happened, variously claiming childbirth, drowning and being hit by a falling coconut. Juna's cellmates have experienced a similar break or breakdown in the female line. Leila's mother had tried to get Leila 'declared *out of control* and locked up' so that she would 'no longer [be] a threat to her family's reputation' (209) and put out a contract on Leila's father's life. Mama Gracienne has lost two families: she is separated from her family on the Chagos Islands, and her infant sons die; later, she loses her second Mauritian husband and Honey, the daughter of that marriage.

However, in prison, Juna identifies the three of them as '*this family*' (108). Mama Gracienne is 'the mother I have found. Inside' (193). The emphasis on 'inside' here reminds us that Juna is pregnant and probably will soon be a mother herself. Leila is a teenager who should rightfully be in a juvenile prison but her crime — spilling the blood of a policeman — condemns her to the adult prison. She is also pregnant — not only a child but imminently a mother too. So here

a family of grandmother/mother, daughter/mother and mother/grand/daughter is created.

Having two of the three inmates in one cell pregnant might appear to be a surprising coincidence, but it does serve to emphasise the burgeoning hunger for freedom. These two 'pre-people' might be inside in two senses but once they are born they will be free under the terms of the law. It also draws attention to a mainly female concern, that in considering the future '*for us, women, there are the unborn who get involved. The inside*' (275). In this way the family is extended beyond the living but also recognises its procreative purpose and potential in reaching forward and shaping the future.

Juna's identification of a family inside the prison seems important to her recognition of the further possibility of solidarity: '*This family. Can we mutiny? The three of us? And others?*' (108). Juna cannot accomplish an escape on her own, but as part of a family she has the power to draw other women towards her and into the mutiny. Furthermore, as the relationships in this family are not biological but socially constructed, the family unit can include any woman who chooses or is chosen to become part of it. So solidarity between the prisoners becomes a possibility through several strategies.

Of course, the reader might question the right of these women to rebel; after all, surely society needs ways of punishing crime and protecting the innocent, and these women are incarcerated because they are criminals. Collen however suggests that justice is not so simple. Whilst Leila is proudly guilty of her crimes, Juna claims that the allegations made against her are false, and Mama Gracienne appears to have confessed to the murder of her daughter out of guilt, grief and because no one can tell her how and why Honey, her daughter, did die. Of some of the other prisoners, we are told:

One just walked the streets. *Soliciting*. So much for free trade. Another went to see a *backstreet* woman. One *stole* a tin of sweetened condensed milk from a supermarket, for a babe on a milkless breast. One *administered noxious substance* to her husband. Three took on their husbands' drug-peddling charges. A clutch of broken down addicts.

(274)

It may be argued that Collen deliberately mixes this range of 'crimes' to challenge our own morality and perceptions of justice. Many readers will differentiate between these women seeing some as innocent and others as guilty; but then Collen asks the reader to compare them to those who declare war and make munitions. Juna questions the justice in this: '*They walk free. Maim and kill people by the hundred. By the thousand. Collateral?*' (274). Juna similarly questions the morality of those who make the economic decisions which create the deprivation that might lead someone to steal food, and asks who then should be punished? What Juna appears to want to establish is the truth — something she sees as separate from justice as defined by the establishment; and again Collen uses common food-related metaphors to express this:

I am hungry. And thirsty. All the time ...

Maybe I will write about milk ... And food. *Milk of human kindness ... Food for thought.* ... Thirst to be quenched by opening up the throat and ... pouring in delicious sweet gurgling milk. *Thirst after righteousness.* Hunger. Hunger to be stayed by tasty morsels of bread and a little something. *Hunger for truth.* (75)

Juna's arrest has coincided with her appointment as secretary for the new union at work. Whilst the allegations against her are for planting drugs, the suggestion is that these are false allegations. The implication is that her arrest is more likely a way of intimidating those who engage in this type of grassroots politics. Like her father and, more recently her brother, Juna has been targeted by the authorities because she is perceived to be a dangerous voice of dissent. She questions the nature of 'justice' in her society — on what it is founded and by whom. She asks who can speak about justice and who can challenge it — the 'people' or only the privileged elite? This justifies mutiny in Juna's mind but she also questions the effectiveness of a localised mutiny. However, by this stage of the narrative she is not paralysed by fears of ineffectuality or bound by conventional rules.

Earlier, Juna notes that 'Recipes are instructions ... Like the criminal code. Telling you what to do and what not to do' (23). When she gets her first message regarding the mutiny, she complains that they are not more directive — 'I prefer getting orders. Instructions, directions. Recipes for escape' (118) — but she is told that 'if these were recipes, *they* would know them too' (118). Juna has to move outside of the conventional mores of society in order to ferment her rebellion. She has noted that '*In any society they say that the first writings are laws and recipes ... then stories*' (24). Juna has been copying down parts of Mauritian legislation and recounting her recipes but now she has to accept that these rule-bound texts will not help her nor address society's corruptions. She is advised by her political-activist friends to discuss multiple expressions of mutiny, to make a map, use riddles and guessing games (119). These are the tools of story-telling and therefore unknowable to the rule-bound Blue Ladies and the institution more generally. By using less predictable texts, plans will stay hidden.

This is not a generic novel of prison escape for the usual 'ingredients' are often absent: plans of action secretly plotted, actions taken, moments of near discovery, feats of bravery and sacrifice. In fact it remains somewhat unclear how the narrative arrives at the moment in the meal hall where the women unite in the face of the 'provocative cut in banana rations' (325). Instead it would seem that several elements combine to bring this to pass — the 'smell of rebellion' (13) creating mutinous feelings in the inmates; the impending cyclone; Juna's hidden knowledge of the prison electronics; the Blue Ladies' increasing disquiet; the arrival of Boni, the activist. These various elements work together to create meaning for the reader. Thus, little narrative drive is created as in a genre text but thematically a convincing solidarity between all the women in the prison is achieved. It might be suggested that the text itself works in the way that Juna has been encouraged to work.

When the order is given ‘Only one banana each!’ (312) every woman ‘makes a stand’ (318), takes her one banana and an ‘oath’. The cut in banana rations, a blatant disregard for one of the few ‘rights’ of the prisoners, has been a calculated ploy by the authority to disperse the rebellion in meaningless actions, such as a riot. They can manage this with violence and repression. However, there is no way to redress what appears to be a non-rebellion and this reveals the power that the prisoners have:

We are taking the power in a process that has already begun and the knowledge — *conviction* even, because it is our own choice — that we will be acting soon means that we are already acting, means victory is possible, means a certain degree of victory is already here with us, inhabiting us. (318)

In this text, the victory is not so much escaping physical imprisonment but an understanding that by working together, oppressed people can challenge the status quo.

In terms of the prison escape genre, this novel is a failure. The women do escape in the eye of the cyclone, but they are driven back to captivity by the devastation caused by the ferocity at the other side of the cyclone. They are left ‘helpless, struggling, starving’ (341). Additionally, we are not told of the fate of Mama Gracienne; of Juna’s brother; or the babies born (or not?) to Leila and Juna. In fact, all characters except Juna vanish from the narrative. This works to focus the reader’s attention on the actual achievement of the mutiny. The ‘certain degree of victory’ (318) remains despite the fact that Juna is back in her prison cell; but now she does not have recipes or rules: she has tools, she exercises in preparation and she is ‘not the only one’ (342). The escape is thought of as ‘[*t*] *hat* time’ in anticipation of a ‘[*t*] *his* time’ (342). She has realised that, for women particularly, but also for anyone subject to (instead of in control of) institutions such as the law, the rules of society do not protect but oppress freedom. These instructions for society cannot be used by women to empower themselves. What is required is a more flexible system — one which lays out the ground then offers the option of many paths and strategies; the ‘*map* of a mutiny’ (119).

NOTES

- ¹ All italics are Collens’.
- ² See for example works by Filomina Chioma Steady (1987), Obioma Nnaemeka (1998) and Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994).

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Crab Soup

*This is one of the recipes shared by the inmates of Poorlwi prison in *Mutiny* by Lindsey Collen. I have tried to rewrite it as a recipe but the text is not specific about quantities or times so this is only for experienced cooks who know how to judge amounts! For the fully lyrical, mouth-watering description see pp. 131–33.*

INGREDIENTS

butter
onions, chopped
fresh leaf coriander (including stalks and roots if possible)
a piece of root ginger
some cloves of garlic
curry leaves (if available)
a chilli, seeds removed
turmeric
oil
crabs, cleaned
salt
tamarind or lemon juice

METHOD

1. Melt the butter in a pan and brown the onions.
2. Remove the coriander leaves and chop. Put them aside for sprinkling on top of the soup.
3. Crush into a paste: the roots and stalks of the coriander, the root ginger, the garlic, the curry leaves, and the chilli. (The easiest way to do this is in a blender but the book suggests finely chopping all the ingredients then ‘squashing’ them with a mortar and pestle, or a flat knife or using a ‘grind stone’ type of arrangement).
4. Add turmeric if required.
5. Fry the mixture well with the onions, adding oil if necessary to stop the paste burning. Stir constantly to make sure it does not burn and become bitter. Continue until the mixture smells cooked.
6. Add the water and the crabs. Bring to the boil then reduce to a simmer for 15–20 minutes.
7. Season with salt and tamarind / lemon juice to taste. Sprinkle with reserved, chopped coriander leaves and serve immediately.