

Indigenous Women Writers in the Pacific: Déwé Gorodé, Sia Figiel, Patricia Grace: Writing Violence as Counter Violence and the role of Local Context

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The first Kanak novel, *L'Epave* (2005) by Déwé Gorodé, a New Caledonian independence militant, left readers perplexed. Traditional society, foregrounded and valued in Gorodé's earliest writing, was now represented as deeply flawed by the prevalence of incest and violence against very young women. This was a violence in which women themselves sometimes played ogress to the flesh-devouring ogre. Gorodé's fictional work was attempting to lift what one of her early poems had called the "heavy cloak" of silence. This had, apparently, not only enveloped traditional Kanak culture but also shrouded female sexuality and sexual pleasure within a hybridized patriarchal and church-dominated Kanak society. Elsewhere in indigenous women's writing in the Pacific, the central trope, as in Gorodé, remains one of colonial violence and dispossession, but this is often similarly set alongside the theme of internal, often sexual violence. In the attempt to understand and counter this violence, women writers across the Francophone and Anglophone Pacific, from Gorodé in New Caledonia to Sia Figiel in Samoa and Patricia Grace in Aotearoa-New Zealand, are breaking the silence, rewriting traditional myth, and creating new valorized feminine spaces.

The comparative aspect of this study casts light on the role that different socio-political contexts play in the varieties of counter-violence produced in Pacific women's texts. The paper's focus, however, is on Gorodé's particularly distinctive literary representations which, it argues, produce a more complex insider understanding of Kanak gender relations and sexual violence than the emerging social science research.

The relatively new literary production by indigenous Pacific writers, published since the 1970s, principally in English or in French, has been predominantly characterized by a writing back to the violence of colonial histories. These Pacific texts sound oppression and loss through the excavation of memory and oral archive from the beginning of European occupation or settlement to present, modern development. Indigenous politicians and writers have developed varied strategies, across time, to speak of the different contexts of ongoing political struggle. At the 2010 Conference of the Pacific History Association, held for the first time in the

Highlands at Goroka in independent Papua New Guinea, for example, the local politician spoke eloquently to denounce the corruption in the PNG democratic system; his solution was to advocate a return to the customary authority of the tribal “big men.” Alongside this common trope of return to tradition or to pre-colonial law and signifying systems, Pacific writers have also adopted regional Oceanian paradigms including the assassinated New Caledonian independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s Melanesian (or Pacific) Way. Local insider indigenous rights texts (Hawaii, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, New Zealand) connect with an outsider postcolonial political perspective or, again, somewhat paradoxically, with universal rights programmes or with something approaching a diversity or diasporic aesthetic. Marxist ideologies of liberation struggle have also been adapted to feed into global indigenous rights programmes or to the local cause, as in the earlier work of Déwé Gorodé who studied in France after the social revolution of May 1968.

Like Tjibaou, this leading Kanak writer, political militant, and Vice-President of the post-Noumea Agreements Collegial government in New Caledonia from 2004, claims to remain first and foremost rooted in the local (earth/land). Notwithstanding this *parti pris* of indigeneity, her work has also become increasingly critical of a custom or tradition significantly hybridized by colonial systems and by modern and neo-liberal capitalist influences. In her recent poem, “Dans le filet,” (“Netted”) the traditional thatched hut has become the *cyber-case*, home of the computer and the flat screen television that catch the young Kanak protagonist in their “net,” fry and cannibalize or consume him (*Sharing as Custom Provides* 156). Similarly, the American Samoan poet Caroline Sinavaiana-Gabbard has written of “washing down the colonial poison of self-hatred with Mountain Dew and Budweiser, self-medicating with stock options and Jerry Springer” or of being “lost at sea” in her multiple identities (Wendt *Whetu Moana* 24). The concept of the return to tradition (or to the earth/the land) is compromised, or, at the least, complicated by this understanding. The positive and unifying dual metaphors that currently dominate indigenous Pacific discourses are the return to the earth (recovery of roots in the land) and the criss-crossing of the Pacific “sea of islands” in ancestral *waka* guided by the star-eyes of Oceanian gods. The intrepid voyaging canoe creates networks of contact with other Pacific peoples. Nonetheless, a number of the modern Pacific voyager-poets represent themselves as simply washed up on the rocks. In Gorodé’s *L’Epave*, the *waka* has become a wreck immobilized in the canoe graveyard.

Women’s speaking out as counter violence

The exalting of “sharing as custom provides” and the focus on recovering what may still be alive *Under the Ashes of the Conch Shells* (the title of

Gorodé's first collection of poems) are overshadowed in this first Kanak novel by the centrality of scenes of recurring sexual violence against very young women. It is, however, this paper will argue, both the evolving socio-political contexts and Gorodé's own continuing struggle and commitment to the redress of injustice, dignity, and more equal power that have enabled the public emergence of the writer's fictional and oblique multi-voiced staging of oppressive gender relations within her own society in all their particular complexity.

The plot follows the unravelling of the mystery of a repressed trauma in the life of young Léna, her slow journey to recovery of the memory of childhood sexual molestation. The text continues to foreground and celebrate the group's heritage of strongly networked human relations and intense ever-present relations with the ancestors and the custodial spirits of the land. However, this does not prevent violence from being situated not only in the struggle against dominant modern culture in this French *collectivité sui generis* but also within Kanak customary life itself. The publication of this curious and unexpected novel took place against the background of the rapidly changing socio-political contexts of the Noumea Agreements of 1998 and their premise of Kanak emancipation through a rebalancing, the transfer of powers from France, and self-determination within a Common Destiny for all New Caledonian groups. The planned series of referenda on independence is now to take place as of 2014.¹

For Gorodé, as for most Pacific women writers, literature thus constitutes both a breaking of the taboo of silence and a way to say "I." Nonetheless, as Patty O'Brien's *The Pacific Muse* has argued, the brutal treatment of women has been a stereotype of colonial representations. Similarly, Christine Salomon and Christine Hamelin have noted the dangers of a kind of pornography of violence or the possible strengthening of negative perceptions among "ill-intentioned readers" that might result from speaking out. Gorodé's insider critique (like the outsider critique of the metropolitan social scientist, Christine Salomon, who spent a year living with and observing the women of the Houailou region) could be used as a weapon against the very community whose positive cultural values both women seek to affirm. Despite such perils, Gorodé's texts, encouraged, as we suggested, by changing New Caledonian contexts, are daring to mirror the militant writer's own tightrope walk between colonial oppressions and the secondary oppression of indigenous women.

As in the Gorodé poem "Speaking Truth," the primary mode of resistance to discursive restrictions in many Pacific women's texts is therefore "to unpick the stitches from sewn up mouths" (*Sharing* 108) and to give voice(s) to those silenced. In the Samoan writer Sia Figiel's similarly courageous speaking-out novels, *Where We Once Belonged* and *Girl in the Moon Circle*, the stories of coming of age in Samoa are narrated in the voices of two very young girls, one ten and the other thirteen. Rather than the now largely discredited adolescent sexual freedom in Samoa vaunted by the American anthropologist, Margaret

Mead, the reader discovers strict social taboos around the expression of female sexuality—harsh, unforgiving punishment over generations for pregnancy or sexual relations out of wedlock as well as physical punishments of children for disobeying parental or *aiga* (extended family) rules. Behind the appearances of communal harmony and strict religious moral observance, what is revealed in the insider portraits is male preeminence in a physically violent culture.

Deconstructing both outside and inside myths. Constructing women's myths as counterviolence

Figiel attacks the false exotic representations of her colonial literary predecessors (Melville, Loti, Stevenson), exposing the resulting images of contemporary tourism such as the South Seas maiden that Samoans (like Tahitians or Hawaiians) are themselves continuing to assimilate through the influence of Western media. However, alongside this postcolonial writing back, the young writer from American Samoa also denounces the abuses of post-independence patriarchal structures of power. Where she is from, writes Figiel in her own voice, “sex is quiet ... silent like those fingers crawling accidentally into your panties when you were about 8 or 9... be a nice girl for uncle... our silent, quiet secret” (*To a Young Artist in Contemplation*, 116).

Gorodé, for her part, overwrites European myth with tales from Kanak oral tradition but gives these a feminine and a feminist focus. Her play, *Téâ Kēnaké 2000 ou KNK 2000*, staged in Noumea in 2000, rewrites the story of the origins of the *Paicî* tribal group around an adaptation of the story of Antigone. This puts into question Jean-Marie Tjibaou's play-spectacle, *Kanaké*, an earlier recreation of the myth for the “Melanesia 2000” cultural revival festival in 1975. Whereas Tjibaou created a virile myth for a new Kanak nation, Gorodé's *Téâ Kēnaké 2000* recounts the assassination of the political leader by his “enemy brother” from the perspectives of a female spirit (*Duée*) and the independence leader's anguished lover. It constitutes a “Womanist” writing back to Tjibaou's heroic, masculinist version of the creation story by foregrounding the elements of fratricide and incest in the original version that the Kanak independence leader had omitted in his celebratory revival of the myth of the cannibal savage. For Tjibaou, alienation in the colonial situation resided principally in the fact that “to become a man, you had to deny your own (savage) culture, become a stranger to yourself and to others” (“Etre Kanak” 226). In *Kanaké*, the former Catholic priest daringly compares the *boenando*, the sacred (cannibal) sacrifice that Kanak have dared to practice, with the Eucharist. In *L'Epave*, in stark contrast to Tjibaou's hero, Gorodé presents the powerful and hyper-virile Ancestor, Old Tom, as an incestuous cannibal and an ogre, spiralling through time and space to devour his own women and children. Recalling Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde,

Faust, Don Juan, or the Beast of European tradition, Gorodé's Old Tom is a hybrid metamorphosing figure, identified as universal, yet grounded in Kanak society. Influenced by his polygamous, non-converted grandfather and thus representing a traditional form of male authority, he is explicitly identified in the text as an avatar of the cannibal warrior. His contemporary double (or son) is the tribal orator, emblematic of the power of the maternal uncle, to whom, according to Gorodé, "nothing can be refused" (Personal Interview).

The new generation of younger Māori women writers, too, celebrate their culture by incorporating founding Polynesian myths while simultaneously rewriting these traditional texts in order to denounce incest and patriarchal violence. Trixie Te Arama Menzies' poem "No Smoke without Fire," for example, recounts the drama of a young girl gathering pipis alone along the rocks, who flees when pursued by a "jolly uncle": "he is after her; she is not going to embarrass him/ he is on her, he will prove once and for all who is master The colours go out, she belongs to him now, she is death" (25). The young girl is thereby identified with the beautiful Hine Titama, the victim of Tane Mahuta, the Sky Father's son, who abandons the first woman, Hina-ahu-one, to seduce his own daughter. This Daughter of the Dawn flees in shame to the world of the ancestors where she becomes the Hine-nui-te-Po, Daughter of the Night, most often presented popularly as death in the form of the feared fatal feminine. In the first-generation Māori writer Patricia Grace's *The Sky People*, Hine-nui-te-Po joins a series of figures of matrix-women or wom(b)en presented as expansive feminine power. As well as re-assigning positivity to this feminine space, Grace's re-use of Māori myth to configure origins implicitly refuses allegiance to patriarchal founding stories, including the story of the new Christian religion. Déwé Gorodé, too, in her novella, *Utē Mûrûnû*, critiques the biblical origin story of an Eve bitten by the snake and found guilty of man's fall that, in Church-dominated Kanak society, has led to a puritanical repression of female sexuality.

The critique or re-writing of founding indigenous myths through sexual violence (present also in the novels of Sia Figiel) works to partially displace the male-centered psychological and anthropological stories of European tradition, refusing, for example, any substantial purchase to the Freudian paradigm of the Savage Horde, a myth that situates the origin of "totem and taboo" in the killing of the patriarchal (and polygamous) father by the sons in order to gain access to the father's women. This initial patricide, Freud argued, ended in the establishment of the incest taboo and of the all-powerful sacrificed father become totem. Pacific women writers' texts, on the contrary, write against this sacrificed father as totem and may be seen as closer to Julia Kristeva's reworking of the Oedipal myth which replaces original patricide with matricide and to her theory of abjection. For Kristeva, the flux and disorder of the feminine threaten the solidity, stability, and rationality of the masculine. The attraction and the fear of incestuous fusion and non-differentiation produce what the philosopher calls a confrontation with the feminine that results in abjection (*Pouvoirs*

de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection). This is the movement of expulsion, the sacrifice of substances discharged by the body, identified with the maternal, to protect the self from lack of differentiation. For Kristeva, then, culture is founded on the taboo or rejection of the maternal sexual body. Pacific mythologies can be seen to formulate a similar theoretical contest for gender power in the opposition, for example, between traditional Polynesian concepts such as *noa*, the unrestricted, ordinary power of women (commonly translated as the impurity or the *tapu* state of anything associated with female reproductive functions), and *ra'a* the restricted and sacred power of men. Alongside the partial disavowal of Western feminism sometimes seen as being “anti-men” or as divisive, the reformulations of myth in many Pacific women’s texts focus on reversing the terms of gender power in an indirect re-contest for symbolic power.

Writing a “return” to the feminine or giving central roles to women function as a form of counter-violence that ranges from the implicit to the explicit and offers a variety of approaches and solutions. In Patricia Grace’s novella, *Valley*, a young boy in a rural school in Aotearoa-New Zealand is modelling a cricket in clay when he inexplicably brings his fist down on the carefully fashioned insect. One side of Hiriwa’s face is “heavy with bruising” (206). On the day of the school pet show, his mother, a “scar curving from her temple to her chin” (207), tells the teacher that she and Hiriwa are “going away”—that “there is nothing left for us to do” (216). Grace’s short stories and novels thus touch lightly, allusively on intimate family violence as on the humiliation in women’s daily lives, seeking only to make what the writer calls in the title to her recent collection, *Small Holes in the Silence*. Her short story “The Geranium,” for example, indirectly evokes the menial and unappreciated life of a woman on whom her husband constantly vents his own frustrations, by depicting the pleasure brought into her life by the flowering plant. In Grace’s novel, *Baby No-Eyes* (1998), images of violence and of haunting are predominantly those that derive from the history of cultural domination. The eyes of an unborn baby whose mother had died in a car accident, dropped into the waste basket of a culturally insensitive hospital, exemplify the failure to respect indigenous beliefs, in this case, in relation to the integrity of the body and its afterlife as spirit. Yet, resolution and wholeness can be found in a return of the *whenua* or umbilical cord to the other now feminized *whenua*, the earth (the land) that, in Grace, as in Gorodé, must not be mined or reduced to an exploited materialist object. Michelle Keown observes that this “space/spaze” invoked by Grace resembles Kristeva’s pre-linguistic child-mother dyad or ‘chora’: The concluding sections of the novel, for the literary critic, “re-evaluate the construction of sexual difference by asserting the social and symbolic power of the womb and the female genitalia” (*Language* 154). This is again figured by the womb of the goddess, Hine-Nui-Te-Po and its connection with the space/spaze within the void, *Te Kore* (161). Such a void is no absence, death, but a feminized presence from which vital energy and indeed the narrative spirals out and back.

Gorodé's novella, *Utê Mûrûnû*, too, re-constructs a remarkably similar space out of traditional elements where the powerful voices of the earth, "little mother, womb and tomb" (21) are identified with, and speak uniquely to, women, themselves identified as the "blood of the earth." The feminine, like the earth with which it is identified, is a principle of fecundity as in Grace, and like the Māori writer, Gorodé explicitly refuses a matrix where women as "bearers of seed" are principally instruments of reproduction. However, unlike Grace's understatement, the language of the political activist takes the form of a fierce and didactic traditional "challenge," directly competing, as the rhythms of the final sentence of the following quotation demonstrate, with male oratorical rhetoric:

Bearers of seed, we were bound and gagged by prohibitions, branded with taboos that were like rocks blocking the paths of life [...] Ādi, black pearls of customary marriage, we were exchanged like pieces of Lapita pottery to seal an alliance, in between two wars. Matrimonial pathways linking the clans, we survived as best we could a childhood and an entry into adolescence that was too often violated by the lecherous desires of senior men. Prestige, virility, war—male concepts for the Great House of men, built on the broad backs of women! Sharing, solidarity, humility, the words of women, conceived, nourished, and carried in our entrails of beaten wives. (21)

The nature of challenge and the question of context

To reinforce her "challenge," Déwé Gorodé in "Utê Mûrûnû" re-creates a resistant legendary Princess from the often adventurous Kaavo, the name given to the daughter of the chief in many tales from oral tradition. Figiel's novels, too, evoke the Samoan warrior goddess, Nafuana, drawing on mythical or high-born resistant heroines who give a resistant but also traditional backbone to the focus on the everyday values of women's lives. In *Ao Toa; Earth Warriors*, Cathie Dunsford figures a more contemporary Māori eco-heroine, Cowrie, a version of Xena, the warrior princess (32-36). Ngahua Te Awekotuku, for her part, reconfigures the Māori myth of "Hinengaro," the shape-shifting wolf woman or vampire woman. Another paradoxical form of resistance that these heroines deploy, notwithstanding the need to speak out against the violence of outsider or insider domination by recreating the myths that surround them, is a positive silence. In Gorodé, the "voices" of the earth, those heard by one of her five generations of almost interchangeable Utê Mûrûnû (Little Coconut Flower), for example, are identified with a core of local, transmitted women's values of just such a listening silence, associated with discretion, effacement of self, sharing, and preservation of community. In fact, Gorodé's responses to violence (rhetorical speech and/or silence) remain, as always, disconcertingly double, centered in Kanak heritage and ways of being and yet seeking discourses to counter the excesses of a traditional warrior culture in which masculinity and sexual domination are closely connected. The work of French social scientists Christine Salomon and

Christine Hamelin confirms this; documenting Kanak male socialisation towards sexual aggression, they note that, in times past, certain clubs were given the form of the male sexual organ. In Paicî language, they point out, a man's male organ could be designated as "his war" (34). The researchers' 2003 survey showed that 12.5 % of the Kanak women interviewed had experienced forced first sexual intercourse, without significant variation between generations.

Gorodé's novel has been published in a country in political transition, where 44% of Kanak and 38% of European origin are considering their future together. In the present transitional *sui generis* collectivity, two of the three Provinces created by the Noumea Agreements are controlled by Kanak, many still largely living in *tribus* ("customary lands"), in customary structures, or circulating between Noumea and the *tribu*. As Stephanie Vigier argues, in Gorodé's work, Kanak women suffer not only from the fracture occasioned by the dispossession of their country and their past but from a double fracture. Vigier quotes one of Gorodé's earliest published poems, from 1975, which prefigures the concerns of *L'Epave*: "how to weigh the yolk of the night of time/ to get close to the boundaries of taboo spaces/ to measure the length of habit/ custom/ the tutelage of customs." The writer has herself "touched only fragments of the veil," captured only rumours of "our imprisonment," has merely "caught the scent" of "all the misery of women/ of this land and elsewhere/ of today and tomorrow" (*Sous les Cendres des Conques* 81-82, our translation).

Michelle Keown argues that the oppression of women and indeed children (and homosexuals) cannot be seen as exclusively a result of white hegemony or of repressive indigenous practices but needs to be considered in the frame of the complex dialectical exchanges between varied cultural systems (55). These exchanges may throw into question Western understandings of the family and of the nature of love. However, their character is also determined by the particular value systems and historical and political contexts of the indigenous writer. In Patricia Grace's first novel, *Mutuwhenua, The Moon Sleeps*, for example, the question of gender equality is subordinated to the issue of redressing the imbalance of power between cultures. The Young Māori protagonist, Ripeka, does come to some awareness of female roles in a world where "girls didn't become famous but got into what is known as trouble... or else lay around giving some bloke hot sex" (45), a world where her father had wanted a son. In this context, the gift required of her by her *iwi* or group, the gift to her mother of her first child, born on the day of her father's death, to help her continue on the family land, can be understood as a symbolic returning of life to the mother-earth, or to the *tapu* bedrock. Regardless of her Pakeha (New Zealander of European descent) husband's wishes in the matter, the gift must be made, for there must be a son to maintain the family on their lands and strengthen the threatened Māori rural community. Patricia Grace is speaking here for a now minority culture constituting only 15 percent of the population and struggling to survive

against Western hegemony and rapid assimilation in a predominantly Anglophone and urbanized modern nation. Her challenge is particularly concerned with Māori cultural survival to which women must sacrifice their own interests.

Sia Figiel's critique of the commonplace physical violence at the core of customary and family relations is doubled by young Samoana's self-identifications, her recognition that the parents in her *aiga* were simply attempting to "instill in us their values—what made them tick—in the best way they could so that we could do the same to our children" and that "secretly we loved them terribly [...] And we knew somehow the feeling was mutual" (*Girl in the Moon Circle* 10-11). Those who go to New Zealand to find work or independence in *Where We Once Belonged* suffer most intensely because "I" has replaced "we." Two other young women characters who return to Samoa after studying in New Zealand respectively refuse what is presented as traditional and moral woman's life spent in the service of men. As rebels, however, they no longer have a place in their own Samoan community. Social exclusion and the refusal of the Church-domination of their islands leaves only the option of a return to the world of the ancient gods and ultimately to suicide. Through these insider-outsider characters, the writer is representing the potential self-violence implicit in her own position in-between, both critical outsider and participatory insider in relation to her own culture. Yet, the kind of return advocated by Grace is not presented as a necessary and serious solution for an independent predominantly Polynesian Samoa, still largely a traditional country of small villages attempting to resolve wider issues of globalization and significant diaspora from this rural basis.

Grace and Figiel respond to the challenge to partially open up what Gorodé's poetry has called the hidden images, the secret "un-avowed memories," "un-satiated desires" and "perverted dreams" that have taken refuge in closed, sealed up, places (*Cendres*, 81-82) with relatively conventional sociological novels. Figiel's texts are nuanced and given a certain innocence by the device of speaking in the voices of young Samoan girls; her realistic description of social settings, and continuous, coherent narrative nonetheless cast a relatively direct light on both the often violent community relationships and the power inequalities that both victimize and form her young protagonists. Grace may use spiralling forms and multiple narratives in what is only apparently limpidly clear writing, her texts, too, reflect the strong influence of her predominantly Western education. Indeed, Grace is of Welsh and Māori parentage; Figiel of Samoan and American origin. Both writers are accessible to a general European readership. This receivability is less the case for Gorodé's more curiously mixed first Kanak novel.

L'Epave: writing incestuous violence as sorcery and possession

As her country edges closer to a new “common future” or to independence, the particularity of Kanak identity is affirmed in Gorodé at the same time as it becomes the object of an investigative literary *mise en scène*. The central story among the many intertwined narratives in *L'Epave* is that of young Lena’s journey to awareness of a repressed childhood trauma. The text follows the traces of this experience, firstly as it casts a shadow over Lena’s discovery of love with young Tom and later, as it pushes her back, unbeknownst to herself, into the arms of one of her childhood aggressors, the tribal orator, becoming for a time his sexual slave. When at the end of the novel Lena finally comes to remember the experience of being raped by the orator as a child on the black rock in the tribe’s “canoe cemetery,” like generations of other Helena/Lena before her, as Old Tom watches on, she will take swift and fierce revenge. Gorodé figures this often incestuous sexual violence as possession by the virile figure of the ancestor, Old Tom, who “attaches the bellies” of very young women to him by rape, from generation to generation. Symbolically, this violation of both customary and Western rules takes place on the prow-shaped stone of the resting place of the ancestral canoe. While Old Tom wields the powers of the sorcerer, of metamorphosis and spell, the orator, who is the double (perhaps the son) of this Don Juan figure, emblemizes the social customary power of the Word and of the status of the maternal uncle. If women are symbolically the “blood of the earth,” it is the maternal uncle who controls this, who alone can give the new-born child the “breath of life” of social integration.

Sado-masochistic violence and the consenting (female) body

Such figures of incestuous sexual power work to deconstruct the modern revival of myths of the exotic indigenous Other that Graham Huggan’s study *The Postcolonial Exotic* hypothesizes. For Huggan, this corresponds to a “marketing” of the “margins,” arguably exemplified by films such as *Dances with Wolves*, *The Whale Rider*, and *Avatar*. In *L'Epave*, violence raises questions of heritage and of gender relations in the country’s “common future” but also, as we noted, questions of the female body: of seduction, and of pleasure. Far from the idealised emotion that is a common place of the contemporary Western world, love in Gorodé, as in the medieval texts of *fin amour* or the classical plays of Racine and Corneille, is often disorder and violence, and sexual passion is represented as a form of possession and imprisonment.

Beyond sexual violence, but apparently intimately linked to it, Gorodé’s text thus touches on another traditionally silenced and perhaps even more taboo question of female sexual freedom and pleasure, a pleasure that in many of her protagonists, paradoxically, entails forms of

fatal bondage. When Lena recognizes the orator for what he is, she finally escapes his control and takes patient revenge by allowing him to slip from the cliff to his death in the shark-hole below, repeating the scene of long meditated vengeful resistance to violence of the Utê Mûrûnû given to the victor as the spoils of tribal war in the earlier Gorodé story. On the other hand, Helena (Old Lena), victim of a similar sexual bondage and part of the illicit threesome with Lena and the orator up in the *tribu*, will follow her lover despairingly over the cliff to her death. The novel also explores a sexual relationship between Helena and Eva, the “paradise of women” that gives one chapter its title, as a means of escape from the servitudes of sexual attachment to men and the repressive alliance between custom and church. Eva has escaped from the possession of an earlier relationship with Old Tom that she was refusing to submit to because, the text explains, she felt that sexual passion was a form of alienation very like the power exerted by the sorcerer over his victim. And yet, out of fear of hell-fire, this symbol of women’s refusal and freedom will join one of the religious sects currently thriving in New Caledonia, be seduced and cheated by the pastor, and end up in a psychiatric institution. Likewise, Lila (Delilah), the flower with a powerful scent, a streetwalker and storyteller re-inventing the tales of oral tradition from a modern female perspective both to show their contemporary relevance and to critique their patriarchal content, cannot escape the power of Old Tom who had seduced her in childhood too. The defiant Lila is raped and murdered.

L’Epave counter-balances the ancestral *mana* of Old Tom (the power and prestige that can, the text tells us, be used for good or evil) with the colonialist figure of the powerfully virile New Caledonian patriarch and philandering sea-captain who deposits eggs in the bellies of young girls all around the Pacific, possibly seducing and bringing home his own daughter. This captain is perhaps also a reference to sexualized forms of domination in a colonial society where men greatly outnumbered women. Once again, women in both societies, white settler and indigenous, can be complicitous with this sexual power. Going back generations, Helena’s Kanak grandmother is an ogress and Helena, herself, will assist her lover, the orator, to ensnare her own daughter (young Lena), thus keeping him in fresh meat in their incestuous threesome. White Fleur de Corail (Little Coral Flower) emerges from her father’s colonial plantation to masochistically attach herself to the Captain’s bruising boot.

“A doubleness or sort of ‘both-and’ that opens up more dynamic possibilities...”?

In many other indigenous Pacific novels, as in Keri Hulme’s *bone people*, a novel that deals with Māori violence against a young autistic child, the appearance of the old *wairua* or spirit has a healing influence and the canoe stone or *mauri*, the spirit of the land, possesses an abiding spiritual

force. For Patrick Evans, the ‘numinous’ *mauri* or sacred stone of the canoe of the founding ancestor at the heart of Hulme’s novel is ultimately “something that enables her to replace the bicultural ‘either-or’ with what is, in effect, a sort of ‘both-and’ ... that opens up more dynamic possibilities, a doubleness” (26). In *L’Epave*, however, the appearances of the ancestor or the orator at the canoe cemetery have a violent and negative outcome for women. Although Lena’s great-grandmother has powers as an ogress, and although Eva has the immense power of women and indeed the power of exorcism, it is childhood memories of victimization that, above all, connect the female characters, Maria, Lila, Helena and Lena.

Does Gorodé’s work indeed produce such a doubleness, that is, both the refusal of the violence of what her early poem, “Being,” calls the “single way of thought” (imposed by Western colonisation) and, at the same time, resistance to age-old forces of violence and possession within the Kanak world? Is this a both-and dynamic, or rather, as I have argued elsewhere, something closer to a form of cognitive dissonance suggesting the still on-going nature of Gorodé’s literary working through the implications of her hybrid contexts (2011)? In the first instance, like Sia Figiel’s novels, *L’Epave* can be read as a powerful realistic portrait of the ways in which innocent young girls can be groomed, manipulated, seduced, sexualized and attached by a powerful older male relative, who uses a mixture of fear, force, and adult authority to obtain compliance. Lena’s story of incestuous and illicit relationships and sexual possession, however, is repeated, spiralling through webs of forbidden relationships, forward to future generations and back to a founding myth, re-constructed here by Gorodé as a ship-wreck that results in a young girl being cast away with her grandfather.² The generations of women all connected by kinship ties morph one into the other, recalling the five generations of young women, all named Utê Mûrûnû and often indistinguishable, in Gorodé’s earlier novella. (In Kanak culture, as Gorodé points out, every fourth generation is considered to replace its forebear, and bears the same name or homonym.) Likewise the two male characters, the fishermen (in oral tradition to go fishing is also to go in search of wives), Old Tom and the orator, morph in their shared predilection for young girls, incestuous relations, rape, and male animal magnetism.

Despite the appearance of a return that appears to be a fatalism, the sins or faults of the fathers visited upon the children, and perhaps precisely because of the text’s cognitive dissonance, the “doubleness” or sort of “both-and” (Evans 26) is indeed also present. Many readers have asked which of the novel’s many voices is the voice of Gorodé herself. The text moves from one time or realm to another and continually doubles its frames of reference and of explanation. The European boat-wreck on the beach in Noumea morphs into the black rock of the canoe graveyard in the Kanak village; the *pirogue* of the ancestor becomes the rock shaped like a canoe in the contemporary village. If the uncle/orator who rapes young Lena on the black rock comes from somewhere else and speaks French to

them—identified in this way by the text with the destructive influence of colonization and cultural assimilation—Old Tom takes pains to tell the story of his initiation into games of love, by his traditional polygamous grandfather who had resisted evangelization up there in the *tribu*. From his first appearance as a scarlet dwarf emerging out of the night fire with a putrid smell as Lena watches her grandmother’s astonishing show of absolute submission, Cannibal Tom is a recognizable stereotype of world fiction and a character in Pacific history.

The text itself insists on the materiality (the socio-political implications) of the violence it depicts: “the stories of Prince Charming, of fairies and witches are only make-believe. At best, they end up with a little grandfatherly groping, at the worst, a little fatherly rape. Dads and granddads, they’re the true sorcerers and ogres of the fairy-stories” (130). Nonetheless, the Beast remains the focus of a certain fascination with the wild thing in the self, and as Marina Warner has shown, speaking of Disney’s Beast as of King-Kong, the fascination of the Beast in all his tumescence and male animal magnetism, finds a legitimate correspondence in the power of the female erotic impulse (Warner 315).

The extreme thematic violence in this novel is reinforced and complexified by the discursive violence of multiple and clashing points of view, unstable narrators, constant displacements and very mixed linguistic registers. These include passages of rap-poetry, street language, text messages of love on cactus leaves, poetry, biblical and Coranic references, allusive dialogue, verbal jousting and word play. This is not a nomadic novel—it is firmly centered in Kanak culture—but it is a deterritorializing work in the Deleuzian and Guattarian sense. The play with modes of writing and with genre may well constitute an attempt to open up or to subvert the traditional forms of the French novel.

The heterogeneous interweaving of thematic elements, voices, and levels of narration both stages and conceals Gorodé’s message. Stories of excess, detailed and explicit scenes of prostitution, voyeurism, games of three or four or more in the wrecked hull of the old boat and on the paving-stones of the Church (ironic echoes of Sade), are told in defiance, as the text itself points out, of the codes of both Christian and Customary morality. Games of master/mistress and slave in both white and Kanak society, and in which women are willing participants move the text from the didactic to the ironic to the preposterous, and indeed from a novel on dramatic social issues to a resistant work on the ready-made expressions of the French language. The novel meets and foils the reader’s expectations of indigenous writing and has resulted in major difficulties with would-be publishers of the translation around questions both of its didactic character and its “receivability” (Walker and Ramsay 2010). Each generation, Gorodé has observed, “must resolve the return of the past in its own way” (Personal Interview). In fact, the fatalistic return staged by the last sentence of her novel remains ambiguous. This is the encounter in the grove of the great canoe “where they learn to love on the black stone” between the grandson of the orator, little Tom and Lena’s daughter, little

Lena. Does the cycle simply continue or is this consensual and non-violent natural but traditionally forbidden relationship (because of the complicated systems of kinship) a way forward?

Salomon and Hamelin's work sheds considerable light from a social science perspective on the contexts of changing gender construction in which Gorodé is writing. Their 2002-3 survey on violence in New Caledonia, for example, interviewed 1012 women across the general female population aged 18 to 54, including 441 Kanak women. The responses showed that it was Kanak women who were, by a considerable margin, most likely to suffer violence—34% had experienced physical assault and 17% rape or attempted rape in the year preceding the survey. There was, predictably, a strong statistical link between this violence and access to material, social and symbolic resources. Somewhat unexpectedly, the study also showed that the vast majority of Kanak women but particularly the younger women disapprove of violence and even “go so far as to challenge patriarchal control” (37). For Salomon, this corroborates the increasing emergence of the idea of equality among a group her previous work had shown to be excluded from the sphere of power. The grounds of exclusion were biology and impurity and social role, with women assigned to procreation and the domestic spheres, and subject to discipline by the husband, his mother and the husband's real and classificatory brothers. Yet, Salomon and Hamelin also note that despite increasing convergence of representations by Kanak and European women, only 2% of those Kanak women reporting sexual violence had also gone to the police. The issue of the gap between actual violation and reporting is partly explained, they note, by the interlocking nature of family and other social networks in an island community and especially in rural areas. It is in these contexts that Gorodé's novel responds to both repression and an emerging new space (thinking common destiny and the role of Kanak women within it) to speak the *non-dit* or the unsaid/ the unsayable.

The novel echoes in its own language a major issue revealed by Salomon's study—that rather than violence or the absence of consent, what is in fact unacceptable in Kanak sexual relations is non-compliance with the present complex social rules. In its didactic concern to show the gap that exists between the orator's public words and what goes on behind them, in the hay or under the pastor's very nose as the text puts it sometimes crudely, *L'Epave* is a similar engagement with the complex issue of sexual violence from the inside. However, Old Tom, like the author and her messages, is not always what he seems. The mystery of his appearances and disappearances as ancestor in his canoe, old whino, seducer-fisherman, grandfather, or avatar of the tribal orator, etcetera, creates a strong impression of the powerful material presence of the other side, in the everyday, for better or for worse. He is both the pursuing shark and the protecting ancestor of young Tom's dream in the opening paragraph of the novel. And, paradoxically, socially deviant sexuality appears to offer a form of female sexual liberation difficult to find

elsewhere in Kanak society. There is a further, more personal reading of the obsessive figure of possession. In Gorodé's counter family romance, almost all of the female characters have sons or daughters fathered by Old Tom, and the blood-letting violence of the ogre is also directed, intolerably, against his own children. The novel is as much haunted by the unacceptable death of a young child (by possession?) as by the trauma of childhood incest.

Gorodé's fiction can be seen as a kind of double writing with, and writing back to, Salomon's research findings. On the one hand, her work stages the difficult consequences for her characters of the non-respect of patriarchal social rules that place them outside the community. On the other, critique of the rules of hierarchy and alliance that define possible marital partners and relationships within the clan and involve cheating and hypocrisy is more than implicit. The social scientists make the argument that "the drop in the threshold of tolerated violence now distinguishes all women in New Caledonia from those of other countries in the Pacific region where comparable surveys have been performed, such as Samoa" (Salomon and Hamelin 42). They attribute this difference to the singular nature of the political context in New Caledonia, claiming that this has permitted the emergence of a radical feminist movement, at least initially through young Kanak within the pro-independence movement. The dynamic was later redeployed under arrangements with the French government to reduce economic and social inequalities, resulting in the setting up of powerful women's associations such as Marie-Claude Tjibaou's *SOS Violences Sexuelles* in 1992 which condemned violence against children, and *Femmes et Violences conjugales*, set up in 1998. Indeed Salomon and Hamelin's survey was itself made possible by the support of Déwé Gorodé in government and of these mushrooming women's associations. The French sociologists note the striking increase in women's participation rates in Provincial government from 16.7% to 46.3% in 2004, an effect of the application of the 2002 French parity law (where each political party is required to include equal numbers of men and women on their lists). They conclude that a new concept of the person that is more individualistic and less dominated by the male ethos of clans and alliances is strengthening. In their view, this is largely an outcome of the feminist struggle initiated in the first-world in the seventies.

In the Loyalty Islands, however, as Salomon and Hamelin themselves point out, some women's groups seeking to confront sexual violence are insisting on the responsibility of colonialism and the process of cultural erosion rather than longstanding gender norms, rejecting the universalist codes and conceptions of French law in favour of Kanak values. This indigenous feminism, they argue, has been influenced in turn by the International Indigenous Women's Forum of 1999. The scope of this article has not allowed us to consider the Pacific writing that has taken this path. Chantal Spitz in her French Polynesian novel, *L'Île des rêves écrasés*, idealises a return to the simpler traditional life of the isolated island of Huahine in the face of continuing French colonization. The

equally politically militant anti-colonialist Kay Haumani Trask in Hawaii similarly disavows a feminist approach in her desire not to create division within her nationalist cause.

The varying modes of what can be considered transnational literary counter-violence examined in Gorodé, Grace and Figiel arise from a movement to and fro between particular indigenous societies and postcolonial influences from outside. Writing back to colonial violence, speaking out against patriarchal violence and rewriting traditional myth and women's position in it, constitute forms of refusal but also forms of doubleness that involve greater or lesser need for interaction with (or denunciation of) these colonialist and masculinist frames. The writer's local socio-political contexts in fact produce diversity in this common counter-violence writing.

As Gorodé has pointed out, “the political discourse that I myself used, colonisers—colonised, does not account for the perversity and ambiguity of the real relationship between the colonisers and the colonised in the past and in the present” (2004). This is also true of her relationship with the sexually charged power relations between men and women that produce violence within her own culture. Gorodé's perversity, firstly in her denunciation of this violence, and again in her use of writing sexual violence as a form of exploratory counterviolence, is perhaps not dissimilar to Homi Bhabha's notion of a sly appropriation of knowledge and a remaking of the dominant culture within changing socio-political contexts.

Notes

1. The 1998 Noumea Agreements acknowledged the “shadows” of the colonial era and divided the country into three provinces, two of which are controlled by Kanak. It provided for the progressive transfer of powers to a “Collegial” government that included both Loyalist and Independence parties, and promised a referendum on independence before 2018. The French state now appears to be nudging the country towards some form of greater autonomy. Significantly, from mid-2010 the Kanak flag was officially permitted to fly alongside the French flag. Given present demographic factors and socio-political movement, the independence vote now planned for 2014 may not secure a majority. The different political factions are being encouraged to work together to give form to the principle of a “Common Destiny” elaborated by the Noumea Agreements.

2. In Kanak kinship first cousins are brothers and sisters. A relationship between a male or female parallel or first cousin is regarded as a ‘forbidden’ relationship (i.e. incestuous) rather than as an illicit relationship (Salomon and Hamelin, 44).

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