

*Imagining the Body in Pacific
Francophone Literature*

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‘Aore a ra i māha to‘na riri, rave atura i to‘na tuamo‘o ei panai mou‘a, to‘na ‘ao‘ao ei purou mou‘a, to‘na manava ei pati‘i ata marevareva, to‘na toahua e to‘na ‘i‘o ei pori fenua, to‘na rima e na avae ei faaetaeta no te fenua: to‘na mā‘iu‘u rima e te mā‘iu‘u avae ei apu e ei poa no te i‘a; to‘na huruhuru ei raau, ei nanaihere, e ei raau tafifi, ia ruperupe te fenua; e to‘na a‘au ei ‘oura e ei puhi no te vai e te tai; e abu ‘tura te toto o Ta‘aroa, mareva tura ei ra‘i ‘ute‘ute e ei anuanua.

(But his anger was not yet appeased, so he took his spine for a mountain range, his ribs for mountain slopes, his vitals for broad floating clouds, his flesh for fatness of the earth, his arms and legs for strength of the earth, his fingernails and toenails for fish scales and frames, his feathers for trees, and his intestines for lobsters, shrimps, and eels of the rivers and the seas; and the blood of Ta‘aroa got heated and drifted away to redden the sky and rainbows.)

—TEUIRA HENRY, *Ancient Tahiti*

The body is never naked. It always refers to an image, an individual or collective projection that reflects all of the meaning contained within it, both consciously and subconsciously. Thus, it cannot be fully understood without considering the symbolic, social, and ideological interpretations of the body and of corporality imparted by human societies. Both a subject and an object, the body constitutes the axis around which the relationship between reality and the representation of self in reality is examined. The body’s place in the cosmos, the way its parts are named, the rituals attached to it, its artistic representations, as well as its mythological and literary representations make up the fields of study that account for the

way human beings settle into their social and cultural space. Thus, for many societies of Oceania, the body is not essentially separate from the rest of the living world. Rather, all are molded from the same living matter and create a continuum. According to sociologist David Le Breton (2010), the delimitation of the physical body as distinct from the man it “belongs” to is derived from individualistic Western societies where a dualistic framework places the body in opposition to the spirit and as distinct from the being who inhabits it. Indeed, the process of individuation as it developed during the twentieth century withdrew each individual from his community by promoting individualistic social structure, from the cosmos with the emergence of a rational and secular conception of nature, and from himself as he now *had* a body instead of *being* one.

The relationship of body and mind appears quite differently in traditional societies, particularly in Kanak and Polynesian societies where the body, in the collective imagination, is akin to a particle of the cosmos. This traditional notion of a collective being persists in numerous Oceanic myths that consider the body as an integral part of a world whose contours, in turn, resemble the form of the body. How should these myths be interpreted? If, as Jung says, mythology, like the head of Orpheus, continues to sing even after its death and even from a distance, it seems appropriate in the context of a study on the Oceanic notion of the body to begin by considering the major primordial images in order to understand the original role of the body in the Oceanic “structures of the imagination” (Durand 1992) and what gives it its unique status. Moreover, the vision of the body as a particle of the cosmos appears as curiously akin to the very recent discoveries of modern cosmology, representing the body as stardust and showing how humanity shares the same history as the cosmos, plants, and animals and that we are all connected through time and space and thus interdependent.

In the following discussion, I inquire whether the vision proposed by the well-known archaic myths finds a way into modern francophone Polynesian and Kanak indigenous literature that puts the body at the heart of the literary process. Because the literary narrative is, as Jean-Yves Tadié put it, “the transformation of mythology that has ceased to act in broad daylight” (*la transformation d’une mythologie qui a cessé d’agir en plein jour*) (1994, 149), I focus on the place and representations of the body in Polynesian and Kanak texts that demonstrate a will to revive the former link to the body, as it appears in the fundamental myths. The corollary question concerns the links between these representations of the body

and a form of “counter-discursive strategy” as first developed by Richard Terdiman in *Discourse/Counter-Discourse*, in which he explained that “a counter-discourse is counter-discourse because it supposes the hegemony of its other” (1985, 185). In the first section of this article, I address the imagery of the body as manifested in the myths of origin, in language, and in indigenous literature to understand how Tahitians and Kanak view themselves in the cosmos, in history, and in contemporary society. Next, I focus on the body as a consolidated entity and as able, in this respect, to enter into the political arena. In colonial days, the continuum between body and cosmos was ruptured. For example, one important aspect of the body, namely the voice, was silenced. Finally, I discuss how recent literature is attempting to reclaim the body and in the process give a voice to indigenous people and their history, culture, and values.

ORIGINAL CONSUBSTANTIALITY

In many myths and legends of Polynesia and New Caledonia, the representation of the body is intrinsically linked to the representation of the cosmos. In the cosmological narratives of French Polynesia as represented in the notable compilation by Teuira Henry, the body occupies a privileged place as the original and absolute measure of existence since the world itself is built from a body. In these narratives, we find that before the creation of the world, Ta‘aroa, the Polynesian creator god, turns in the infinite space of the original night: *te pō*. He moves around in a shell, Rumia, the primordial egg that reenacts the everlasting question of origin, begging the question of the existence of a bird that might have hatched this original egg: “The shell was like an egg revolving in endless space with no sky, no land, no sea, no moon, no sun, no stars” (Henry 1928, 338). In ancient Hawaiian legends also we find the notion that the universe could have arisen from an egg laid by a huge bird. Such myths force us to envision a time before Ta‘aroa, a life predating the birth of God. However, another possible assumption is that the creator god himself is a bird. This hypothesis is upheld by the ambiguity of the Tahitian word *huruhuru*, meaning both “feathers” and “hair.” The text entry *A ueue te huruhuru a Ta‘aroa* could then be interpreted as “shakes his hair” or as “shakes his feathers.” The latter interpretation clearly supports the notion of God as a bird. Furthermore, we know of the importance of feathers for Polynesians and the aura of sacredness that they bestowed on the greatest *ari‘i* (chiefs). The feathers were so closely linked to a primal sacredness that Polyne-

sian people imagined that the first gods were covered with red and yellow feathers (Henry 1928, 338). It is therefore quite probable that the image of the creator God had a birdlike appearance, even if it is not possible for us to determine which came first, the chicken or the egg! As Ta'aroa leaves his shell, he realizes he is alone, as his body no longer fuses with the shell in which he has turned since the dawn of time. He calls out but only hears the resonance of his own voice. *Ta'aroa* means “great knowledge” but also “complete separation.” He has neither father nor mother; he is alone, “separated” from the living material with which he was one. As a result, he then creates the cosmos from his body to repair this great separation.

In the excerpt presented at the beginning of this article, Ta'aroa literally dismembers himself in order to create the various constituent parts of the cosmos. Each of his components, every part of his body (except for his head) is used to build up an element of the universe: the backbone builds mountains, the fingernails and feet form the scales and frames of marine animals, feathers give rise to plants, the major organs become the sky and clouds, etc. Not only does this creation myth show the consubstantiality of the body and the universe—both body and cosmos are made of the same organic material and woven into the same living matrix—but one should also note the primacy of the body, its precedence, which makes it appear as the master, the original referent, and the founder. It is the body that provides the depth of the universe and determines its physicalness. Another myth recounts the construction of the first “house of God” from the “empty carcass of Ta'aroa” (*te pa'a tino o Ta'aroa*), which takes the form of an empty canoe: *te ivi tuamo'o ra, o te tabuhu ia; o to'na 'ao'ao, o te ta'ota'o ia no te fare atua, o to'na ivi ouma ra, o te raupo'i ia e to'na ivi papa, o te unuunu ia no te fare atua* (the backbone was the ridgepole, the ribs were the supporters of the god's house, the breast-bone was the capping of the roof, and the thigh-bones became the caved ornaments around the god's house) (Henry 1928, 426).

Only the head, the text states, will be kept intact. Thus, the head is recognized as both an integral part of the body and an entity with special status. As for the sex of God, it is surprising that no mention is made of it when one considers the important role of sexuality in Pacific societies. However, it should be recalled that Teuira Henry was the granddaughter of the Reverend John M Orsmond (the first compiler of these texts) and that attention to modesty and religious edification guided both father and granddaughter in their choice of documents. “After all, Reverend Orsmond saw in the mists of oral tradition and heathenish deformity a fin-

ger pointing to an age more refined and better informed and enlightened by the lamp of divine revelation” (Henry 1928, 1). In other stories, the breadfruit tree springs from a man; the body is the trunk, his extremities are branches, and his head is fruit (the legend of Rua Ta‘ata; see figure 1). The coconut tree, in the same way, springs from the head of the man: the shell is the skull, the stuffing his hair, and the two small holes, his eyes.



FIGURE 1. *La Légende du Uru*, by Gerard Guyot. Woodcut, 2001. Reproduced with artist's permission.

In a slightly different way for Kanak, man comes from a tree, a fruit, a stone. His flesh and the components of the plant and mineral kingdoms are made from the same material. However, it was the plant and mineral worlds that existed in the first place, prior to the existence of the body: “It was not the Melanesian who discovered the tree, rather the tree was revealed to him, as it is the source of all knowledge,” wrote Maurice Leenhardt (1971, 67). One comes across this same notion of body and cosmos convergence in the myth that tells of the birth of man from a tooth of the Moon:

The elders say that the earth, rolled in a spiral, touched the moon and that the earth stone on the mountain was nearly dry before the division of countries on the mountain of Tyaumyê. When the sea had been nearly reduced to dry rock, the moon withdrew a tooth from his mouth and placed it on the earth stone. The tooth remained there for many days, until rotting and worms set in. The worms fell to the earth and changed into lizards; those who fell in the water changed into eels and the smallest of the lizards had a human face. (Guiart 1963, 146; see also Pwerabi 2014)

Of these primordial beings was born Téâ Kanaké, “the first named,” who starts learning how to live in a society: he trades the first yams, he builds the first hut, he defines the sacred places, and he utters the first words. It is not insignificant that the first lesson for Téâ Kanaké concerns community life. Leenhardt emphasized that man in traditional Kanak society defines himself through his relationships with others. He is intimately bound to his fellow human beings, the other members of Kanak society, with whom he forms an undivided entity, calling into question the boundaries of the physical individual body (Leenhardt 1971, 248). The tribal organization corresponds to this representation of the body as an intertwined entity. The group outweighs the individual, who is not valued in and of himself but rather as part of the whole. The person is thus “dif-fused in the group” (Leenhardt 1971, 248). Finally, at the last stage of his learning, deep in the web of a banyan tree, Téâ Kanaké proceeds to enter the world of the spirits and the dead: “To learn everything about the life of man, Tea Kanaké decides to experience death, he enters the banyan tree that is the body of spirits. Along the roots that lead to the underground world, he visits the land of the dead and, in this womb, he undergoes a transformation” (Leenhardt 1971, 77; Pwerabi 2014).

The banyan is at once the matrix (the “womb”), the “body” of the mind, and the connection place where one is linked with the spirit world

and the dead. The separation between the living and the dead does not appear in traditional Kanak culture, and cases of people who are declared dead but then regain their place among the living are taken for granted. Plant life and the human body are so intertwined that, according to legend, each Melanesian, like Téâ Kanaké, knows which trunk of the forest his grandfather is descended from. Unlike the Western individual, the Oceanic person lives in a world where all things are interconnected; he is a being in a chain.

Above all, the myth of Mother Earth dominates representations of the relationship between man and nature. The land for Kanak is like that of Polynesians—the original, sacred place—and one should not be surprised by a statement like this from Jean-Marie Tjibaou: “We are not men from somewhere else. We are men made out of this earth” (quoted in Bensa and Wittersheim 1996, 104; see also Tjibaou and Missotte 1976). Admittedly, the symbol of Mother Earth is not uniquely Oceanian. However, it is one of the most dynamic concepts in this region of the world and reveals what Bruno Saura called “the metaphysical attachment of Pacific Islanders to the earth” (*l’attachement métaphysique des Océaniens à la terre*) (2003, 10). The primacy of the Great Mother archetype must be viewed in relation to its philosophical reference to the *materia prima*: the Great Mother who gives birth to all life forms, the waters preceding all creation, and the earth producing life forms. The waters, then, are the mother of the world, while the earth is the mother of living things in the collective imagination, as described by philosopher Gilbert Durand (1992, 252–253). Durand also pointed out the “isomorphism” of earth symbols corresponding with those of the mother (1992, 224; Porcher 2013), revealing in modern literature what the Tahitian author Chantal Spitz called “an irrational and unreasonable love for the land” (*un amour irraisonné, irraisonnable pour la terre*) (1991, 100). Likewise, for Kanak, the earth is the supreme source of the living world, the link of a perpetual exchange between the living and the dead, between the visible and invisible: “It is improperly called Kanak religion . . . appearing as an Oceanic version of vitalism. There is neither transcendence nor immanence in it, just an unbroken chain, complex and perpetually renewed, where beings and all things are unique, albeit part of the same reality, the same movement of Being” (Godin 2000, 47, quoted in Darnault 2008, 50).

Kanak mythology refers to certain inedible round fruits hanging from the trees as the descendants of the first ethnicity. Moreover, genealogy is understood as a continuity of roots in a poem in which the roots are

“recited” (Gorodé 1985, 79). Within this symbolic constellation, the placenta plays an important role in Pacific Islands imagery. It is seen as a parcel of land within the body that feeds the child in the womb and, when buried after the child’s birth, returns to the earth. This vision has been the subject of a major study by Saura on the placenta (2003), which states that, symmetrically, Polynesian islands possess a navel of sorts, represented by a mountain, a stone, a rock, or even a cluster of trees, often located at the center of the island.

This superimposition of body and nature can also be found in the lexical corpus for “the body.” Jacques Vernaudeau and Jacqueline de la Fontinelle have said that the body (*tino* in Tahitian) can refer to both a person as an individual entity and a skeleton or a frame, for example, the body of a car, the beams of a house, or the hull of a ship (2011). The term therefore refers very clearly to the outer frame while also being a synecdoche for the whole person. As for New Caledonia, Leenhardt, who focused on the region and the Houaïlou Ajië language, demonstrated that the terms used to describe the different parts of the body also refer to elements of the mineral and plant worlds (1971). The body, which is called *karo*, is present in many elements of nature: *karo boe* (the body of the night, that is to say, the Milky Way, or the backbone of the sky); *karo gi* (the body of the ax, or its handle); *karo kamo* (the body of the man, or the person). Leenhardt specified that the main body parts are grouped into three components: *kara* (the enveloping surface, or the skin), which also means bark, or flesh and muscle; *pië*, which means lymph nodes, the flesh or the seed of fruit, or parts of the body; and finally, the skeleton, *ju*, which can also mean heart of wood and coral rubble. The similarity of shapes and materials is basic to a set of correspondences between the elements of the body and those of nature: the shape of the lungs is reminiscent of the Kanak totem tree, and the intestines are similar to interlacing vines of the forest. Consequently, they have the same name. In the same vein, Vernaudeau and de la Fontinelle stated that the same type of analogical process occurs in both Tahitian and Ajië. In both languages, “kidney” is identified by the same term for the fruit called *mape*; “menstruation” by the term for “mud,” *vari*; and the placenta, *pufenua*, is the same as “seed” or “earth” (2011).

The “anthropological structures of the imagination” (*structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire*) (Durand 1992) as manifested in the myths and in language as shown here lead us to a first conclusion: the body in pre-European Oceania is first and foremost a cohesive entity. The same

symbolic materiality links mankind and the cosmos. The overlap between the elements of the cosmos and human body parts, rooted in the collective unconscious about the concept of materiality and a common origin, is built on an isomorphism of the elements and the different parts of the body. It seems that nature antecedes the body in Kanak imagery, whereas for Polynesians, the body would precede nature. The body can also be seen as cohesive because it seeks cooperation after its creation: the body and its “peers” clump together, in a sense, to form one unit, that of a tribe or of any human community that thrives in group cohesion. However, I think it important not to consider, as Leenhardt did for the Kanak, that this linguistic particularity comes from a deficient representation by Pacific Islanders who supposedly ignore depth and perceive things only in two dimensions, without putting any distance between people and things. Leenhardt insisted that the connection between the plant and the body cannot be interpreted through an anthropomorphic lens or as metaphor. On the contrary, I think that catachresis and metaphor must be posited. After all, we speak of the “trunk” of a person without having to interpret this shift as an aporia or logical disjunction of language or representation. I therefore agree with Vernaudo and de la Fontinelle (2011), who said that the ancient Polynesians knew a kidney was not a *mape* fruit and vice versa, but they were confident in a continuum between nature and humans. What is apparent for us, therefore, is that the body for Pacific Islanders, from its inception, makes up the world to which it belongs. As such, it is viewed as a way to *connect* nature, humankind, and the spiritual world rather than as a limit or boundary. It is a symbol of solidarity within a collective entity as well as within the cosmos.

COLLECTIVE BODY, POLITICAL BODY

If the body in the Pacific carries with it a sense of community, one is not surprised to see it connected with an ideological and political role in today’s francophone Polynesian and Kanak indigenous literature. The body bears the scars of history and bears witness in its very flesh to a collective history: it is what Michel Foucault called “a surface of traces of events” (*une surface d’inscription des événements*) (1994, 143).

Before beginning the discussion of the texts, it is worth describing the emergence of literature in francophone territories in order to understand the conditions under which these authors started to write. In the last three decades of the twentieth century, a cultural renewal emerged in

New Caledonia as well as in French Polynesia. Traditional culture, native languages, and ancestral rituals were revived, and movements of protest against the effects of colonization took place. In the wake of these movements appeared the first literary texts written by indigenous authors who focused on the question of identity and of colonization. In New Caledonia, poet Déwé Gorodé, who is today the minister of culture, wrote her first poetic collection, *Sous les cendres des conques* (Under the Ashes of Conches) in 1985. She let her anticolonialistic views erupt in an activist poetry fed with the Marxist ideas she discovered when studying in France, where she was close to protest movements that arose after May 1968. The conch is the big shell used by Kanak to call the clan for a gathering. The “ashes of conches” symbolize the loss of Kanak unity as a result of the reservation system due to colonization. Gorodé chose to write in French in order to have her voice heard, as there are twenty-eight vernacular languages in New Caledonia and the inhabitants of one valley often do not understand those of the next one. She then produced a less-militant volume of eighteen poems in collaboration with Nicolas Kurtovitch, later published in a bilingual edition as *Dire le Vrai/To Tell the Truth* (2000), and short stories like “L’Epave” (The Wreck, in Gorodé 2005), in which she denounced violence against women.

In Tahiti, Henri Hiro wrote the earliest texts in Reo Mā’ohi promoting and defending his country’s culture and language. In *Pehepehe i ta’u nuna’a* (Poems for My People), his lyrical voice underlines the beauty of Mā’ohi identity and traditions (Hiro 1985). He advised Mā’ohi people to write, whatever their language is, to save their culture. Following his advice, twenty years on, Chantal Spitz published the first novel written by a native Tahitian writer, titled *L’Île des rêves écrasés* (1991), published in English in 2007 as *Island of Shattered Dreams*. The book denounces the ravages of colonization through the description of a family living an idyllic traditional life on their island and who have to cope with war and, twenty years later, have to leave their island as it is used by the French for nuclear testing. Spitz’s book *Hombo* (2012) describes the life of a drifter (*hombo* comes from “hobo”) who cannot find his way between his lost traditions and colonial modernity. Spitz defines herself as francophone, but not francophile (2002). In 2011, Spitz wrote *Elles*, in which she let various feminine voices build up a partly autobiographical narrative.

Inspired by a different ideological movement, Flora Devatine defends Mā’ohi culture and language as well as the free use and play of all lan-

guages. As a poet and a member of the Tahitian Academy, she writes in Tahitian and in French. Her original hybrid poetic voice mixes the oratorical art of the Mā'ohi tradition and personal lyricism. She first wrote *Humeurs* (Moods) in 1980 under the pseudonym Vaitiare and subsequently published *Tergiversations et rêveries de l'écriture orale* (Waverings and Daydreams of Oral Writing) under her own name in 1998. The latter poetry collection, presented under the acronym TERE0 (*te reo* means "the speech/voice" in Tahitian), strives to represent a mode of writing that echoes oral expression patterns. It reveals a poetry that weaves together various languages (Tahitian, French, and even Spanish, as the author used to be a Spanish teacher) to create a resolutely modern third linguistic space, marked by hybridity and turned toward the future.

In these books, which can be considered as the first books of modern autochthonous literature, the myth of Mother Earth is widely exploited to introduce images of ecological mutilation. In *L'Île des rêves écrasés*, Spitz inextricably fused vegetal and fetal metaphors, transforming them into isotopes of the same element. Her characters, who, according to tradition, bury the placenta of newborns, feel a connection to the land as if it were an "immortal rooting from the belly" (Spitz 1991, 95). One of her characters, the very young father Maevarua, "opens the belly of the nourishing earth" to lay the placenta of his child, and then he plants a tree there, which will in turn feed his son. The attachment to the land is thereby "engraved in the belly" of men who are "made of Ma'ohi earth" (Spitz 1991, 95). However, this land is defiled by the "machinery of men from elsewhere" preparing to conduct the first nuclear test. The continuum is so strong that one of the characters develops the taste of blood in his mouth, "the taste of the blood and the violated soul of his people" (Spitz 1991, 98), deceived by the "President General," who without asking for anybody's opinion decided to install a test base on the island of Ruahine. As Julia Frengs stated in her dissertation "Writing Oceanic Bodies," Spitz's novel *Island of Shattered Dreams* "repeatedly utilizes the language of rape as a metaphor for the damage done to her land and the spirits of her people" (2013, 124). The issue of political domination is also framed as a breach of this continuum. When they go to war, the sons of Polynesia no longer feel any contact with the ground because they are wearing shoes. Somewhat dramatically, each mother slips some dirt into her son's luggage in order to "force the hand of fate to restore her child back" (*forcer le destin à lui rendre son petit*) (Spitz 1991, 43). The strength of the earth moves up from the feet, reaching the stomach and the bowels (though not

the heart, as it is not the center of emotions—the intestines are). In Spitz's novel *Elles* (2011), the stories are told by women who appear as the womb of the country. The fathers are there to ensure the genealogical line, but women are the ones who make history.

This analogy finds a striking illustration in the work of Kanak poet Gorodé. The metaphor of an umbilical cord connecting all Kanak peoples to the great Kanaké land is woven through her entire corpus of poetry and comes in a variety of modalities. In her poetry, Gorodé refers to the land of Kanaké as “the beginning.” This land is the founding space, the original location of Kanak identity. It is likened to an “all-encompassing plant uterus” (*vaste utérus végétal*) whose intimate warmth stems from that of “tiny fragmented placentas” (*de minuscules placentas cloisonnés*) (Gorodé 1985, 56). It is the nurturing mother, the original source, that envelops all substances and circulates its nourishing matter. The Kanak land, the “rebel mother of the Pacific” (*la mère rebelle du Pacifique*), is also a “mourning” mother bereaved (*endeuillée*) by violent clashes and by the nickel mining that defaces the “island with the green nickel belly” (*l'île au ventre vert de nickel*) (Gorodé 1985, 98). According to Durand (1992, 263), the patriotic (matriotic, if we dare to say so!) feeling conveyed here is but a subjective intuition of matriarchal and terrestrial isomorphism. The struggle for land is a fight for the mother. Some of Gorodé's poems show the Earth Mother opposing another female entity, an allegorical figure with “intercontinental tentacles” (*tentacules intercontinentales*) called “Madame Multinationale” for whom “the jade-coloured nickel of a Pacific island / is just another plaything” (*le nickel couleur de jade d'une île océanienne / n'est qu'un joujou de plus*) and who “does not understand a bit of the earth's language,” as “she only loves King Dollar” (Gorodé 1985, 63; in English in the text).

If one agrees to consider with Robert Nicole that francophone writing is “an expression of the body of counterdiscourses that resist, reject, and rewrite the dominant western discourse of the other” (1999, 266), what deserves notice is the recurrence of a topic that participates actively in the counter-discourse strategy: it is the question of muteness that looms in many works of modern anglophone and francophone Pacific literature. It is portrayed as a physical trace left by colonization in the body of Islanders and as the first form of submission exerted by the missionaries on the people. The body became atrophied, mutilated by history, not only in the course of the battles for power whereby some people got killed or injured but more insidiously, if less visibly, in a place that is particularly significant

for cultures of oral tradition: the throat, which can no longer produce sounds or emit words to express one's identity or one's suffering.

In Tahiti, the Pomare Code was imposed on the population in 1819 by King Pomare II under the influence of the missionaries who wanted him to reign over Tahiti so that they could expand their religion and their power under his protection. The Pomare Code imposed a ban on nudity, obliging the population to wear clothes covering the whole body. It imposed a ban on dance, which was considered indecent and as showing prurient, lascivious intents; on tattoos as crude markers of identity; and on flower costumes, as they could divert the people from the austerity of faith. These were external signs of identity and they happened to be the first ones to be restored during the cultural renewal movements of the 1970s. Still today, the wearing of flowers, tattoos, and *pareo* are the first visible signs of cultural, if not political, positioning, especially the *pareo* worn by men when not on the beach or at home in Tahiti.

But more profound is the atrophy of the throat. Modern autochthonous literature focuses on the question of silence, of mutism as a consequence of colonization. The silence is always a collective one, even when it affects isolated individuals. Moetai Brotherson's novel *Le Roi absent* (The Missing King), published in 2007, presents the misfortune of Moanam, a young man overcome by adversity. Struck with a muteness that is not physiological but that has handicapped him since birth, the narrator character carries, unknowingly engraved in his body, the history of a family curse that is the whole history of all Pacific peoples. In the beginning, U'utameini and his sister, Nukutauna, were both *tahu'a* (religious specialists), spreading the word of their people. However, because Nukutauna discovers "signs" one day and betrays the spoken word, she is cursed by the assembly of *tahu'a* and sentenced to silence, a sanction to be transmitted through generations by each mute girl who comes after her (Brotherson 2007, 129). Daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters of Nukutauna and all of their descendants were cursed, down to Moanam, the last branch in this genealogy. The young man bears the scars of his family curse, which takes root in the larger story of colonization, of the discovery of writing and the subsequent loss of the sovereign and sacred spoken word. Silence, even that of a single individual, bears witness to the collective history of Polynesians, of contacts with outsiders who brought the "signs" and of the ensuing acculturation. Brotherson gives to understand that silence struck the peoples of Oceania, who were forbidden to speak their own language and who lost their oral tradi-

tion. The prohibition of their native language and their muteness are not merely symbolic; this is a living, somatic imprint, the fresh track of a past that resurfaces in the present and abolishes it. The history of the peoples of Oceania is itself overshadowed by a larger story as the narrator discovers that before the story of his great-great-grandmother Nukutauna, a North American Indian princess named Nuttaun was outcast by her brother because she supported writing. As a result, she was cursed and lost the ability to speak. Thus, Nukutauna may also be seen as a reincarnation of the Indian princess. In this we find a perception of the body as a link in a historical chain, a trans-generational, trans-ethnic transmission from a living past. Because it transcends the “present,” unwittingly carrying vestiges of the past, the body can be viewed as rooted in a genealogical scheme, which Foucault notably referred to as “the articulation of the body and history” (1994, 143). From this point of view, Brotherson’s novel is the novel of a genealogy, a cornerstone that harkens back to the primordial mystery.

In her novel *Mutismes* (2003), Titaua Peu denounced all forms of “muting” that paralyze modern Polynesian society, especially among the poorest social classes, because they do not know words that would give them legitimacy or a place or status in society. She considers that this aporia is the main reason for the riots that took place in Tahiti in 1995: the poorest are marginalized by alcohol abuse as well as violence, which are conduits for trivialized self-expression. Another avatar of colonization, as denounced by Peu as well as Spitz, is colonial literature and its intrinsic “exoticism.” The dangers of “orientalism” as shown by Edward Saïd (1978) are replicated in books that disseminate misleading ideas about Tahiti. Such literature was written by Westerners and for the sake of Westerners, who have “all spoken of the Polynesian better than himself” and who have thus deprived Polynesians, for a second time, of their own discourse (Spitz 2006, 88):

Non je n’aime pas «Le Mariage de Loti».
Non je n’aime pas Pierre Loti.
Non je n’aime pas le roman la littérature exotiques liés au mythe
Vivant par le mythe
Se nourrissant du mythe
Enfantant du mythe
Non.
Définitivement je n’aime pas le mythe
Ce mythe qui m’entrave
Ce mythe qui mutile mon peuple

*Ce mythe qui flétrit les Chinois.
 Définitivement je n'aime pas cette littérature exotique qui roman après
 roman siècle après siècle
 Redit réécrit ressasse les mêmes inepties les mêmes caricatures
 les mêmes mépris.*

(No, I do not like “The Marriage of Loti.”
 No, I do not like Pierre Loti.
 No, I do not like the novel, exotic literature related to myth
 Living from myth
 Fed by myth
 Feeding myth
 No.
 I definitely do not like myth
 The myth that chains me up
 The myth that mutilates my people
 The myth that reviles Chinese.
 I definitely do not like this exotic literature that novel after
 novel century after century
 Repeats rewrites rehashes the same nonsense, caricatures,
 and contempt.)

Spitz here targets one of the jewels of “exotic” literature, *The Marriage of Loti* (an autobiographical novel published by Pierre Loti in 1880), which scored a great success and helped spawn a number of clichés and untruths regarding the “Polynesian soul.” This literary work has, in this sense, divested from Polynesians the ability to speak for themselves. The story proper is deliberately biased, as it describes colonial settlement from the perspective of the Europeans and not that of the colonized populations. For Spitz (2006, 88), it therefore falls on Polynesian authors to tell:

*Une histoire
 Nôtre
 Autre que la vérité historique académique estampillée référencée labélisée
 Dite depuis plus de 150 ans par une litanie de brillants spécialistes
 formés aux universités de la république.*

(A story
 Ours
 Other than academic historical truth stamp-approved referenced labeled
 Recounted for over 150 years by a succession of brilliant academics
 trained by the Republic.)

To accept the words of outsiders to describe history from their angle is similar to a “good brainwashing” (*lavage de cerveau à l’endroit*) (Spitz 1991, 162). From this perspective, Spitz’s *Island of Shattered Dreams* can be considered as what Andreas Pfersmann called a “novel of counter-history,” as it tends to narrate history from within and as perceived by insiders. Pfersmann defined this specific genre as “epic novels that evoke the destiny of a people or of a minority whose objective is subversive with regard to a dominant writing tradition.” What defines these works is their focus on a collectivity’s destiny as “historically determined and reduced, or even ignored by the mainstream, established historiographical approach” (Pfersmann 2011, 431). In Spitz’s novel, Tetiare, the young woman who emerges as a double of the author, is encouraged by her brother who wishes her to write their history, as seen by themselves (1991, 162). She musters up the courage to write, thanks to her mentor who told her (Spitz 2006, 157):

*écris nous
écris notre peuple
écris notre pays
c’est déjà tard
on s’en fout de la langue
tu dois écrire
écris*

(write about us
write about our people
about our country
it’s already late
we don’t care a nut about language
you must write
write)

In a *mise en abyme* (nested set of reproductions), Tetiare ventures to write the book that would become *Island of Shattered Dreams* and assumes the task of writing the history of her country and of her people to give them back their dignity.

For Déwé Gorodé, silence is doubly lethal for Kanak women experiencing harsh laws of tribal tradition in respect to their gender, on top of those framed by the colonial regime. Women are sentenced to confinement by a “deadly silence” (1985, 81), insofar as the tribe respects the power of

men and of tradition. Gorodé's words for "Kanak women" make up a statement "stolen from ancestral taboos" (*une parole rafflée aux tabous ancestraux*). In her poetry, the names for Kanak women reflect the theme of enclosure, and their deadly silence stigmatizes all the misery of the women's condition, which, within the tribe, condemns them to mute suffering. But moving toward Western models of modernity often means the disintegration of the family and the complete alienation of Kanak women, who become lost from their very contact with "white" civilization, experiencing prostitution, alcoholism, and subservience to the power of money. As the poet tries to unearth the "unspoken secret memories" (*les souvenirs secrets inavoués*) buried in the hearts of these women, she manages only to "feel" (*palper*), "capture" (*capter*), or "perceive" (*sentir*) evanescent materials like "dust" (*la poussière*), "rumors" (*les rumeurs*), and "breeze" (*la brise*). This poem concludes on a note of defeat, with a bleak outlook on both the present and the future (Gorodé 1985, 82):

*et même si je vivais très longtemps
même dans toutes les langues de la terre
je ne saurais jamais ni le dire ni l'écrire
car je n'en saurais jamais assez.*

(and even if I lived a long time
even in all the languages of the earth
I would never know how to say it or how to write it
because never would I know enough.)

BODY AND RESONANCE

To overcome this silence, a number of Pacific authors have attempted to revive a form of oral storytelling in their literature that repositions the body at the very center of the literary discourse and reinstates the voice in written storytelling. In doing so, they have implemented a counter-strategy to fight the deleterious effects of colonization using the weapons of the colonizers: written words. Thus, from the bodies emerges a voice transcending the ages. This is particularly evident in the main character of *L'Île des rêves écrasés* (Spitz 1991, 19):

Monte alors la voix de Tematua. Voix de la Terre éternelle. Voix des Pères immortels. Venue du fond de la nuit qui a traversé l'espace du temps des hommes.

(Then rises Tematua's voice. Voice of the eternal Earth. Voice of the immortal Fathers. From the depths of the night, through the space and time of men.)

Tematua's body becomes instrumental for the materialization of this timeless voice, a voice that represents a common thread between the past and present. The voice no longer belongs to the young man; it is no longer that of a single person; it transcends the present and the individual. In *Hombo* (Spitz 2012), words from the past take the shape of versified chants. They are reminiscent of the *paripari*, sung by the "memory dancers" and going well beyond individual identity and family history. They spring from the same land and make for the community's sense of attachment to a land and to a story.

Authors may "invent tradition," to use the words of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983). Orature is integrated into the texts in such a way that we could say that traditions are reinvented: there is no will to represent chants exactly as they were (tradition is partly lost anyway). Rather, the point is to keep up the pulse of orality, to make it live through a "hybrid" form. These authors seem to work in what Homi Bhabha called the "liminal space, in-between the designations of identity," the "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" that "opens the possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy (2004, 5).

In Flora Devatine's 1998 book, the oral narrative originates from the body of the speaker, literally. The book becomes a printed experience where the cadence of the sentence, the sonority, and the stylistic effects literally shake the body of the reader. As David Punday showed in *Narrative Bodies*, "narrative, then, always first and foremost depends upon corporeal hermeneutics—a theory of how the text can be meaningfully articulated through the body" (2003, 15). We are also reminded of the silent voice evoked by Pascal Quignard and of the strange shuttle that runs from the body of the reader to the book, "weaving an invisible web, setting in motion some dark oscillation and, provoking a strange metamorphosis, rises to a hallucination that is physically experienced" (*La navette*] tisse un réseau invisible, elle met en branle une libération obscure et, provoquant une étrange métamorphose, elle donne l'essor à une hallucination qui est éprouvée comme physique) (1990, 141–142). The author reenacts the "movement of a motionless body" (*une locomotion du corps immobile*) caused by the book and its "ghost voice" (*voix fantôme*) that marks the body and leaves a subtle imprint inside it (Quignard 1990,

142). In this respect, writers such as Devatine use their writing to solve the contradiction between oral and written words. Her poetic approach is an attempted reconquest of orality—ancestral, performative, sacred—as well as an exercise at “taming the writing” with which she is not familiar. Also, she wrote, one must resort to writing (Devatine 1998, 37):

*Qui permet de retrouver
Du souffle
De ses profondeurs antiques
A insuffler*

*A l'actuel discours
Qui ne résonne ni ne sonne,*

Devenu silencieux, englouti, anéanti!

(Which allows to extract
Breath
From its ancient depths
To instill

In the current discourse
Which does not resonate nor ring,

Falling silent, engulfed, voided!)

Devatine then assigns to writing the reconquest of “resonance.” To avert the “silence” of the current discourse, which merely has a referential function and remains a deprived speech, the poet attempts to make her writing vibrate, giving it a pulsation in invoking the body as a sounding board—a body whose first act is to give a heartbeat to writing. She brings her poetic texts to life, giving them breath and creating a space of inspiration and expiration. She thus uses the oratory “body” and the *‘orero* (oratorical art) of the past to create, as it were, a life-support of her writing (Devatine 1998, 73):

*Et j'écris
Recherchant et retenant
Le souffle
Le mot-clé de l'inspiration
Initiant sur l'inspir*

*S'exprimant sur l'expir
Par l'écriture
Qui respire
Ce que j'expire
Ce que j'aspire*

(And so I write
Seeking and holding
The breath
The keyword of inspiration
Starting with inspire
Giving voice to expire
Through writing
That respire
What I expire
What I inspire)

The syllepsis effect here rests on the polysemy of the word “inspiration,” which denotes both the experience of respiration and the sense of creative process. Writing, for Devatine, is like breathing, and poetry is therefore viscerally connected to the body, for which breath is vital. The play on the word “inspiration” is not only a verbal game. Moreover, the work on the text, the couching of the words on the sheet, can be likened to a tattoo ritual, punctuated by the rhythm and sound of the Tahitian language (Devatine 1998, 74):

*D'autres ta'iri
D'autres ta'ira'a!*

*Et à lire des signes nouveaux,
Gravant, tatouant, enregistrant,*

*Un pehe 'api
Ua hu'ihu'i te manava!*

(For some *ta'iri*
For others *ta'ira'a!*

To read the new signs,
Carving, tattooing, recording,

A new poem
The soul palpitated!)

The theme of the chant revealed by the different names of traditional chants, the sounds and rhythm of the Tahitian language, are incorporated in the verses to convey the desire to revive the ancestral word. This perspective tends to overcome antagonisms between orature and writing and may constitute a strategy against what Nicole has called “technological colonialism” (1999, 272), the process of marginalization of orature as a lack of something or a deficiency compared to written material. Devatine’s oraliture shows that her choice is to reconcile rather than oppose. The concept of oraliture was coined by Ernst Mirville (1974; see also Dumas 1984). It refers to any form of scripted oral narrative and finds an echo among authors who are bent on a “reinvention” of the ancestral word. The interest of this type of “counter-discursive strategy” is that it gives orature a modern framework, using the colonial model in order to distort it. The characteristic of this production is that it employs the writing format to give orature a new voice. In Spitz’s texts, any mutation must be interpreted as a political act, as she departs from all the normative rules she learned at school. In her essays and in her later texts, she tends to omit capital letters at the beginning of her sentences, and she does away with commas and periods, leading sometimes to syntactical ambiguities. She also forms neologisms and transforms intransitive verbs into transitive verbs and vice versa, allowing her to liberate herself through the creative process. Not only has the French language lost its original features to become a “deterritorialized” French (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 16), but it has also become the support for a higher form of literary authenticity, which is orality.

What strikes attention then in these texts is the consistency of the poetic voice. Brotherson’s novel shows, at regular intervals, the same scene: a woman sitting cross-legged staring at the narrator. She has huge eyes and speaks to him without uttering any word (Brotherson 2007, 95):

Faute de parole, il me reste les signes. Je suis Nukutauna. Le treizième tambour s’est tu avec moi. Tu ignores qui je suis vraiment et qui tu es toi, Moanam, alors laisse les signes te guider et nous nous retrouverons.

(For lack of speech, I have signs left. I am Nukutauna. The thirteenth drum has fallen silent with me. You do not know who I am really or who you are, Moanam, so let the signs guide you and we will find each other.)

Then she gives him the “signs,” saying, “read and understand.” Thus, the recital invariably opens with the same phrase (Brotherson 2007, 95):

Ce matin ma mère me tend des feuilles, un encrier et une plume. Mon tour est venu. Je connais bien les signes maintenant et comme pour elle, les oiseaux du large sont mes yeux au-delà de moi.

(This morning my mother handed me sheets of paper, an inkwell and a quill. My turn has come. I know the signs now and as is the case with her, the birds offshore are my eyes to the beyond.)

The continuous return to that prophetic and elliptical voice produces an incantatory effect. The use of italics in the original signals a framework of enunciation emphasizing the text’s high degree of poeticity; and its obscure nature and metaphors mark out this recitation as a reinstatement of ritual speech. What can be grasped from the elaborate poeticity of these texts is a desire to give writing the sacredness of oral tradition. The return to the chant demonstrates a desire to reconnect with oral traditions and to reconcile writing with the body through the voice. The orality is reclaimed in the hope of recreating the world: speech is given a prophetic and incantatory twist in its determination to return to a form of sacredness. In “reinventing the past,” this oral style of writing “incants” the present and, in a sense, consecrates speech—not because it is meant for gods, but because it is delivered in a mythical form and staged as a ritual.

In conclusion, the strong imprint of mythological patterns in Oceanic imagery as it is manifested in francophone Pacific literature shows that the imagery of the body appears as an essential key to understanding how Polynesians and Kanak view themselves in the cosmos, in human society, and in history. The Oceanic person is originally fundamentally connected to the rest of the world and can be perceived only as a root, a link, or a branch in a long unbroken chain. This conception about the role played by the body and the place of humankind in the world is amazingly modern, considering either the latest concerns about ecology or the last discoveries in cosmology: people come from the same matrix as the cosmos and much of their preoccupation stems from the fact that they have ignored or denied it so far. Pacific history has shown that any and all changes to this continuum, most notably those induced by colonial history, also manifest themselves bodily through mutilation and degradation. Because it is a link in a chain that goes beyond the individual, the Oceanic body can be seen as an epic narrative: it tells the misfortune of a people and becomes part of a larger, collective picture. Thus, by putting the spoken word at the heart

of their poetic inspiration, many indigenous poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are attempting to reclaim the body and give a voice to indigenous people, their history, their culture, and their values. They invoke it in order for it to find a central place in the modern world, where it tends to lose the “resonance” associated with orature. In this way, a new connection is established between the materiality of small black marks inscribed on a page and that of Mother Earth.

* * *

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Abstract

This article deals with the central position of the body in Polynesian and Kanak imaginary, ancestral myths, and language. In the collective imagination, the body is akin to a particle of the cosmos. The author probes into major primordial images in order to understand the peculiar role of the body in the Oceanic “anthropological structures of the imaginary” (Gilbert Durand’s term) and asks whether the vision proposed by archaic myths finds its way into modern autochthonous Polynesian and Kanak indigenous literature, especially in the writings of Déwé Gorodé, Chantal Spitz, Flora Devatine, and Moetai Brotherson. Indeed, in keeping with the theories of Michel Foucault, the Oceanic body as it appears in modern poetic or novelistic narrations bears witness in its maimed flesh to a collective history and bears the scars of colonialism. Through its transhistorical dimension as well, this brand of francophone literature constitutes an original way to introduce some sort of counter-discourse into narrative strategies shaped by Western colonial history. In reclaiming the body, these writers are also reviving an ancestral voice.

KEYWORDS: Oceanic myths, Oceanic literature, francophone Pacific, the body