

Selected Poems of

Déwé Gorodé

SHARING AS CUSTOM PROVIDES



TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY

Raylene Ramsay & Deborah Walker

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PANDANUS BOOKS

Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies
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Introduction

by Peter Brown

NEW CALEDONIA is a French territory¹ in the southwest Pacific, part of the Melanesian archipelago,² over a thousand kilometres east of Australia and 20,000 kilometres from Europe. It is made up of the Mainland (*Grande Terre*), whose principal city, Noumea, is also the Territory's capital, and its 'natural extensions' in the shape of neighbouring islands, most notable among them the Loyalty group of Lifou, Maré, Ouvéa and the tiny Tiga.³

Today, New Caledonia is characterised by considerable ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity. French is the official language, but 28 Melanesian or Kanak⁴ languages are also spoken, as well as Wallisian by a substantial minority of the population. The island's finely balanced demography⁵ has given rise to social and political tension over the years, but has more recently provided the basis for the projection of a future 'multi-cultural' state.⁶ Nearly 90 per cent of New Caledonia's some 200,000 inhabitants live on the *Grande Terre*, with the advancing urbanisation of recent years resulting in the growth of greater Noumea to the point where it is now home to nearly two-thirds of the Territory's population.

Historical background

Austronesian migrations from South-East Asia first populated the island, establishing what has come to be called the Lapita⁷ culture, some 3,000 years before it became known to Europeans when Captain James Cook sailed there in 1774.⁸ After Cook's voyage, French navigators, in particular d'Entrecasteaux (1792) and Dumont d'Urville (1827, 1840) further explored the islands of New Caledonia; whalers, sandalwood traders and beachcombers

followed. English and French missionaries were active from 1840, facilitating European settlement, although the Catholic Marist missions set up on the northeast coast of the Mainland met with hostility, and the Balade mission had to be temporarily abandoned in 1847. Annexed by France in 1853, New Caledonia became a penal colony in the second half of the 19th century, receiving more than 20,000 convicts (*transportés*) banished from metropolitan France between 1864 and 1897. More than 4,000 political prisoners (*déportés*) were also exiled there after the crushing of the Paris Commune in 1871.⁹ Under colonial rule, the indigenous Kanaks (Melanesians), whose culture is based on their relationship to the land, were resettled on reserves, often far removed from their original homes. A poll tax was levied on them and they were forced to work as indentured labourers. Against this background, several politically significant and violent uprisings took place, particularly in 1878 and 1917.¹⁰

Following the dramatic changes that took place in New Caledonia during the Second World War, when the island became an important American military base, the French Fourth Republic repealed the *régime de l'Indigénat* in 1946; the Kanaks became French citizens, while the colony of New Caledonia evolved into a *Territoire d'Outre-Mer*. Following the constitutional reforms proposed by the *loi-cadre* (Defferre framework law) of 1956, the Territory received a certain degree of autonomy, but in the 1958 referendum in France's overseas possessions, 98 per cent of voters in New Caledonia voted against independence. By about 1960, demographic change had resulted in a redistribution of the relative size of the various ethnic communities, with the indigenous Kanaks becoming a minority for the first time. In 1963 Paris abrogated the *loi-cadre* and resumed central control of New Caledonia's affairs. The demographic change was then accentuated by French government policy, which encouraged an influx of migrants to the Territory, particularly during the mining 'boom' of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when world demand for nickel was great.

New Caledonia is one of the world's leading nickel producers, with sales of the ore accounting for about 90 per cent of its export revenue.

The 1970s saw the beginnings of the independence movement, as campaigns were launched for the redistribution of land. These campaigns were led by a new generation of Kanaks, some of whom had been students in Paris in the 1960s and had seen at first hand the political force of social movements. In this context, successive governments in France proposed a variety of plans for the future of the island, ranging from a continuation of the status quo to the possibility of independence. In 1975, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the ex-priest-turned-social activist on the way to becoming leader of the independence movement, organised the cultural festival *Melanesia 2000*. This was held on the outskirts of Noumea near the site of the Cultural Centre that now bears Tjibaou's name. It was here that, through this festival, the question of 'Kanak identity' came into the public arena for the first time.¹¹

The following decade witnessed sharpening divisions among the communities of New Caledonia, often leading to violent confrontation, calls for independence with the establishment in 1984 of the FLNKS (*Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste*) and, at the international level, tension between France and regional powers. These strife-ridden years, known euphemistically as '*les événements*'¹² (1984–88), came to a head in April 1988 when 27 gendarmes (four of whom were later killed) were taken hostage by Kanak militants on the Loyalty island of Ouvéa. 19 of the militants and three soldiers died when the French army laid siege to their hiding place in a cave shortly before the French presidential elections that year.¹³

Clearly, a political compromise was urgently required. This was achieved with the signing, in June 1988, of the Matignon Accords, which were negotiated by the French Prime Minister Michel Rocard and the leaders of the two main communities in the Territory: Jean-Marie Tjibaou (pro-independence FLNKS)

and Jacques Lafleur (anti-independence RPCR: *Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République*).¹⁴ The Matignon Accords restored social peace by establishing a constitutional framework within which the Territory's future could be debated. They also divided New Caledonia into three Provinces (the Kanak-controlled North and Loyalty Islands, and the European South) in a stated attempt at social and political '*rééquilibrage*' (rebalancing). Furthermore, they created the *Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak* (ADCK) as part of their promotion of Kanak cultural heritage. Since 1998, the ADCK has been housed in the *Centre Culturel Tjibaou*, constructed as the last of the *grands travaux* (major works) of the presidency of François Mitterrand.

Despite the assassination of Jean-Marie Tjibaou in 1989 and the fear of further civil unrest and violence, the Matignon Accords held good. With French development money flooding into the Territory, an uneasy peace prevailed in a makeshift present, enabling some social and cultural redefinition as the difficult past and uncertain future were, in effect, placed in parentheses. New Caledonia had given itself 10 years before a referendum on its constitutional future was scheduled to take place in 1998. In the event, the referendum held on 8 November of that year was not about independence as such; rather, it ratified the Noumea Accord, which had been signed on 5 May, the day after the inauguration of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre. This Accord provides for an irreversible process of devolution of certain state powers over the following 15 years (notably in education, employment and immigration), increases recognition of indigenous culture and promotes a greater integration of the Territory into its regional context. It also anticipates a further referendum on independence, as early as 2013 if the New Caledonian *Congrès* so decides, and by 2018 at the latest.¹⁵ The Accord document is preceded by an important preamble in which the French state recognises the 'shadows' cast by colonisation and its impact on Kanak culture. Accordingly, an undertaking is given in the document to promote the latter, for example through the development of Kanak language and cultural awareness programs in schools.

The place of literature

This whole process, including its tensions, is being accompanied, and has to some extent been anticipated, by a flourishing of literary activity. A new generation of local writers, responding to the social unrest of the 1980s and the repositioning that followed, have been longing more for the future than any kind of romanticised past. By the 1990s the New Caledonian literary scene included authors from the island's diverse communities. Kanak authors, notably Déwé Gorodé, Wanir Welepane and Pierre Gope, were promoting indigenous culture and identity but also engaging in critical examination of custom and contemporary social issues, while authors of European settler descent were bringing perspectives different both to those of metropolitan French writers interested in the exotic and to those of expatriate Caledonians of the previous generation (Jean Mariotti, Alin Laubreaux) — Louis-José Barbançon, Nicolas Kurtovitch, Frédéric Ohlen and Catherine Régent, for example, have opened up enquiry into subjects of concern that had hitherto been taboo or 'unspoken' (*non-dit*), such as the expropriation of Kanak lands and the convict past of many Caldoche families. Voices from other ethnic backgrounds have also been making themselves heard — for example, Arlette Peirano (Franco-Reunionnaise), Liliane Saint-Omer (Indonesian descent) and Jean Van Mai (Vietnamese) — and metropolitan-born writers, such as Claudine Jacques, Laurence Leroux, Anne Bihan, Catherine Laurent and others have been making their life in New Caledonia and attempting to come to terms with their new situation through their writing. In all cases, the local is seen not as the provincial or exotic, but as an opportunity to explore a highly specific form of universal experience through an evolving means of expression.

This output of the past quarter-century, particularly that of the home-grown writers, at first took the form mainly of poetry, followed by short stories and, more recently, novels and plays. These works emerged as attempts by the various communities to express and assess the implications of political

conflict and social polarisation, and to find their place in the new dispensation following the Matignon Accords of 1988 and, a decade later, the Noumea Accord.¹⁶ If the Matignon Accords returned civil order to New Caledonia, a society that had been on the brink of civil war for several years, the Noumea Accord explicitly called for the creation of a new society that would provide a ‘common destiny’ for its diverse populations, and in so doing posed the great challenge of forming a nation out of the embryo of a state.

In this context, the search for identity, or possible identities, being undertaken by many in this multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic society presents an interesting social development, of which the considerable increase in the production of local works of imaginative literature over the past 20 years is clearly a reflection. Although still largely unknown,¹⁷ it could be said that this writing is, to some extent, taking place in the image of the island itself, given the fact that its authors increasingly represent New Caledonia’s ethnic and cultural diversity, in some cases through the innovation of joint authorship,¹⁸ even if, for obvious historical reasons, Kanak writing has been the exception rather than the rule.¹⁹

The exception, however, can be telling, as in the case of Déwé Gorodé, an original and forceful voice in contemporary Pacific writing, whose work we are delighted to be presenting here in English. Déwé Gorodé needs no introduction to many, at least to many in the region, due to her political role as vice-president of the New Caledonian Government. However, her literary output is not as well known as it should be outside New Caledonia, despite the fact that she has published a number of works in various genres over the past 20 years.

Déwé Gorodé and the resurgence of Kanak cultural consciousness

Born in 1949 at Ponérihouen (Pwârâiriwâ), on the central east coast of New Caledonia in the Paicî linguistic region,²⁰ Déwé

Gorodé²¹ grew up in a family that was both marked by the Protestant faith and imbued with the oral literary heritage of her people. Both her paternal grandfather, Philippe Gorodé, and her maternal grandfather, Elaïcha Nâbai, were trained as pastors by the French Protestant missionary and ethnologist, Maurice Leenhardt, in his mission Do Neva, near Houaïlou on the central east coast of New Caledonia, in the Ajië linguistic region. Early on, she was exposed to Kanak cultural and literary traditions, her father being something of a master in verbal jousting, at the same time as she heard Perrault's French fairy tales retold by her siblings in Paicî.²²

Gorodé's early education was in the local Melanesian community school on the reserve, or customary lands as they have come to be called. This was followed by several years in the French-language system in late primary school at Houaïlou, when her father was managing a property nearby in the central mountain range, the *Chaîne Centrale*, for a wealthy Noumean businessman. Her high school years were spent in Noumea, at the *Lycée La Pérouse*, where she successfully undertook her baccalaureate and matriculated to university in 1969. She subsequently went to the Paul Valéry University in Montpellier, completing a bachelor's degree (*Licence-ès-lettres*) in French literature in 1973.

Upon returning to New Caledonia, Gorodé took up a teaching position in a Catholic school at Saint-Louis, outside Noumea. Like many of her generation, particularly those who had experienced the climate of social agitation in France in the late 1960s and early 1970s, she became politically active in the incipient cause of independence. After joining the *Foulards rouges* (Red scarves) movement, set up a few years earlier by Nidoïsh Naisseline, a *grand chef* from the Loyalty island of Maré, in 1974 she formed, along with Elie Poigoune, the *Groupe 1878*, in memory of the Kanak revolt of that year under chief Ataï.

Gorodé's growing militancy soon got her into trouble with the law, and in 1974 she was arrested for disturbing the peace

during a sit-in in the law courts in Noumea and sentenced to several months in prison. After a couple of months, she was briefly let out on parole on compassionate grounds, as she had a seven-month-old baby daughter. Neither prison nor her domestic duties, however, stopped her from pursuing her social activism. In 1976, she was one of the founders of the political party PALIKA (*Parti de Libération Kanak*), which evolved out of the *Groupe 1878*, and she has remained a leading member of this party ever since.²³ In July 1977, Gorodé was again interned in the *Camp-Est* prison in Noumea for a short period, having been sentenced for inciting violence and armed revolt through the publication of a tract written in the wake of the death of a young Kanak protestor.

In 1975, Gorodé attended the founding conference of the Nuclear Free Pacific movement — now known as Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP). She became involved with the network of non-aligned countries, leading to conferences in the Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico and Algeria.

In the 1980s, during the years of *les événements*, Gorodé continued her political work in PALIKA, one aspect of which was her involvement in the setting up of the *Ecoles Populaires Kanak* (EPK), a network of schools designed as an alternative to the French education system to teach Kanak children about their own culture and in their own Kanak language(s). In 1984, following the formation of the Kanak independence front, the *Front de Libération Nationale Kanak Socialiste* (FLNKS), she became a representative for external relations and so made many trips to address international forums, including visiting United Nations' committees (New Caledonia was put on the UN decolonisation list in 1986²⁴) and women's groups. In 1985, she published her first volume of poetry, *Sous les cendres des conqués* (*Under the Ashes of the Conch Shells*).

In the 1990s, Gorodé worked for a time for the ADCK on cultural heritage projects, notably collecting and transcribing Melanesian tales and legends, particularly for use in schools. She then resumed her career as a teacher, both of French and Paicî,

her mother tongue, in high schools on the east coast. During these years she published two volumes of short stories, *Utê Mûrûnû* (1994) and *L'Agenda* (1996), and two books of poetry, *Par les temps qui courent* (1996) and *Dire le vrai* (1999), the latter written jointly with Nicolas Kurtovitch when they were together on a lecture tour of Australian universities in 1997. Also in 1997, she published *Pierre noire* (*Black Stone*), a French translation of verse by the ni-Vanuatuan social activist and author, Grace Mera Molisa. In 2000, her play, *Téâ Kênâké 2000*, was premiered at the 8th Pacific Arts Festival, held in Noumea.

At the same time, Gorodé remained very active in grass-roots politics for PALIKA. Following the ratification of the Noumea Accord in 1998, she formally entered politics at the territorial level in May 1999, as an elected representative to the New Caledonian *Congrès*, where she assumed the portfolio of Culture, Sport and Youth Affairs. In April 2001, she was appointed vice-president of the New Caledonian Government. Following the provincial and territorial New Caledonian elections of May 2004, she was reappointed vice-president, this time of the government of Marie-Noëlle Thémereau, and was again given responsibility for Culture. In this capacity, she organised the New Caledonian delegation to the 9th Pacific Arts Festival, held in Palau in July 2004. Her portfolio now includes Women's Affairs and Citizenship, in place of Sport and Youth Affairs.

Déwé Gorodé has thus continued to conduct a dual career, cultural and political, throughout her adult life. In essence, these two activities are twin aspects of the one drive. Indeed, her writing, like her career as a teacher, is an act of cultural politics. Her double heritage, Paicî and French, is reflected in her texts, which reject exoticism and facile dichotomies in favour of a critical evaluation of and creative engagement with culture, an approach that often entails the transgression of certain boundaries. Her work consequently demands considerable effort on the part of the reader, at least —

but not only — the Western reader, as it presents the Kanak world and to some degree ‘kanakises’ the French language.

There is a strong tradition of expression at the forefront of intercultural exchange on both her paternal and maternal sides. Her grandfather, Philippe Gorodé, was an informant for Maurice Leenhardt, just as her father, Waia Gorodé, subsequently was for the anthropologist Jean Guiart. In fact, Waia Gorodé was much more than a mere informant, penning two works of his own, *Mon Ecole du Silence* and *Souvenirs d'un Neo-Calédonien ami de Maurice Leenhardt*.²⁵ On Déwé Gorodé’s maternal side, too, there was a tradition of writing. Her grandfather, the pastor Elaïcha Nâbaï, composed *Discours de pilou* and left an autobiography and notes on the 1917 rebellion. As Bernard Gasser says in his postface to the French edition of Gorodé’s second collection of short stories, *L’Agenda*, ‘there is, therefore, in Déwé Gorodé’s ancestry, a rather long tradition of writing, that is to say, to varying degrees, a profound ferment of social debate and criticism’.²⁶

Gorodé’s own writing gives contemporary relevance — not without criticism where she deems it necessary — to the values of traditional culture, in order to work on rewriting Kanak history. Her desire to influence the course of events in this way can at first seem strange to the outsider, who may tend to adopt an essentialist Western view of indigenous peoples as having a ‘natural’ culture, unchanging in time — a view that is a heritage of European Enlightenment’s supposed discovery of ‘natural’ or ‘primitive’ Man in the exploration of the Pacific by the navigators of the second half of the 18th century.

This European vision can take a benevolent form, as in Rousseau’s ‘noble savage’, typically associated with what came to be known as Polynesia, or a fearful and hostile form, as in the idea of the ‘ignoble savage’, more typically associated with Melanesia, whose peoples found themselves, like the Australian Aborigines, at the bottom of the Western hierarchy of racial taxonomies. The lines of such classificatory zeal came to be

drawn more rigidly as the 19th century continued and Christians went farther afield to do their work of subjugating the 'dark forces'. Either way, an essential nature was posited for indigenous peoples, who were judged to be outside of history, to exist in some Golden Age, a kind of 'Garden of Eden', or be frozen in the 'deep time' posited by thinkers of the 19th century.²⁷ Indeed, was this not the very notion of prehistory, defined as being the situation of peoples without writing? Against this long and persistent tradition, Gorodé writes as an agent of change with a mission to show that a consciousness of history has always been at the heart of Kanak culture. As Jean-Marie Tjibaou said a related context, 'Our past lies ahead of us.'²⁸

Sharing as Custom Provides

Cultural politics can be seen as a consistent impulse throughout Gorodés work, including that presented in the current volume. *Sharing as Custom Provides* presents poems that have been selected by the translators, Raylene Ramsay and Deborah Walker, from four different sources, both published and unpublished. The first section is from *Under the Ashes of the Conch Shells* (*Sous les cendres des conques*), a collection that appeared in 1985 at the height of the period of civil unrest in New Caledonia. The second section, 'Signs of the Times', contains poems selected from a small volume of maxims and observations published in 1996 as *Par les temps qui courent*. The third section, 'Speaking Truth', includes poems that formed part of a bilingual collection, *Dire le vrai/To Tell the Truth*, published in 1999, with English translation by Raylene Ramsay and fellow Auckland University academic Brian McKay. *Dire le vrai* was an interesting initiative that began with the lecture tour Gorodé and fellow New Caledonian writer Nicolas Kurtovitch made of several Australian universities in July 1997. During their fortnight's stay in the country, they set themselves the task of writing a poem a day each, and the volume that appeared two years later was the fruit of this collaborative effort. Finally, under the title 'The Best of All Worlds', we are pleased to be

publishing a number of Gorodé's most recent poems, none of which have appeared in print before.

'Under the Ashes of the Conch Shells'

The first section, 'Under the Ashes of the Conch Shells', presents diverse expressions of the experience of exile. The poems were composed in different locations over a number of years: while Gorodé was abroad at university in Montpellier (1970–73), when she was back home in New Caledonia (1974–85) and during periods she spent in prison due to her political activism (1974, 1977). Beyond the expression of individual experience, however, this is an account of the alienation of a people and a culture. Yet, despite their often sombre tone, reflecting tragic themes, the poems are not pessimistic; rather, self-confidence, a sense of belonging, a faith in the future and a strong presence of mind are their hallmarks.

While much of the writing is stridently political, as it takes up the Kanak pro-independence cause, the poet shows that she is also capable of great sensuality and a keen sensitivity to language. At every turn, Gorodé demonstrates her grounding in culture, as well as her commitment to her people's struggle for dignity and independence. She is acutely concerned, however, to avoid facile rhetoric, and to unmask oppression and hypocrisy wherever she finds them, including in her own culture and among her people's supposed leaders.

Gorodé is wary of sham, misguided idealisations, which are the converse of, but also the complements to the colonial denial of indigenous peoples' identities and rights. In 'Millenia', she enjoins the women of New Caledonia to find their place and reclaim their bodies and their history themselves, and not leave it up to Westerners, however well-intentioned they may be: 'no to the ethnologist/no to the sociologist/.../no to the missionary/'civiliser' 'pacifier'/no to the petit-bourgeois idealist'.

The device of an apparent romanticism undercut by a radical shift — the poet's turning of her gaze to brutal social reality — is also at work in this poem. The opening two stanzas of

'Kanak Reserves' are an articulation of indigenous rhythms of daily life — in the fields, cultivating crops ('working the *igname*') and gathering materials for the construction of habitation ('posts straw mud for building the hut'). There are ritual-like celebrations of the major events of life — birth (coleus branches) and death (cordyline) — as well as references to kinship and social relations (the customary exchange of gifts, the *Adi*), and the gendered symbolism of the natural world in marriage: pines (male) and coconut palms (female). Contrasting with this traditional picture is the devastation of the following stanzas, mimicking the eruption and disruption of colonialism with its attendant evils: alcoholism as a generalised phenomenon ('alcohol-soaked weekends or weekdays') causing further violence and social degradation, including sexual aggression ('Saturday night parties, hoolies that end with girls on the block/cruising around in the car to pick up some more/then go home and beat up the misses').

The facts of Kanak life as Déwé Gorodé presents them raise pointed questions about 'tradition' and 'custom', particularly as the tribal elders can appear at times to be grouped together with the French officials — all making fine speeches. Moreover, the poem suggests that there has been little evolution since colonial days in this regard, the 'district governor' and 'other touring excellenc[ies]' still indifferently lumped together. The institutional role of the Church as an instrumental participant in, or at least passive witness to oppression is also criticised ('morning mass with or without your grace').

The poem alludes to historical divisions between settlers and the indigenous population over the contentious issue of livestock grazing on Kanak lands, which transformed, in particular, the west coast of New Caledonia, and was one of the causes of the Kanak insurrection of 1878. The significance of this division is aggravated here by the fact that the expression 'on the other side', used by Déwé Gorodé, a Kanak from the east coast, would normally mean on the other side of the central mountain range. But this physical division between east and

west coast becomes a social and ethnic divide between settler and Kanak, and acquires added poignancy through the fact that it is from the other side of a barbed wire fence 'enclosing the tribes' that Kanaks see what is happening. This is a historical reference to the policy of containment of Kanaks on reserves under the *régime de l'Indigénat* introduced in 1887.

This historical reminder is no mere archaeology of the past. Written at a time of grave tensions between pro-independence and anti-independence forces, the poem clearly states that the situation described exists in the present, with more sophisticated methods used to marginalise the indigenous population: women, old people, casual labourers and the 'unemployed youth of my country' are all placed under the responsibility of the administration, cynically and collectively labelled as a 'French cop', and again said to have the implicit support of the Council of Elders.

Gorodé tells us that violence can take many forms. In 'Day After Day', its forms range from the weapons of the military ('the gunpowder of violence') to those that are more insidious and corrupting in the longer term: for example, alcohol, whose victims become agents of their own demise ('the poison bottle'), money and mercantile values ('the bread smelling of small change'), and the corruption of indigenous manners ('the customary gesture by the false brother betrayed'). 'Questions' evokes the plight of women caught between their role as nurturers, with young babies at breast, and their occasional need to escape from their own partners ('terrified flight into the darkness'), even through suicide. This is made worse by male hypocrisy — for example, when, on the day after a drunken and often violent binge, the male leaders, now sober, talk glibly of freedom and of the oppression that they suffer at the hands of Europeans ('as if nothing were amiss/ /at the meeting tomorrow, in front of everyone/he will speak of oppression, of freedom').

Against this background, an effort of reconstruction is required, not just vis-à-vis the colonial powers, but, as we read in

'Day After Day', with regards to her own people, in order to 'recreate the ritual phrase that unmasks treachery/reinvent the magical dance that ensures victory'. The opening poem of the series, 'Adieu 1970', is illuminating in this regard. On the one hand, it describes a scene of decay and desolation: 'Straw and vines of the roof are rotting/mud walls cracked and crumbling/*grande case* in ruins' (a particularly grave situation, the *grande case* being a symbol of Kanak culture). Yet the poet does not feel resignation before this evident state of decline, even if cultural revival might seem almost impossible to achieve ('Close call, almost too late'). The poem is rather a call to action, an effort to ensure that there are 'eyes opening to see/It's time to return/start over'.

The title of Gorodé's first collection, *Under the Ashes of the Conch Shells*, a line taken from 'Dawn Serenade' ('an elegy to drink/beneath the dying eyelid/the last teardrop of water run dry/under the ashes of the conch shells'), captures this situation in a wonderful, condensed image. The conch shells were formerly used to call together the clan for a meeting in the communal meeting-house. The ashes remaining from the fires that burned during the night are a sign of togetherness, a physical reminder that the 'immaterial' culture of oral tradition does not pass without trace. In the context of the poem, however, it is the conch shells themselves that are reduced to ashes, suggesting that the means of calling the clan together have been destroyed. The voice of the conch has been silenced, symbolising the dispersion of the clans themselves and the loss of their culture. To counter this state of affairs, poetry has a political function; the poet breathes new life into the conch, as her voice seeks to become a rallying cry for the renewed unity of a people.

Thus, the lucid description of past decline by no means prevents an expression of optimism about the future. The life cycle will continue, despite all the 'Sobbing Cries'. Indeed, while in the poem of this name tears are shed at the planting of the coleus, it is these very tears that will allow the plant, a

symbol of the newborn child, to grow. Hope shines through in a perfectly natural cycle of renewal, an instance of Gorodé's conceptualisation of the world, in which the cultural is the symbolic order integrally connected to social organisation, kinship and the natural world.

If, on the one hand, Déwé Gorodé can take a very scrutinising and critical look at 'tradition', on the other she shows her acute Kanak consciousness of the sociability of custom, whereby the experience of being together heightens the sense of loss occasioned by the passing of time. The poem 'Dawn Serenade' may be elegaic, yet it is devoid of any spirit of abandonment; rather, it is a powerful expression of the need to speak up against the trivial in culture, the trivialisation of culture, 'the overused cliché/the seditious light of the forbidden verb'. It warns against the long night of censure that can end in the false dawn of mere rhetoric ('the bitter dew of the word broken'), when discourse flourishes without conviction.

In this context, even literature can be misleading, through its very capacity to beguile us and entice us down dead-end or artificial paths, as in 'Rebel Sun': 'the literary trivia/ cock-and-bull bigotry/mindless mouthing/utter rubbish'. To counter this danger, Gorodé sets herself the task of speaking for her people, of giving voice to 'the repressed words of generations down-trodden humiliated beaten/in the icy silence of colonial tombs'. As she says in 'Day after Day', she is attempting to 'reform the slaughtered images of our dashed hopes'. In this sort of reformation, the condensed language of poetry has a vital role to play. In 'Word of Struggle', for example, the 'word' is self-referential, a performative speech act: 'this key opening the way/to the world that dares make a stand/to the poem that defends/to a radical poetics/and above all/to a politics of struggle'.

Gorodé's consciousness of poetry's vital role gives an urgency to her mission, to her quest to revitalise culture. If, despite past woes, she has an abiding faith in and optimism about the future, she is also acutely aware of the fleeting nature

of life; she experiences outrage at the waste of time and talent she suffers in captivity, be it literal (in jail), or metaphorical. In 'Behind the Walls', Gorodé indicates that the pulse of the oppressed has to be converted into a creative impulse that 'guides the writing that trembles with/anger tenderness revolt love/and its pounding rhythm'. The ordering of terms is significant here: beginning with anger, followed immediately by tenderness, which itself generates a sense of outrage, but returning in the form of revolt, all leads finally to love.

Gorodé's language can be analytical, declamatory, condemnatory, but also lyrical, sensual, magical. The latter group of qualities can, moreover, serve to heighten the reader's sense of the cruelty and inhumanity with which Gorodé is concerned. In 'Wave-Song', for example, the poetic voice identifies with the sound of the sea and the idea of the universal traveller through the image of waves washing west across the Great Ocean and coming to expire on a distant shore after having been infused with the blood of human suffering in Pinochet's Chile in the east, with nuclear fallout at Murorua along the way.

Gorodé's work is a political and poetic project of great intensity and duration ('day after day, second after second', as we read in 'Day After Day'). In fact, despite certain political differences between Gorodé's approach to culture and that of Jean-Marie Tjibaou (reflecting more general differences between their respective political parties, PALIKA and the *Union Calédonienne*), which became evident at the *Melanesia 2000* festival in 1975, the perspective presented here would seem to ally her vision to his, in so far as it sees culture as a forward-looking creative process, without longing for a supposedly fixed 'traditional' state.

Speaking Truth

Gorodé takes up the theme of the social function of literature from the outset in her second volume of verse, *Speaking Truth*. The opening poem in this cycle, 'Writing', announces a cultural

project — and, as we have already seen, for Gorodé, culture is never far removed from political considerations. ‘Writing’, the first in her Australian series of poems, is dated Sydney, 15 July 1997. Just after arriving in Australia, the poet, naturally enough, still has images of home in mind — or rather a critical perspective on her home-land, which she does not identify by name, but rather situates geographically as ‘an island/a land/of water’, in obvious contrast to the massive continent on which she now finds herself. A day after Bastille Day celebrations, Gorodé gives us the negative image of an island where silence reigns, ‘speechless/lifeless/visionless/voiceless’ — and gives herself the task of breaking this silence by writing it, by reading and transcribing the land, which, unlike its human inhabitants, is not silent but is rather ‘a land where earth and stone speak in the place of beings’. This transcription is complemented in the third poem in the series, called, simply, ‘the land’, by a sense of belonging to a social group, to a culture seen as a totality, where the vegetal and the human merge in the conjunction of the masculine element (yam) and the female (taro): ‘a pearl of dew/on a yam plant stem/or taro heart/where my being beats/to the rhythm of the earth’.

The second poem is entitled ‘Independence’, a term to which Gorodé gives a deep, personal meaning beyond the rhetoric of politicians. Not that she is not a fervent supporter of the Kanak pro-independence movement; indeed, she has always been a leading player in the FLNKS. What she wants, however, is to impart concrete meaning to the term, to remove it from the trap of abstract categories in order to make it relevant to the daily lives of those who struggle to provide for their families. Independence is not, however, the individualistic concept of Western society. Rather, for Gorodé, it involves inter-dependence — ‘sharing as custom prescribes/giving to others/fighting her own desires’. In this context, ‘state dependence’, welfare handouts of all kinds — including intellectual (‘in the face of oneness of thought’) — are anathema to the dignified spirit of true independence.

To this extent, her call at poem's end for 'a free country/a sovereign nation/a people who share' is no sectarian divisiveness. Her lecture tour of Australia and writing project with Nicolas Kurtovitch, the settler descendant and founding president in the late 1990s of the New Caledonian Writers' Association, took place a few months before the ratification of the Noumea Accord, which was to call for a 'common destiny' for the diverse peoples of New Caledonia. In this context, Gorodé's call for her people to share can be seen as a political gesture implying the extension of Kanak custom to all. This sense is echoed in the final poem of the series, dedicated to Bernadette, 'a great lady of this country', who is also the mother of her fellow writer and traveller, the non-Kanak Caledonian, Nicolas Kurtovitch.

'Being' is a performative reminder that 'the two centuries of colonial history' have not succeeded in obliterating the poet's people or its culture. The latter term is to be understood here in an anthropological sense, that is, as an expression of humanity conveyed through all one is and does. Gorodé tells us this by using the Paicî term 'Aboro', which, according to Jean-Claude Rivierre, means 'individual', 'living being', 'person', 'man', and is found to form part of a composite noun in expressions ranging from 'child' and 'elder' to 'indigenous person' and 'generations'.²⁹

This theme of the inter-connectedness of all existence is also found in 'Roots', a poem about being born into the world, in which the recurrent fundamental image of the earth takes its priority over the other elements, water and air (sky). Maternal imagery pervades this poem about indigenous culture and the land and the latter's connection to individuals in their daily lives, 'the knot/umbilical cord/returned to earth', a connection that only deepens with time.

If metaphors of femininity and maternity are used to describe the earth, conversely, images of nature can be used in the description of women, particularly pregnant woman, as we see in 'The Waiting': 'for the bud that opens/for the stem that

appears/the shoot that emerges'. Yet, there is no wild idealisation in these images of the maternal earth. Tenderness and violence, dignity and shame, respect and remorse, hope and despair are all presented as common occurrences. Gorodé again juxtaposes the metaphorical and the realistic to give her reader an alarming jolt: 'from the belly caressed/or violated'. The poem ends with the ethos of Gorodé's poetry, devoid of ideology: 'to act like a human being/to do/to say what is right/to write/ /so that we may find/together/the word that comforts/the talk that soothes/and the act that frees'.

Writing here is clearly a form of political action, in the broad sense of being concerned with the way people interact within existing social groups. This sort of writing does not come easily, however; rather, it is the result of an internal struggle in which gut-wrenching emotion can become so invasive as to bring about paranoia ('Fear of these people/fear of those people', the poem 'Fear' tells us). Yet Gorodé realises that she must overcome the potentially stifling effect of such fear. The stakes are too high, a matter even of life and death, both for the individual and the community — 'when what it's really about/is a country being born/where we may continue the every day struggle/so we may ourselves be born'.

For Gorodé, to be is 'being with the other', as the title of the next poem indicates. Her idea of custom stresses the importance of social contact to the individual's sense of well-being: 'toward others/to live/and to be/oneself with/others'. But to reach out towards others is also to have them come to us in return: 'the other/who is/on the threshold of your hut'.

Gorodé's preoccupation with act of writing and its value is displayed quite dramatically in the poem 'Creation'. Literature, whose substance is language, is not confined to any rarefied atmosphere or *belle-lettriste* tradition. In a generalised semiotics, language is everywhere inscribed in the natural landscape or projected onto it:

Sorting words/in the water's flow/on a rock's crag/
with the curve of a stone
Sorting words/between the lines/against the grain/
from breaking point/to point of no return

Conversely, there is no indulgence in the romantic notion of writing as mere transcription. Writing is a human act — of creation — for which the technical means at the writer's disposal are crucial, as they too are capable of generating meaning: 'Seizing sense/in the sound of a consonant/in the voices of a vowel/in the quaver of a comma/ /in the no of a hiatus/in the closure of a bracket/in the finality of a full stop'. This act of 'seizing' is therefore tantamount to a bringing to life, creating the future, both literally and metaphorically: 'in the name of those/at the frontline/of a country yet to be born'.

Attention to language, to the murmurs of the world, even to its silences, is taken up in 'Listen' ('noise/cry/laugh/trill/rhyme/rhythm'), with its alliterations and assonances in the repetition of 'i' and 'r' sounds in the French original: 'bruit/criri/rire/trille/rime/rythme'. The project to hear the rhythm of the world, even in its interstices and apparent emptinesses, is far more than aesthetic, however. There is a realisation that, in the absence of language, we lose our humanity; one is essential to the other. But a play on words also allows the reading that we lose our humanity if we deny the Other: 'what would a human be/without signs/without language/spoken or written?/what would one be/without the other?'

The Other is also expressed by death, as the poem of that name suggests — a daily, but non-banal occurrence in the world: 'death speaks/the other/to us/as/our daily bread'. Manifold signs of this are everywhere — in the symbolic order, where the sight of a sheath of cordyline gives notice of someone's passing away ('an unexpected flower/in the yard/or on the lawn'), in chance occurrences ('an odour of beetle/a blue bottle's flight'), and in dreams. But to accept death as a universal, defining life through its extremities, is not to acquiesce in the face of injustice and

violence, in the face of death due not to any law of nature, but rather to the wilful intervention of humans seeking the demise of others: 'the slow death of a people/the programmed death/of all those who are ignored'.

Here Gorodé reaches out to all those sacrificed at the hands of oppression. She is searching for universal brothers and sisters, this Kanak woman: 'The death/of all those in whom/every hour/of the day and the night/die a thousand deaths/my Kanak woman's verse/my words of being Human'. This is surely a variation on the theme of the universal particular announced by Jean-Marie Tjibaou's desire to express 'that part of the universal that is within us'.

Given such an ecumenical breadth of meaning, it is not surprising that the title of the following poem, 'being alone', is quickly undermined by the verse itself. The Kanak is never alone in her or his world, even if no one seems to be around. The spirits and ancestors are there to accompany and guide them: 'the *u* and the *duée*/those we cannot see/around us/and who are everywhere'. To be is to be with, to live together, to share, both during life within the relational context defined by kinship, and beyond it, any radical demarcation of the living and the dead being misplaced. For this reason, too, the disadvantaged, the socially excluded, the lost and homeless are to be brought back from alienation, from the prison of self and solitude, into the collective fold of humanity.

On the positive side, this sense of sharing is a key to universal happiness, as shown in 'Elsewhere'. This poem is a touching personal moment for me, as Déwé Gorodé wrote it after giving a class to my students at the Australian National University in Canberra. For the poet, this meeting with young adults to discuss her texts is a strong memory precisely because it was a moment of sharing, both in the classroom, where words were exchanged in the creative acts of writing and reading, and outside, in the conviviality of the subsequent meal. A commonality of being overcomes any sense of foreignness and

exclusive difference: 'Elsewhere is here/when elsewhere/are people who listen/and share'.

A series of fleeting images pervades 'Hope': an Aborigine sitting on a beach in the cold, having no doubt slept out overnight; an old man walking barefoot along the icy-cold footpath in the morning. Yet, despite these scenes of dereliction and misery, it is not despair that rises up within the author, but hope, as the title suggests, like the seagull flying high above signs of human decay. Amongst general indifference, Gorodé tries 'to hold on forever/and ever/to a word/made from the woes of the world/hope'.

Finally, she presents her mission, as she did in *Under the Ashes of the Conch Shell* over a decade earlier: to tell the truth to closed eyes and minds, to lift masks and confront reality. She seeks to liberate language, to free speech so that people can speak for themselves rather than be spoken down to or spoken for. Her aim is thus to restore integrity to a world that would otherwise be prepared 'to casually reduce us to nothing'.

'Signs of the Times'

Gorodé's preoccupation with the value of writing is taken a stage further in the third section of the work, 'Signs of the Times', a series of aphorisms with a strong emphasis on form, where the layout and font size have words emerge on the page like children from the womb. Political themes are taken up with renewed vigour as the poet looks critically at issues of exploitation, corruption, hypocrisy, tradition and custom. This leads her once more to adopt a twin approach to language, which is capable of breaking the silence, 'telling the truth', but also of leading us astray, into escapism: 'We also get high/on words/to forget/the world'. This forgetting can be a wilful act, when people use words as masks to make themselves appear other than they are, to cover up the way things are and to suppress painful memories, which can be like 'a red-hot iron/in the wound'.

In these poems, Gorodé pours forth her lucidity about the times, when almost all politicians, Kanak politicians included,

are on the make. There is a critique of Kanak practices within the tribe, particularly on the part of those who make use of custom for their own personal gain at the expense of their fellows: ‘The laziness of some/feeds off the Custom/of others/ There are those/who live beyond their means/and make others pay/by their opportune use/of Custom’.

This is no idle observation, given that Déwé Gorodé is herself engaged in the political arena, currently as vice-president of the New Caledonian Government. She is scathing about those (‘the black briefcase’), who were absent from the difficult period of struggle and are now taking up front-row seats, looking out for ‘number one’ — in a play on words referring not just to the egotism and pretence of such big shots, but also to the name of the leading New Caledonian beer, thereby opening up the suggestion of a dual over-indulgence by those more interested in personal pleasure than in the cause of their people.

In pithy maxims, spread dramatically across the page, these poems bring out the stark contrast between people for whom land only has worth in its own right and those for whom land has a mercantile, exchange value linked to the products of nickel mining. Here, too, there is a play on words: nickel is known as the ‘green rock’ and the word used in French here for ‘rock’, *caillou*, is the European/*Caldoche* name for New Caledonia — a play on words telescoping community images of identity and the market economy. The poet insists, however, that the land (‘my mother, the Land’) is the inevitable and vital underlying substratum of all human construction in the encroaching city, whatever the surface structures (concrete, bitumen, tar) and however solid they may appear to be.

This work presents a condemnation of the trivialisation and commercialisation of custom (‘there are those/who would go in for Custom/as they would go to a fair’), now involving inter-Kanak profiteering. There is a frank, brute admission that ‘Custom’ has become a cliché or slogan, devoid of meaning or substance, something that is highlighted in bold script: ‘**The soul/is gone**

from this word/emptied/thrown out/trashed/“**Custom**”. The threat to Kanak culture is underscored by reference to the term ‘*boucan*’ (sorcerer), which no longer represents a spiritual force of old, but the new spirits and false ‘magic’ of the bottle (‘when you hold us in your spell’), which cause irresponsible, disrespectful and violent behaviour, including rape and murder within families. The logical outcome of this ‘dog’s life’ is death, life turned on its head, represented in graphic fashion on the page by the macabre image of the upturned half-moon containing no smiling face but merely the word ‘death’.

‘The Best of All Worlds’

The final section, ‘The Best of All Worlds’, presents a selection of Déwé Gorodé’s most recent poetry, published here for the first time. Again, the context is urban contemporary, and the tone is often ironic, even sardonic. The opening poem, ‘Waste Land’, with its echoes of T.S. Eliot, sets the scene. The earth, with which people have identity-defining relations in traditional Kanak culture, is replaced by ‘land’, here conjoined with ‘waste’. This is the world of squats, marginalised lives, cultural dislocation and youths growing up without knowing their heritage and uncertain of their future. Attention to Kanak specificity gives way to a concern for general issues confronting any city in the developing world, where children are raised in a polluted environment. In New Caledonia’s case, the pollution is due to smoke from the nickel smelting works at Doniambo on the northern outskirts of Noumea, an area of Kanak working class suburbs. There is a moral pollution in the air, too, as children spray graffiti on walls and commit other minor offences, all the while doing their best to avoid the police and security patrols on their rounds.

Like the puffs of polluted smoke being pumped into the atmosphere, the lives of today’s youths are being blown away in the wind. But what remains is a feeling of rage and outrage. The official discourse may be all about sharing, but divisions between the haves and the have-nots are widening — and not just along

racial or ethnic divides. In this 'system of no fair share', the poet is now cut off from her brothers of yesteryear, now 'the haves', who, through their silence, have become complicit in the growing social inequality of the island.

The prison in which the poet had been held a quarter of a century earlier is now a 'mental prison', which destroys its victims from within, although, in the light of the poem's previous references, this term also suggests a literal incarceration for those involved. The young portrayed here are losing their bearings; their minds may be filled with images of the possibilities presented by the virtual worlds projected everywhere around them, yet they have lost touch with their own 'everyday reality'. Another effect of these youth's exposure to such images is the dissipation of their energies, making them disinclined to engage in political revolt (as Gorodé's own generation did). The 'waste land' in question corresponds to a 'soul searching soul emptying blues', an indolence of the mind and soul, and a moral vacuity, which arise as neighbourhood friends are swallowed up one after the other, either recuperated by the system or quite simply sapped of energy.

The very title of 'Tropical Town' implies changes leading to a clash of cultures, given that, in the Pacific context at least, 'tropical' is usually not associated with images of the town or city. This twist is illustrated in the poem's opening lines, where we learn that in these tropics 'a few coconut palms' merely serve as a backdrop for the city made of 'all the iron and the concrete it takes'. The dislocation is made more severe by the poet's interpretation of the situation as a form of foreign domination (not limited, according to the poet, to this group of islands): 'like it or not/we're in France here/twenty thousand ks away'. The poem ends on a note of sarcasm, directed at the misplaced nostalgia some people still feel for the colonial past.

'With Back Bowed' is also a poem about the relationship between past and present, memory and change, presented through the eyes of an old woman looking back at the child she

once was. It examines the vast gulf between past and present, across which old age seems paradoxically to have been reached in an instant, from first stanza to second. This gap is not merely physical, for not only does the woman suffer from the infirmity of her aging body, she is also wracked by moral pain, as she reflects on the contrast between the security of her childhood, spent in the care of her parents in a traditional hut, and the uncertainty and instability of the situation faced by today's youth. The latter are portrayed as having lost contact with the land in becoming street urchins in the city, losing all memory of their cultural heritage, cut off as they are from their parents and their people's past.

In the fourth stanza, the theme of shame is developed with a strong condemnation of those who promote custom while in fact betraying it for their own gain: 'where the ruling masters/are liars/and impostors/fraudsters/and forgers/of our customs'. These *arrivistes* are also on the loose in the city, assimilated into the fast lane of Western life ('pounding the pavement/with the self-important strides/of the man on a mission'); on the move, on the make, these Kanaks are indistinguishable from careerists anywhere. We discover, however, that this upwardly mobile group is linked to the disadvantaged one referred to earlier in the poem. Through a play of syntax that turns upon the reference to 'children to feed', the two worlds converge, with the effect that both are seen to have a dysfunctional family life, with children going off the rails ('spoiled daughter/estranged son'), casting new light on the earlier references to 'mistress to satisfy' and 'a jealous wife'. Might this convergence of worlds also apply to what we learn at the poem's end, of the many distresses of the family living in the squat, whose children go to school through the mangrove: alcohol and drug addiction, prostitution, rape, an incestuous relationship between the father and his daughter. In this context, the final stanza, a reprise of the first, reiterating the woman's memory of her idealised past, serves to heighten the gulf between the village life she once knew and the present disarray

— personal, cultural, social — in which today's Kanaks find themselves.

A further evocation of the mangrove occurs in the next poem, 'Mangrove Swamp', which begins, or at least seems to begin, in a natural setting. There is a hint that the mangrove 'crawling with beings' may not have only animal and vegetal life in it. Midway through the poem, beautiful flowers turn into women, with whom macho male profiteers make merry. The implication of prostitution becomes increasingly explicit as the poem advances. The natural setting then gives way to low-life human concerns, ending in the false glitter of the lights of the city, said to entrap and subjugate the children growing up on its edges. Here, albeit in vain and in despair, the poet assumes a maternal role for her people via the final image of the collective 'my child'.

'Drag Net' is another example of the poet's mistrust of the lure and false promises of modernity. Globalisation's substitution of various forms of virtual encounter for human contact is portrayed as letting in 'the evils of the earth', a Pandora's box full of nasty surprises, and with no glimmer of hope at the bottom. The society presented here, which seems to be chasing after the future with a perpetual sense of being left behind, is again portrayed as one that dehumanises people in the name of commercial values, resulting in a generalised state of prostitution, 'where/sex equals cash/or promotion'.

The seemingly more optimistic 'Netted' begins by announcing the immense possibilities for knowledge and adventure, exploration in time and space, that are offered by the Internet. The 'net' really is a universal form of communication that has found its way across 'the oceans of the world' to penetrate right into the Kanak village. Gorodé creates a neologism, 'cyber-hut' — a play on the term 'cyber-café' (French, *cyber-case*, *cyber-café*) — to show how far the new culture has reached. Another play on words involving 'net/netted' reveals, however, that the Internet can also be a

trap. Surfing or sailing the oceans virtually may seem to be exciting and innovative, but new navigators often do not see the danger of being swallowed up in the process. Thus, the ‘little boy’ of the opening lines, who should grow up into ‘big boy’, in the end becomes a ‘little fish’, caught in its own words, like so many nets: ‘when/little fish grows up/into big fish/will be caught and fried/leaping/tangled/netted’. Here the potentially desolate future of New Caledonia’s youth is only too clearly marked out.

The theme of decline is taken up again in the next poem, which deals with the loss of dignity and the identity crisis brought about by addiction to alcohol and other drugs, which produce a stupor in ‘whose blazing will/raze any vague desire/to think/or do/whatever/in this world’. The world turns against these victims of addiction, allowing them to become human wrecks. The poem offers a devastating critique of contemporary New Caledonian society and culture, whose youth is sunk in a shipwreck of an island, having lost the will and capacity to act as independent beings.

The denaturalising of the environment, physical and human, is confirmed in the final poem, ‘In the Land of King Nick’. ‘Nick’ here is not the European Nicholas, or Father Christmas, who comes bearing gifts; rather, it is nickel, the mineral to be extracted from the land to provide wealth ‘for all the golden boys’ of this ‘island in the sun’ — locals and outsiders living the picture-postcard culture of the international jet-set. However, these beautiful images of ‘nature sport gods’ frolicking in the sea are not the whole story, for the island paradise surrounded by a lagoon cannot withstand rough waves. The well-off do not want their sleep to be troubled by thoughts of those whose labour makes it possible for their lifestyle to be maintained.

These latest poems of Déwé Gorodé present us with a paradox: in the post-Noumea Accord era, in which the writer is vice-president and Minister of Culture, her analysis of the current state of affairs and, more acutely, her vision for the

future would appear to be more sombre now than when she was languishing in prison as a Kanak militant 30 years ago. At that time, the situation, though tense and difficult, seemed clear to the young, politically conscious indigenous woman: the pro-independence movement had succeeded in forming a national front and the tide of history made the future seem a horizon of promise. Many changes have occurred since then, at both the territorial and international levels, and the picture has blurred. While key foundational elements of Gorodé's vision remain — a commitment to the land as source of identity, a critical awareness of the situation of women, a recognition of the importance of personal as well as collective freedom in the struggle against all forms of oppression — it must be said that the future projected by the young militant of the pro-independence movement of the 1970s and 1980s appears in her poetry today to be much more elusive and problematic than before, and the realisation of this future will require all the energy and determination of those engaged in its construction. Whatever this future holds over the next decade or two for this Pacific Island nation embarked on an experiment in nation building, it is clear that Déwé Gorodé will remain a major voice informing those within and without the work in progress. Interested parties clearly have much to look forward to.

Footnotes

- ¹ With the constitutional changes brought about by the Noumea Accord (1998), New Caledonia is no longer, technically, a French Overseas Territory (TOM). It has become, 'simply', *la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, and its constitutional status has shifted from that of a *Territoire d'outre-mer* to the unique status of a *Pays d'outre-mer* (POM), i.e. an 'Overseas Country'. For convenience, and given the unresolved nature of the latter term in many respects, the term 'Territory' is still used here to designate New Caledonia.
- ² The other two French Pacific Territories are French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna. French *Territoires d'outre-mer* (TOM),

while remaining, like the *Départements d'outre-mer* (DOM), an integral part of France, have specific constitutional and administrative arrangements which allow a greater local autonomy than the latter. The *Accord de Nouméa* (1998) provides for greater decentralisation, allowing New Caledonia's *Congrès* the capacity to make laws in certain areas (e.g., immigration, employment).

³ For further details, see Alain Christnacht, *La Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Notes et Etudes documentaires, No. 4839, Paris: La Documentation française, 1987, p.7.

⁴ K(k)anak(e)(s)/K(k)anak (invariable)/C(c)anaque(s): in this single (?) word is inscribed a whole history, political as well as linguistic, of New Caledonia. And orthography is not merely a matter for debate among academics. Until the late 1980s, the graphic 'K', particularly in its invariable form, was associated with the political affirmation of the independence movement, as in, for example, the FLNKS (*Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste*). The 'K' form appears now to be passing into general use, but one can still find non-Kanak examples of the more traditional and 'cautious' 'C' (*Canaque*), although officially 'both' forms are admitted. The 'normalisation' of the 'K' form has been accompanied, however, by its inflexion or banalisation as substantive or adjective. No longer *hors la loi*, it is now subject to 'agreement', as Déwé Gorodé's own writing shows — e.g. her collection of short fiction, *Utê Mûrûnû* (Noumea: Editions Grain de Sable, 1994) — although Alban Bensa and Eric Wittersheim, in their presentation of the writings and interviews of the Kanak independence leader, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, follow the example of the *Nouveau Petit Robert* by allowing declension of the noun to signal a plural, while maintaining the adjectival form invariable. See Jean-Marie Tjibaou, *La Présence Kanak*, Paris: Editions Edile Jacob, 1996.

⁵ According to the 1996 census, New Caledonia had a population of 196,000. In recent times there has been a good deal of popular speculation in New Caledonia about a possible increase in this number to around 300,000. The census scheduled for 2002 was deferred, following the intervention of French President Jacques Chirac, due to a dispute over a question referring to ethnicity

within the census. As a consequence, the census — to be held in late 2004, without the question of ethnicity — will be boycotted by many Kanaks. A parallel ‘cultural survey’ is to be conducted by the New Caledonian Government. It is unclear what reliable information will be collected by either of these surveys. According to ethnographer Jean-Louis Rallu, the actual population of New Caledonia in late 2004 may be about 230,000 (personal communication, September 2004).

Despite these uncertainties, it could be said that the population is composed of approximately 45% Melanesians, 34% so-called ‘Caldoches’, i.e., the descendants of European settlers and convicts and those assimilated (see following paragraph below), 12% Polynesians (mostly remittance workers from Wallis and Futuna, but including some Tahitians), 3% Indonesians, and others (Vietnamese, ni-Vanuatu, Antillais, Arabs etc.). Officially, there are 28 distinct Melanesian languages. Of these, Drehu, from the Loyalty island of Lifou, is the most widely spoken, with around 10,000 speakers — now less than the number of people speaking Wallisian. Other ‘minority’ languages, reflecting the afore-mentioned ethnic groups, are also spoken. A very localised *créole* persists at Saint-Louis, south of Noumea. French is spoken by virtually the entire population. Whatever any future constitutional change may bring, New Caledonia is very likely to remain francophone.

‘Caldoche’: once (and to some extent still) a pejorative reference, this term is now embraced by many of the younger generation of descendants of the European settler population in New Caledonia. This ethnic but by no means political minority today constitutes about one third of the Territory’s population. Reflexion on the ‘*identité Caldoche*’ has been given in recent years by historian Louis-José Barbançon (*Le Pays du Non-Dit. Regards sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, La Mothe-Achard: Offset Cinq Edition, 1992) and the ‘Collectif Caldoche’ (*Etre Caldoche Aujourd’hui*, Noumea: Ile de Lumière, 1994), as well as by a metropolitan historian, Isabelle Merle, in *Expériences coloniales. Nouvelle-Calédonie (1853-1920)*, Paris: Belin, 1995.

⁶ The Noumea Accord (1998) announces the goal of a ‘common destiny’ for New Caledonia’s diverse peoples.

- ⁷ The name ‘Lapita’ comes from a corruption of the Haveke language place name Xapetaa, near Koné on the west coast of New Caledonia. See Christophe Sand, *Archéologie des origines. Le Lapita calédonien* (p.33). This pre-colonial heritage, which is particularly associated with dentate-shaped pottery, is still being unearthed. Excavations began in the 1950s, but it was not until the 1990s that extensive exploration of the Lapita site got underway with the uncovering of dozens of square metres of archeological surface, showing the richness and diversity of the deposits, ‘the most diverse collection of well-preserved dentate-stamped pottery thus far discovered in the south-western Pacific’ (Sand, p.41). The same author has said that he and his team ‘would need three hundred years’ to explore this archeological legacy properly. (Personal communication).
- ⁸ The received view is that Cook, finding that the inhabitants had given no general name to the island, called it New Caledonia, as the impressive hills he saw on the East Coast reminded him of parts of Scotland. In a similar vein, on the same voyage he named the neighbouring islands, now known as Vanuatu, the New Hebrides. The first known French navigator to visit New Caledonia was d’Entrecasteaux in 1792, although it is also possible that La Pérouse did so in 1788, before embarking on his final, fatal voyage, which saw him shipwrecked at Vanikoro in the Solomon Islands.
- ⁹ For a detailed account of this whole period of the penal colony, see Louis-José Barbançon, *L’Archipel des forçats. L’histoire du bain de Nouvelle-Calédonie (1863–1930)*, Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2003.
- ¹⁰ See *intra* for details, in endnotes, as the occasion arises.
- ¹¹ For an account of the *Melanesia 2000* festival and of Kanak culture in general, see Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Philippe Missotte, *Kanaké. Mélanésien de nouvelle calédonie*, Papeete: les éditions du pacifique, 1976. (English translation by Christopher Plant: *Kanaké: The Melanesian Way*, Papeete: les éditions du pacifique, 1978).
- ¹² This is the word that was also used to describe the Algerian War (1954–62) until the French Parliament belatedly afforded it a different recognition in 1999.

- ¹³ See, for instance, Stephen Henningham, *France and the South Pacific. A Contemporary History*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992, p.69.
- ¹⁴ These Accords were subsequently ratified in a national referendum in November of the same year. (The participation rate for the total French population was 37% (63% in New Caledonia), of which 80% in metropolitan France voted in favour of the Rocard plan, compared with only 57% in favour in New Caledonia). Besides the new constitutional framework, these Accords created, from July 1989, three Provinces (North, South, Loyalty Islands), and provided substantial additional development funds. They remained in place until being superseded by the Noumea Accord in 1998.
- ¹⁵ *Accord de Nouméa*, Section 5, 'L'évolution de l'organisation politique de la Nouvelle-Calédonie'.
- ¹⁶ At the same time, it is worth noting in the vein of popular culture the appearance of more than a dozen volumes of *La Brousse en folie* (1984–present) by the Caledonian writer and cartoonist, Bernard Berger, whose comic strip stories featuring cultural stereotypes have enjoyed great popularity, even 'best seller' status, in the Territory.
- ¹⁷ The anthology by François Bogliolo, *Parole et Ecritures. Anthologie de la littérature néo-calédonienne* (Noumea: Les Editions du Cagou, 1994), was groundbreaking in this regard, providing an interesting and courageous attempt at making this literature known to a wider public beyond a few specialists. Anne-Marie Nisbet had already published an anthology, *Littérature néo-calédonienne* (Sherbrooke: Naaman, 1985), but this was before the dramatic developments of that decade and the literary revival that took place in New Caledonia. A number of literary reviews published during the 1970s and 1980s, most notably the all too short-lived *Flamboyant imaginaire*, edited by Hélène Colombani, and the contribution of local critics such as Paul Griscelli and Bernard Gasser, had already given the impetus to this revival. More recently, the *Transcultures* group at the Université de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, Noumea, under the direction of Professor Dominique Jouve, has done much to 'rediscover' and promote in scholarly editions the literature of the Territory (e.g. the collected works of Jean Mariotti, reeditions of

Georges Baudoux, and the literary ‘rehabilitation’ of Alin Laubreaux). In this context, the role of the publishing house, Grain de sable, established by Laurence Viillard in the early 1990s, has been a major development in facilitating both good quality and affordable (hitherto not always the case in New Caledonia!) publications. Moreover, in another significant move, Grain de sable has brought together under the ‘one roof’, both ‘European’ and Melanesian voices in its program of publishing contemporary writing. Kanak voices have also been heard in the successful quarterly, *Mwà Vée*, published by the ADCK since 1993. The latter also brought out a special edition in English, *Living Heritage. Kanak Culture Today*, to coincide with the 8th Pacific Arts Festival held in Noumea in October 2000.

¹⁸ This includes the recent phenomenon of trans-racial authorship, as, for example, in the joint efforts of Nicolas Kurtovitch and Déwé Gorodé (*Dire le vrai*, Noumea: Editions Grain de Sable, 1999) and Nicolas Kurtovitch and Pierre Gope (*Les Dieux sont borgnes*, Noumea: Editions Grain de Sable, 2002).

¹⁹ Anthropologists and linguists such as Maurice Leenhardt, Jean Guiart, Jean-Claude Rivierre and Alban Bensa have over the past century brought out the richness of the Melanesian oral tradition in New Caledonia. That oral tradition includes a number of different literary genres, ranging from origin narratives to the epic and lyric through to humorous and playful language games. See, for example, Alban Bensa and Jean-Claude Rivierre, ‘De quelques genres littéraires dans la tradition orale paicî’, *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, no. 50, t. XXXII, March 1976, pp.31–64; Marc Coulon, ‘Introduction’, *la littérature kanak*, Noumea: ADCK, 1993. Moreover, the work undertaken by the ADCK to keep this heritage alive is confirmation of its contemporary cultural significance. However, in the context of this tradition, the production of written literary texts remains the exception.

²⁰ For more detailed information on her clan origin, see the preface written by her relative, Téâ Auru Mwatéâpoo, to *Sous les cendres des conqués*. iv.

²¹ ‘Gorodey’ is the spelling under the French administration. In Paicî, her name would be pronounced with nasalised vowels, as

- 'Görödé' (personal communication from author).
- ²² Personal communication from author.
- ²³ In this context, particularly given Déwé Gorodé's current responsibility for the portfolio of Culture in the New Caledonian Government, it is worth noting that PALIKA did not at the time agree with the approach of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, then leader of the *Union Calédonienne*, to advance the Kanak political cause via the promotion of culture in his initiative in organising the *Melanesia 2000* festival in 1975. As Déwé Gorodé has said in an interview, PALIKA considered this festival to be a banalisation of Kanak culture and a distraction from more serious forms of political action. *Littérature de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Paris: Notre Librairie, 1998, p.77.
- ²⁴ See Stephen Henningham, *France and the South Pacific. A Contemporary History*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992. p.210.
- ²⁵ Déwé Gorodé has herself expressed a certain ambivalence towards this family tradition, showing kinship respect, even pride and admiration, but viewing it from a critical historical perspective at the same time. About the role of informant, she has said, 'It is already quite something that an elder of the age of my father, with the little schooling he had, could produce such a thing, and what would have been the point of my saying anything against this?' Interview published in *Littérature de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Paris: Notre Librairie, 1998, p.80 (translation). Gorodé, *L'Agenda*, p.107.
- ²⁶ See Alice Bullard, *Exile to Paradise. Savagery and Civilization in Paris and the South Pacific, 1790-1900*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- ²⁷ See *La Présence Kanak*, eds, Alban Bensa and Eric Wittersheim, Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 1996.
- ²⁸ See *La Présence Kanak*, eds, Alban Bensa and Eric Wittersheim, Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 1996.
- ²⁹ Jean-Claude Rivierre, *Dictionnaire Paicî-Français*, Paris: Editions SELA, 1983, pp. 26–7.

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UNDER THE ASHES OF
THE CONCH SHELLS

Adieu 1970

wild grass has taken over
the ceremonial pathway beneath the coconut palms
Straw and vines of the roof are rotting
mud walls cracked and crumbling

*Grande case*¹ in ruins

Close call, almost too late
you are returning from afar
long journey
hundred plus years package tour
into the labyrinthine wandering of a youth in tatters
eyelids blinking at the sight of what has come and gone

Eyes opening to see
what was
what is
what will be

It's time to return
start over

Adieu 1970

Montpellier,
September 1970

¹ The *grande case* is the chief's hut in a traditional kanak village

Adieu 1970

L'herbe folle a envahi
l'allée centrale sous les cocotiers
Paille et lianes du toit pourrissent
les murs de torchis ne sont plus que fissures

Grande case en ruines

Tu reviens de très loin
d'un voyage organisé de plus de cent ans
des dédales d'une jeunesse en lambeaux
paupières clignotants sur ce qui a été

Regard qui s'ouvre sur

ce qui a été
ce qui est
ce qui sera

Il est temps de repartir

Adieu 1970

Montpellier,
septembre 1970

Sobbing Cries

Tears in your eyes of rebel wild vine
twisting around the long hanging roots of the old banian trees¹

Teardrops beneath your lids of green *coleus*² at the dawn
of life dedicated to its fine proud stem

Sobbing that drowns your voice of powder-face *popinée*³
speaking of days too short of an unknown genesis

Hurried creations where too fast things have fallen out of place
where in these tears you forget the *totem* that protects you

Pure magic imprisoned in the poor little palm
of your sad sacrilegious hands that grab

at every scattered thought of the genesis
of gods and totems hungry for sobbing cries

Sobbing cries of a *popinée* woman in genesis
Sobbing cries in this genesis that is yours

Sobbing cries for the gods and totems of the Melanesian

Crying Tears To ensure the growth of the *coleus*
planted at dawn for your sobbing cries

Montpellier,
17 January 1972

¹ The banian is the most sacred of trees for Kanaks

² A sheath of *coleus* is offered to the maternal clan,
in particular the mother's brothers, at the birth of a child

³ *Popinée* is here a derogatory term used to designate a Kanak woman

Sanglots et cris

Larmes dans tes yeux de liane sauvage et rebelle
liée aux longues racines pendantes des vieux banians

Pleurs sous tes vertes paupières de coleus¹ à l'aube
de la vie dédiée à sa fine et fière tige

Sanglots qui noient ta voix de popinée² fardée
parlant des jours trop courts d'une genèse inconnue

Créations hâtives où trop vite tout se confond
où dans ces pleurs tu oublies le totem protecteur

Pure magie emprisonnée sous la pauvre paume
de tes mains tristes et sacrilèges qui s'accaparent

toutes les pensées éparpillées de la genèse
des dieux et totems avides de sanglots et cris

Sanglots et cris de popinée dans une genèse
Sanglots et cris dans cette genèse qui est tienne

Sanglots et cris pour les dieux et totems mélanésiens

Larmes Pleurs Afin que pousse la tige de coleus
plantée à l'aurore pour tes sanglots et tes cris

Montpellier,
17 janvier 1972

¹ Coleus: on offre une tige de coleus aux oncles maternels à la naissance d'un enfant.

² Popinée: terme à connotation raciste pour désigner une femme kanake.

Word¹ of Struggle

Word in offering to the native totems
word taken back from the ancestral taboos

tumbled and polished by the waters of the land
like the rounded greenstone of the warrior's axe

burned on the fire stones
like a work tool of old

Word carved from the zenith of pain
like a birth that comes after a long difficult labour

Word forged at the point of no return
of the tasks that demand everything that take our all

Linked syllables to cry out
the misery of our peoples

Chains of phrases formed
out of their long combat

this key opening the way
to the word that dares make a stand
to the poem that defends
to a radical poetics
and above all
to a politics of struggle

Camp-Est prison,
September 1974

¹ The French term 'parole' designates the spoken word; but it can also refer to the oral tradition of Melanesian culture

Parole de Lutte

Parole offrande aux totems endémiques
parole raflée aux tabous ancestraux

polie par les eaux du pays
comme le jade arrondi des haches guerrières

brûlée sur les pierres du foyer
tel un outil de travail d'autrefois

Parole forgée au zénith de la souffrance
telle une naissance difficile longue à venir

Parole fourbie au point de non-retour
des tâches qui prennent tout de nous

Maillons de mots pour crier
la misère de nos peuples

chaînes de phrases créées
au gré de leur combat

cette clé ouvrant la voie
à la parole qui prend parti
au poème qui défend
à une poétique militante
et avant tout
à une pratique de lutte

Camp-Est, septembre 1974
Camp-Est : prison de Nouméa

Behind the Walls

Behind the walls
the seconds peel away
seconds beating with the pulse of the oppressed
and its accelerated pace
excites our prisoners' solitude
guides the writing that trembles with
anger tenderness revolt love
and its pounding rhythm
spells out the repressed words of
generations down-trodden humiliated beaten
in the icy silence of colonial tombs
and slowly
imperceptibly
takes possession
of the body of the fingers desiring
to resist
behind the walls

Camp-Est prison,
October 1974

Derrière les Murs

Derrière les murs
s'égrènent les secondes
où palpite le pouls des opprimés
et sa cadence accélérée
excite nos solitudes prisonnières
guide l'écriture tremblante de
colère tendresse révolte amour
et son rythme lancinant
scandale les paroles refoulées de
générations écrasées violentées humiliées
dans le glacial silence des caveaux coloniaux
et lentement
imperceptiblement
prend possession
du corps des doigts qui désirent
résister
derrière les murs

Camp-Est,
octobre 1974

Rebel Sun

Guitar tune at *Ulès*¹
when the moon bleaches the waves
evaporating beneath the burning sand
of euphoric nights
Erased images
of our memories betrayed
of our bodies tortured, flayed dispossessed
You are dead indeed
childhood loves
youthful follies
rose-tinted illusions
Already the morning star shines
spiked with a thousand reds
the rays of dawn
blow sky-high
the literary trivia
cock-and-bull bigotry
mindless mouthing
utter rubbish
meaningless babble
the mouldy remains of midnight utopias

Behold the return
of the
rebel sun

Camp-Est prison,
October 1974

¹ *Ulès* is a nickname for Déwé Gorodé's home village, the 'tribu de l'Embouchure', at Ponérihouen, on the east coast of New Caledonia

Soleil Rebelle

Air de guitare à Ulès¹
quand la lune blondit les vagues
s'évaporant sous le sable brûlant
des soirées d'euphorie
Souvenirs rayés
de nos mémoires trahies
de nos corps écorchés
Vous êtes bien mortes
ô amours enfantines
ô folies de jeunesse
ô chimères à l'eau-de-rose
Déjà brille l'étoile du matin
dardant mille couleurs rouges
les rayons de l'aurore
mènent la razzia sur
les balivernes littéraires
les bondieuseries âneries
le « n'importe quoi » le « folklore »
sans queue ni tête
les restes moisis des utopies de la nuit

Voici revenu le temps du
soleil rebelle

Camp-Est, octobre 1974

¹ Ulès: surnom de tribu

Where is the Moon?

Where is the moon ?

Moon

trembling light that shimmers on drifting oceanian waves
mysterious land of the sons of the blue stone

Moon

Firefly of *Gömââwé*¹ drunk with the inebriating scent of ocean kelp
Mirror of *Têmu*² donning her tattered opalescent robes

Moon

cradling the prayers of the mother for her child
walzing with the seasons of the labours of the earth

Where is the moon?

Salt water

air fire

earth stone

Moon of *decapitated* hilltops

Moon of *dynamited* coral

Moon of forbidden words

Moon of secret loves

Moon of women moon of men engaged in endless struggle

Camp-Est prison,
November 1974

¹ *Gömââwé* is the name of a 'god'

² *Têmu* is an old woman of legend

Où est la Lune?

Où est la lune ?

Lune

lumière tremblotante sur vagues océaniques en dérive
mystérieuse contrée des fils de la pierre bleue

Lune

luciole de Gômââwé¹ s'enivrant aux algues marines
miroir de Têmu² se rhabillant de ses guenilles opalines

Lune

berçant les vœux de la mère la priant pour son enfant
valsant avec les saisons des travaux de la terre

Où est la lune ?

sel eau

feu air

terre pierre

Lune des crêtes décapitées

lune des coraux dynamités

Lune des mots interdits

lune des amours clandestines

Lune de femmes lune d'hommes en lutte

Camp-Est,
novembre 1974

¹ Gômââwé: ou « duéé mênâ », nom d'un dieu.

² Têmu: vieille femme légendaire.

Day After Day

We will try to
glue back together the broken pieces of our dashed hopes
reform the slaughtered images of our strangled speech
rediscover the unity of the scattered word
thrown to the four winds of solitude by
the gunpowder of violence
the poison bottle
the bread smelling of small change
the customary gesture by the false brother betrayed
day after day
second after second
like the river hollowing out its bed
the ant counting her dead
the foam marking the shore
recreate the ritual phrase that unmasks treachery
reinvent the magical dance that ensures victory

Perlou,
February 1975

Jour Après Jour

Nous essaierons de
recoller les brisures des espérances anéanties
regrouper les images fusillées du discours étranglé
retrouver l'unité de la parole éparpillée
aux quatre vents de la solitude par
la poudre de violence
le poison en bouteille
le pain sentant la monnaie
le geste coutumier du frère payé
Jour après jour
seconde après seconde
comme la rivière creusant son lit
la fourmi comptant ses morts
l'écume dessinant la grève
recréer la phrase rituelle qui démasque la trahison
réinventer la danse magique qui assure la victoire

Perlou,
février 1975

Dawn Serenade

A kiss
exchanged on a path
at dawn
smell of fire
devouring dead leaves of coconut palm
fed by wrinkled fingers

Our dawn shall have its poem
Our country shall have its waking call

Dawn serenade to the comrades

An elegy to drink
beneath the dying eyelid
the last teardrop of water run dry
under the ashes of the conch shells

A guitar to pick out

at the end of the night
on the edge of the void
at the limit of chaos
on the echo of mourning
on the bloodless lips
on the emptiness of the voice that fades and dies

the restive reticence of the overused cliché
the seditious light of the forbidden verb
the first cry of the newborn word

the bitter dew of the word broken

Noumea, June 1978

Aubade

Un baiser
au détour du sentier
à l'aube
l'odeur du feu
dévorant les feuilles mortes de cocotier
sous les doigts ridés

A notre aurore son poème
à notre pays son lever

Aubade aux camarades

Une élégie pour boire
sous la paupière moribonde
la dernière larme d'eau tarie
sous les cendres des conques

Une guitare pour cueillir

au bout de la nuit
au bord du néant
à l'orée du chaos
sur l'écho du deuil
sur les lèvres exsangues
sur le vide de la voix qui s'en va

la réticence rétive du mot galvaudé
la lumière séditieuse du verbe interdit
le premier cri de l'inédit

l'amère rosée de la parole brisée

Nouméa, juin 1978

Kanak Reserves

planting sweet potato manioc
picking coffee
working the *igname*¹
posts straw mud for building the hut

*Adi*² manu-cloth³ stores banknotes
coleus branches for the uncles
fronds of green araucaria and cordyline
the word binding the clans
in sadness in joy
a mourning a wedding
under column pines and coconut palms

alcohol-soaked weekends or weekdays
that end with gospel songs or fights
Saturday night parties, hoolies that end with girls on the block
cruising around in the car to pick up some more
then go home and beat up the missus

meetings of the Council of Elders
speeches addressed to the district governor or
 other touring excellency
morning mass with or without your grace
working at the temple
movies at the army base and the rest
Sunday afternoon football
while

the caterpillars tear out the heart of the mountains
the Nickel II laden to the hull
sets sail off and away out to sea
local bush traders and other rip-off merchants take our
coffee bananas other fruit
the white farmer's stock grows fat
on the other side of the barb-wire enclosing the tribes
the same endless pillaging exploitation

locked in locked out, marginalised
other world, maybe
but a safety valve, whatever else
taking in the jobless the out of work
the old people women children
unemployed youth of my country
kept under the thumb of the French cop from
 'Indigenous Affairs'
who signs off the papers
of the Council of Elders' meetings
shadow zones
of the famed isle of light
post-card sanctuary of tourists hungry for sea sex and sun

zoological parks
concentration camps
tropical ghettos
Kanak reserves

Camp-Est prison,
July 1977

¹ 'igname' means 'yam', an important foodstuff in traditional Kanak culture, which is sometimes called a 'culture of the yam'.

² 'Adi' is a term designating ceremonial exchange 'money'.

³ 'manu-cloth' is a loin cloth

Réserves Kanakes

Champs de maniocs patates
cueillette du café
travaux de l'igname
paille poteaux boue pour la case

« Adi » manus¹ vivres billets
tiges de coleus pour les oncles
crêtes d'araucaria et cordyline
parole liant les clans
dans la tristesse dans l'allégresse
un deuil un mariage
sous pins colonnaires et cocotiers

Week-end ou jours de la semaine alcoolisés
qui finissent en « taperas » ou en bagarres
soirées « pop² » groupes pour « faire la chaîne³ »
virées en bagnole pour draguer
avant de rentrer tabasser la compagne

Réunions du Conseil des Anciens
discours au sous-préfet ou au gouverneur en tournée
messe avec ou sans monseigneur
travaux à Eika⁴
cinéma des militaires et la suite
foot-ball le dimanche
pendant que

les « caterpillar » égorgent les montagnes
le « Nickel II⁵ » chargé à fond de cale
met les voiles prend le large
les colporteurs et autres marchands nous extorquent

le café les bananes et bien d'autres fruits
le bétail du colon engraisse
de l'autre côté des barbelés bouclant les tribus
pillage exploitation se perpétuent

«Monde en marge» peut-être
mais en tout cas soupape de sûreté
résorbant sans-emploi et chômeurs
les vieux les femmes les enfants
la jeunesse sans travail salarié de mon pays
sous contrôlé du flic «syndic des Affaires autochtones»
signant les procès-verbaux
des palabres du Conseil des Anciens

Zones d'ombre
de la fameuse « Ile de Lumière » des cartes postales
pour touristes en mal des * « trois s⁶ »

parcs zoologiques
camps de concentration
ghettos des tropiques
réserves kanakes

Camp-Est,
juillet 1977

1 manus: étoffes utilisées dans les échanges coutumiers

2 soirées «pop»: soirées de fête avec danse et alcool

3 faire la chaîne: quand, à tour de rôle, des hommes couchent avec la même femme, lors d'une soirée.

4 Eika: la cour du temple protestant, avec ses habitations.

5 Nickel II: minéralier de nickel.

6 trois s: «Sun» «Sea» «Sex»: soleil, mer, sexe.

Kanak Dog-day Dusk

Kanak dog-day dusk
a graceful cicada loses her way, wanders in
through the bars of my cell

Her wings sing me the warm intimacy of earth
warm intimacy of miniscule mosaic placenta
prolific cells
where yesterday she slumbered
warm intimacy of the vast plant-like uterus
where yesterday she slumbered

in the womb time
indeterminate
three days, centuries, millennia
carefree cicada knows not
cares not

knows only she loved this land this earth
nurturing belly
gentle milk breast mother
this earth this land
dark mossy softness
of her birth

When she emerges
adieu outmoded chrysalis
adieu old rags
astounding midnight metamorphosis
bright-shining mystery of rainbow finery

elegant grace of young beauty
wondrous gown of dancing fairy-winged creature
turning and spinning in a first magical ballet
to the chords of musical wings
poised for flight
when dawn comes

When the mid-day sun
will burn her wings
blissful lethargy, solitude, pain
of the Oceanian cicada

at the martyrdom of my land

Day-time silence of wings
still and in waiting
for the dusk of the Kanak dog-day sun

when their strident chorus in my cell has the bitter
injustice
of seconds stolen, hours taken, days robbed
by this prison time
that no one
that nothing
will ever replace

Camp-Est,
novembre 1974

Crépuscule Canicule Kanaks

Crépuscule canicule kanaks
une gracieuse cigale du pays s'égare
entre les barreaux de ma cellule

Ses ailes me chantent
la chaleur l'intimité de la terre
celles des minuscules placentas cloisonnés
prolifères cellules
où elle sommeillait hier
celles du vaste utérus végétal
où elle somnolait hier

au temps foetal
durée indéterminée
trois jours siècles millénaires
frivole cigale n'en sait rien
peu importe

Seulement elle aimait cette terre
matrice nourricière
sa douceur de mère de sein de lait
cette terre
noire mousse moelleuse
où elle naquit

Après la mue
adieu chrysalide démodée
adieu vieilles guenilles
étonnante métamorphose nocturne
rayonnante magie de parures colorées
grâce élégante de jeune beauté
merveilleuse toilette d'hémiptère virevoltant
en un premier ballet féérique
sur accord d'élytres musicaux
prêts à l'envol
quand viendra l'aurore

Quand le soleil de midi
lui brûlera les ailes
hébétude solitude souffrance
de la cigale océanienne

devant le martyr de ma terre

Silence diurne des élytres
à l'affût du
crépuscule de la canicule kanake

où leur stridente mélodie dans ma cellule a l'amertume
l'injustice
des secondes volées des heures raflées des jours dérobés
du temps emprisonné
que personne
que rien
ne nous rendra

Camp-Est,
novembre 1974

Naked Cloud Nights

for you, my Kanak sister

Naked cloud nights
Moonless shadow
The blind man alone
lives the darkness of your skin
beautiful
woman who waits
in the naked cloud nights

You are the wandering *iule*¹ that haunts
 mountain springs riverbanks streams
wrapping yourself in your long hair that covers you entirely
Then, at the coming of the warrior, in pursuit of the girl
 runaway from the tribe
you let your tresses fall, you reveal and open yourself
And the soul of the son of the tribe
penetrates your long hair and is lost
The soul of the son of the tribe the spirit of the warrior
have become the dwelling place of the wandering *iule*

You are the flower whose petals are constantly blown away by
the breath of the ocean reef winds the cyclone god
you let yourself be picked during endless nights

by hands fingers that wield long spears
greenstone axes wooden clubs
offering, in abandon you wilt and are reborn
and the hands of the *tayo*² grow weary
and the arms of the *tayo* rest in peace
spears clubs axes sleep
and are obedient totems of your immortal petals

You are the clear rain that haunts
the tall mountain guardian of the *tapu* spirits
the anxious call of the rain-maker sorcerer tempts you
becoming multitude for him you leave the clouds
in the black madness of rain-waters
and the dance of the rain-maker welcomes you
and the ritual voices this night are silent
and the words of the sorcerer become rain-drops

Eyes closed
Tears of joy
At dawn the dew
flows from your breasts
springs
wandering drifting waters that well
in your closed eyes

Montpellier,
14 January 1972

¹ *iule*: caterpillar associated with water and wood sprites
with a reputation for driving those it meets crazy

² *tayo*: has the sense of Kanak here

Nuits Nues

à toi, ma soeur kanake

Nuits nues
Ombres sans lune
Seul l'aveugle à vie
vit avec ta peau
belle
femme qui attend
dans les nuits nues

Tu es la iule¹ errante au bord des sources
le long des rivières et des ruisseaux
tu t'enroules dans ta chevelure qui te recouvre toute
Puis à la venue du guerrier qui poursuit
la fille enfuie de la Tribu
tu te dénudes tu te découvres tu t'ouvres
Et l'âme du fils de la tribu
pénètre dans ta chevelure et s'y perd
L'âme du fils de la tribu l'esprit du guerrier
sont devenus la case où vit la iule errante

Tu es la fleur sans cesse effeuillée par les souffles
du récif le dieu cyclone
tu te laisses cueillir au gré des nuits interminables
par les mains les doigts qui manient sagaies les haches
ostensoirs² et les casse-tête
tu t'abandonnes tu te fanes tu revis
Et les mains du tayo³ se lassent
et les armes du tayo reposent en paix
les haches les sagaies et casse-têtes se sont endormies
et sont sages totems de tes pétales immortelles

Tu es la pluie limpide qui hante la haute montagne
gardienne des esprits tabous
L'appel anxieux du sorcier faiseur de pluie te tente
Devenue multitude pour lui tu quittes les nues
dans la noire folie des eaux
Et la danse du sorcier t'accueille
et les voix rituelles cette nuit se taisent
et les paroles du sorcier deviennent gouttes de pluie

Yeux clos
Larmes de joie
A l'aube la rosée
jaillit de tes seins
sources
eaux qui divaguent
dans tes yeux clos

Montpellier,
14 janvier 1972

¹ iule: chenille associée à la nymphe des sources et forêts réputée pour rendre fous ceux qu'elle rencontre.

² haches ostensoirs: haches rondes en jade.

³ tayo: a le sens de «Kanak» ici.

White Sleepless Nights

*in remembrance of my grandfather and
in memory of my mother*

pure nights
girls so free
brilliant street-lights
of drunken ecstasy
pale
sudden luminescence
in the pure nights

The grains of sand below our ancestral space where at times
the waters flow to the lizard
shark river's mouth and are caught there
The grains of sand no longer hear the wailers' cries
of mourning when the chief dies
and the bamboo cameleon
from that moment moans no more and has disappeared
She has gone forever the woman who creates
the life and the blood of the clan
have gone out

the woman life-spring followed the idol into the labyrinthine
darkness of the town
was night-owl and flying fox singing and crying
the hope of the divinity so envied, idol more powerful
than the totems of all the clans
light of this god that fascinated you
as you searched for your sister that he has taken already
Your desire was to belong to this shining sun

She cares no longer for the past caresses of the breath
of the coral ocean breeze
No more will she offer her face to the ocean waves
that submerged a childhood salted with loud illusions
and sea-shell shining stars
each and every night my sister no longer sleeps
Dead and gone the time when the fire burned in the hut
the time of the deep sleep that unites us to the totems
And ever since my sister knows only
white sleepless nights

Crazy dreams
wordless lips
again you see the idol
desired vision
intense instant
in those crazy dreams

Montpellier,
27 February 1972

Nuits Blanches

*à la mémoire de mon grand-père
et au souvenir de ma mère*

Nuits pures
Filles si libres
Brillants réverbères
de l'ivresse sans mal
Pâle
subite lumière
dans les nuits pures

Les grains de sable en bas du tertre ancestral où s'écoulent
et demeurent parfois
les eaux de la bouche de rivière des requins lézards
les grains de sable n'entendent plus les cris des pleureuses
endeuillées quand meurt le chef
et le caméléon des bambous
dès lors ne gémit plus et a disparu
Elle s'en est allée à jamais la femme qui crée
la vie et le sang du clan se sont éteints

La femme source de vie suivit l'idole dans les tortueux
dédales de la ville
fut chouette et roussette nocturnes chantant et chuintant
l'espérance de la divinité si enviée à l'idole plus puissante
que les totems de tous les clans
Lumière de ce dieu qui te fascina
alors que tu cherchais ta soeur qu'il a déjà
Tu désirais être à ce lumineux soleil

Elle ne se soucie plus des caresses passées
des souffles du récif corallien
Elle n'offrira plus son visage aux vagues des marées
qui submergeaient une enfance salée d'illusions criardes
et d'étoiles nacrées
Toutes les nuits ma soeur ne dort plus
Il est mort le temps du feu dans la case
du profond sommeil qui nous unit aux totems
Et depuis ma soeur ne connaît que des nuits blanches

Songes fous
lèvres sans mot
tu revois l'idole
Rêve
Intense instant
dans les songes fous

Montpellier,
27 février 1972

Millenia

Yesterday before they landed
in our history
of roots recited
of origins memorised
who you were exactly
what your place was
in the world of our people

it's up to you, my mother
it's down to you, my sister
to try and find out

no to the ethnologist
no to the sociologist
from the capitalist West
no to the missionary
'civiliser' 'pacifier'
no to the petit-bourgeois idealist
to those who will chant that

you were a nothing, a non-entity
or else you were the mainstay of the clan
you were lower than a beast of burden
or else you were the source of life itself

for Millenia
they have spoken written decided
for you
in your place
my mother, my sister

it's high time to put a stop

both to the deception
and the damage

time to FIGHT
to define yourself
YOURSELF
to define your place
within the heart of your people
and every elsewhere

Camp-Est prison,
November 1974

Des Millenaires

Hier avant leur arrivée
dans notre histoire
aux racines récitées
aux origines mémorisées
qui tu fus exactement
qué fut ta place
dans le monde de notre peuple

il t'appartient ô ma mère
il te revient ô ma soeur
d'essayer de le chercher

non à l'ethnologue
non au sociologue
de l'Occident capitaliste
non au missionnaire
«civilisateur» «pacificateur»
non au petit-bourgeois idéaliste
qui chanteront que

tu n'étais rien du tout
ou bien tout reposait sur toi dans le clan
tu étais pire qu'une bête de somme
ou bien tu étais la source de toute vie

Des millénaires
ils ont parlé écrit décidé
pour toi
à ta place
ô ma mère ô ma soeur

Il est grand temps d'arrêter

et le manège
et le carnage

et de LUTTER
pour te définir
TOI-MEME
de même que ta place
au coeur de ton peuple
et partout ailleurs

Camp-Est,
novembre 1974

Questions

Fear at each liquor-soaked *tapéras*¹
Anxious terror of beatings, blows sometimes fatal
Cooking pots thrown around under the coffee plants
Yet another terrified flight into the darkness
feet stung by thistles brambles nettles
electric ants
biting into the breast that feeds our last born
thoughts of suicide amongst other things

For tomorrow, again
as always, as if nothing were amiss

at the meeting, in front of everyone
he will speak of oppression, of freedom

whose freedom, whose oppression, who by who with who for?

so many questions
our collective politics
will have to answer to

Ponérihouen,
September 1980

¹ *tapéras*: a corruption of the English word 'temperance',
it means here, ironically, drinking binge

Questions

Frayeur à chaque «tapéras» alcoolisé
angoisse des coups parfois mortels
marmites balancées sous les caféiers
Encore une fuite éperdue dans le noir
sous épines ronces et sensitives
et ces fourmis électriques
sur le sein allaitant notre dernier-né
Idées de suicide et autres

Car demain de nouveau
comme si de rien n'était

à la réunion devant tout le monde
il parlera d'oppression puis de liberté

de qui pour qui par qui avec qui ?

tant de questions auxquelles
notre pratique commune
devra répondre

Ponérihouen,
septembre 1980

Speaking Grief

So many words
or so few
no number
can speak the grief
no letter
can read the pain

Our suffering is

an island on the ocean of tears
a grain of coral sand on the shore
a pearl on a wet eyelash
a spray of green cordyline
a piece of cloth laid on a branch of araucaria
a date to flower on an aloe leaf

Our grief is

sharing as in exile the *igname* of the humiliated
anchoring the event in the history of our struggles
carrying the weight of the word mutilated
organising the anger of despair
reorienting the course of the river of monolithic oneness
building a new house for a country that would be otherwise

Ponérihouen,
9 May 1985

Pour Dire le Deuil

Tant de mots
ou si peu
point de nombre
pour dire le deuil
point de lettre
pour lire la peine

Notre douleur c'est

un îlot sur l'océan des larmes
une poussière corallienne sur la grève
une perle au bord de cils mouillés
une gerbe de cordyline verte
une étoffe sur un rameau d'araucaria
une date à fleurir sur une feuille d'aloès

Notre deuil c'est

partager l'igname d'exil des humiliés
incruster l'événement dans l'histoire de nos luttes
porter le poids de la parole mutilée
organiser la colère désespérée
orienter le cours de la rivière unitaire
bâtir une case nouvelle pour un pays autre.

Ponérihouen,
9 mai 1985

Wave-Song

Overwhelming heat
melts the scent of the laurel roses
near the high walls
under the tall mango tree
losing its young tasteless fruit
burns the many coloured petals
of the frail petunias
that lie dying on the sand
of the exercise yard

In this sun
the earth all around
is empty of water

Only the endless wave-song
beyond the barb-wire
is a lullaby that rocks our enclosed and watchful sleep

is a confession
of a journey via Valparaiso
beneath the huge white mushroom cloud
infecting the sky over Mururoa

a scream
deafening cry
echoing the cries of Santiago's tortured

an entreaty
words of combat
echoing the words of Pablo Neruda Victor Jara¹
Salvador Allende
and his last remaining companeros

carrying us forward
in dignity
stronger and more serene
more timeless than that of the ageless majestic
stone guardians of Rapanui²

Camp-Est prison,
November 1974

¹ Victor Jara: Chilean musician

² Rapanui: Easter Island

Clapotis

Chaleurs accablantes
fondant le parfum des lauriers rosés
près des hauts murs
sous le grand manguier
qui perd ses jeunes fruits fades
brûlant les pétales aux innombrables couleurs
des frêles pétunias
agonisant sur le sable
de la cour des mineures¹

Sous ce soleil
la terre alentour
est vide d'eau

Seul le clapotis sans fin des vagues
au-delà des barbelés
berce notre sommeil enfermé aux aguets

Il nous avoue
avoir vogué via Valparaiso
sous l'énorme champignon blanc
gangrenant le ciel de Mururoa

Il nous hurle
à nous briser les tympans
les cris des torturés de Santiago

Il nous entraîne
sur les paroles de combat
de Pablo Neruda de Victor Jara²
celles de Salvador Allende
du dernier carré de ses companeros

à la dignité
plus solide plus sereine plus immémoriale
que celle des géants sans âge
hiératiques gardiens de pierre de Rapanui³

Camp-Est,
novembre 1974

¹ cour des mineures: la cour face au bâtiment des mineures

² Victor Jara: musicien chilien

³ Rapanui: l'île de Pâques

SPEAKING TRUTH

writing

writing
an island
a land
where beings once were
where beings were without being
where beings are without being
speechless
lifeless
visionless
voiceless
beneath the heavy cloak
of silence
clear felled
by oneness of thought
by thought of oneness

writing
an island
a land
of water
rain-water
spring-water
sea-water

nickel-tinted
creek water
muddy water
of stagnant
mangrove
where floundering around in the slime
or swimming through murky waters
like a fish in water
becomes an art

writing
an island
a land
where
earth and
stone speak
in the place of beings
in the place of man
in the place of woman
so they may speak
the place of the child
who is
to be
born

Sydney,
15 July 1997

écrire

écrire
une île
un pays
où les êtres étaient
où les êtres étaient sans être
où les êtres sont sans être
sans dire
sans vie
sans voie
sans voix
sous la chape de
silence
et en coupe réglée de
la pensée unique

écrire
une île
un pays
d'eau
de pluie
de source
de mer
de creek
nickelé

d'eau
boueuse
de mangrove
stagnante
où vasouiller
ou nager en eaux troubles
comme un poisson dans l'eau
devient un art

écrire
une île
un pays
où
la terre
et
la pierre
parlent
à la place de l'être
à la place de l'homme
à la place de la femme
pour dire
la place de l'enfant
à
naître

Sydney,
15 juillet 1997

Roots

Roots stretching
out
into the day
by day
into time passing
into sun wind rain passing
hollowing out
earth
under stone
further deeper
always ever further deeper
to tie
the knot
umbilical cord
returned to earth
on earth's very belly
like the chrysalis casing
of cicada
returned to earth
on earth's very belly
emerging there
to land on these very roots
to be born to the world
before taking flight
bending into the wind
in flight toward a river ford
or toward waters flowing to sea
and beyond

toward a country...
some foreign quay...
railway station...
airport...
airwaves...
a way
a road
a path
toward the other

Sydney,
16 July 1997

Racines

Racines
s'étirant
au quotidien
au gré
du temps qui passe
du temps qu'il fait
creusant
la terre
sous la pierre
toujours plus loin
encore plus loin
pour nouer
le lien
le cordon
ombilical
rendu à
la terre
à même
la terre
telle la parure
de chrysalide
de cigale
rendue à
la terre
à même
la terre
à la mue
ou sur les racines
pour naître au monde
avant l'envol

au gré
du vent
vers le gué
ou vers les eaux
qui s'en vont
vers la mer
et au-delà
vers un pays
un quai
une gare
un aéroport
un réseau
une voie
un chemin
vers les autres

Sydney,
16 juillet 1997

o.t.h.e.r

original people
trampled underfoot
hunted
exterminated
removed

out-cast
threatened
homogenised
excluded
razed

letters
words
signs
that do not account for
that cannot speak
the reality
the realities
of the other
in their place
lines
lines of verse
written words
that try at least
to recognise
who
is the other

oppressor
tyrant
hardliner
enemy
racist

concrete
statue
to bring down
from the pedestal
to become
human
to be other

other(s)
together
home
earth
resistance

oneness in love
truce
halcyon
empathy
reverie

words
it's only words
ink on paper
big words
fancy words
as one might say
or
as the other would say

but what would the other be
what would a human be
without signs
without language
spoken or written?

what would man be
without words

what would one be
without the **other**?

Sydney,
17 July 1997

l'autre

a. u. t. r. e

aborigène

usé

tué

rien

effacé

aliéné

uniformisé

trépassé

rayé

éliminé

lettres

mots

signes

qui ne rendent pas compte

qui ne peuvent pas dire

la et les réalités

de l'autre

à sa place

lignes

vers

écrits

qui essaient du moins

de reconnaître

qui

est

l'autre

adversaire
ultra
tyran
raciste
ennemi

statue
de béton
à descendre
du piédestal
pour devenir
humain
être autre

autrui
unité
terre
résistance
ensemble

amour
utopie
trêve
rêve
être

des mots
rien que des mots
de la littérature
comme qui dirait
ou
comme dirait l'autre

mais que serait l'autre
que serait l'humain
sans signe
sans langue
parlée ou écrite ?

que serait l'homme
sans parole ?

que serait l'un
sans **l'autre** ?

Sydney,
17 juillet 1997

death

an unexpected flower
in the yard
or on the lawn
or in the tiny hand
of a little girl
a coconut-palm frond
cut by a small boy
or its trunk
lying across a track
an odour of beetle
a blue bottle's flight
a wounded kitten
a sparrow's cry
a sea-bird
on the threshold of the hut
a broken glass
a sleepless night
a dream
a presence
a meeting
all strangely unforeseen

Death is here
as on the first day
as on the last

Death speaks
the other
to us
as
our daily bread

child
sister
cousin
uncle
aunty
friend
comrade
foreigner
stranger
stray
big
small
woman
man

all that lives
all our lives
what we are
between life and death

the slow death of a people
the programmed death
of those who don't fit
the everyday death
of all those who are ignored
or treated with
insult
humiliation
hatred
violence

The death
of all those in whom
every hour
of the day and the night
die a thousand deaths
my Kanak woman's verse
my words of being Human

Sydney,
18 July 1997

la mort

une fleur inattendue
dans la cour
ou sur le gazon
ou dans la menotte
d'une fillette
une palme de cocotier
coupée par un garçonnet
ou son tronc
au travers d'un sentier
une odeur de coccinelle
un vol de mouche bleue
un chaton blessé
un cri de passereau
un oiseau de mer
au seuil de la case
un verre brisé
une insomnie
un rêve
une présence
une rencontre
insolites

La mort est là
comme au premier jour
comme au dernier jour

La mort nous dit
l'autre
au quotidien

l'enfant
la sœur
le parent
l'ami
le camarade
l'étranger
l'errant
le grand
le petit
la femme
l'homme

tout ce qui vit
toute notre vie

ce que nous sommes

entre la vie et la mort

la mort lente d'un peuple
la mort programmée
de ceux qui dérangent

la mort au quotidien
de tous ceux qu'on ignore
ou qu'on traite par
l'insulte
l'humiliation
la haine
la violence

La mort
de tous ceux en qui
à toute heure
du jour et de la nuit
meurent de mille morts
mes vers de femme Kanak
ou mes mots d'être Humain

Sydney,
18 juillet 1997

independence

Independence
is

a bit of garden
bit of field
a patch of dirt
patch of land

land to work

like the woman
tending her children
her taro¹
her yam²
day in day out
fishing night
or day both
lagoon fish
mangrove crab

whether to feed the extended family
or for market day

whether working at her own pace
or at the set hour
in her rights and responsibilities
for the child to come
or the child at school

sharing as custom prescribes

giving to others
fighting her own desires

in the face of silence
of violence
of inaction
of apathy
and state dependence
in the face of oneness of thought

doing
speaking
living
in the everyday

our aspirations
of being
together

a free country
a sovereign nation
a people who share

Sydney,
19 July 1997

^{1&2} the taro is, symbolically, the female counterpart to the male yam

indépendance

L'indépendance
c'est

un coin de jardin
un bout de champ
une part de terrain
un lopin de terre

la terre à travailler

comme la femme
qui élève
au quotidien
ses enfants
ses taros
ses ignames
ou pêche de nuit
comme de jour
les poissons du lagon
les crabes de la mangrove

pour nourrir la famille élargie
ou pour le jour du marché

travailler à son rythme
ou à l'heure dite
dans ses droits et devoirs
pour l'enfant à venir
ou à l'école

le partage coutumier

donner aux autres
et lutter contre soi

face au silence
à la violence
à l'inertie
à l'assistanat
face à la pensée unique

faire
dire
vivre
au quotidien

nos aspirations
à être
ensemble

un pays libre
une nation souveraine
un peuple qui partage

Sydney,
19 juillet 1997

being

Being
being human

in the face of two centuries
of colonial history
when
we were without being
when
we were not
were naught
we
were
always have been
we
have always known
that we were
we
have always known
who we were
know now who we are
what it is we're fighting for

In my language
Âboro
is
the human being in all he is
in all that this being
is

Sydney,
20 July 1997

être

Etre
être humain

face à deux siècles
d'histoire coloniale
où
nous étions sans être
où
nous n'étions pas
nous
avons toujours su
que nous étions
nous
avons toujours su
qui
nous étions
nous savons qui nous sommes
ce pour quoi nous luttons

Dans ma langue
Âboro
est
l'être humain dans tout ce qu'il est

Sydney,
20 juillet 1997

being alone

We are
from a people
from a culture
from a land
where
being alone
is being with
the *u*¹ et *duée*²

**those we cannot see
around us
and who are everywhere**

they who have lost their roots
who have lost their culture
who have lost their direction
who have no identity
no fixed abode

or they who are alone in themselves
who see only themselves
alone

to be taken by the hand
brought in
led out
from the asylum exile
of alienation
the prison house
of self
the solitude
of ego

in order to see
to be with
to live with
share with

**those we cannot see
around us
and who are everywhere**

Sydney,
21 July 1997

1&2 *u* and *duée* are sprites, goddesses

être seul

Nous sommes
d'un peuple
d'une culture
d'un pays
où
être seul
est
être avec
u et dué

**ceux que l'on ne voit pas
autour de nous
et qui sont partout**

les déracinés
les déculturés
les sans repères
les S.D.F.
les sans papiers

ou les seuls en eux
qui ne voient qu'eux
seuls

à amener
à sortir
de l'asile
de l'aliénation
de la prison
du soi
de la solitude
du moi

pour voir
être avec
vivre ensemble
partager avec

**ceux que l'on ne voit pas
autour de nous
et qui sont partout**

Sydney,
21 juillet 1997

the land

A bit of land
between the sorghums
near a ford
under a banyan
at the water's edge
where a fern is born
on a river bank
where a sultan-hen
a lady bird
a scarab beetle
speak to me
as I fall
asleep
into dream
under a patch of blue sky
or a breath of sea breeze

a ray of sunlight
on the rim of its eyelid
on the threshold of its gaze
where a cicada's wing glistens
or a pearl of dew
on a yam plant stem
or taro heart
where my being beats
to the rhythm of earth

Sydney,
22 July 1997

la terre

un lopin
entre les sorghos
près d'un gué
sous un banian
au bord de l'eau
où naît une fougère
sur un talus
où me parlent
une poule sultane
une coccinelle
un scarabée
quand je m'endors
en rêve
sous un bout de ciel bleu
ou un souffle d'alizé

un rayon de soleil
au bord de sa paupière
au seuil de son regard
où brille une aile de cigale
ou une perle de rosée
sur une tige d'igname
ou un cœur de taro
où palpite mon être
au rythme de la terre

Sydney,
22 juillet 1997

the waiting

waiting
nine months
or more multiplied in
seconds minutes hours weeks
in one's daily work
in the house
for the boss
for the child to come
from the belly caressed
or violated
for the bud that opens
for the stem that appears
the shoot that emerges
pushing up
from the ground nurtured
or burned

Waiting
beyond the labour of life
and the daily presence
of death

in dignity
respect
and hope
or
in shame
remorse
and despair

facing
the look that condemns
the word that wounds
the gesture that does not come

Is
to act like a human being
to do
to say what is right
to write

so we may find
together
the word that comforts
the talk that soothes
and the act that frees

Sydney,
23 July 1997

attente

Attendre
neuf mois
ou plus multiplié en
secondes minutes heures semaines
dans le travail quotidien
à la maison
ou pour le patron
l'enfant à venir
du ventre qu'on caresse
ou qu'on viole
le bourgeon qui éclot
la tige qui surgit
la pousse qui émerge
de la terre
qu'on soigne
ou qu'on brûle

Attendre
au-delà du travail
de la vie
de la mort
au quotidien
dans la dignité
le respect
et l'espoir

ou
dans la honte
le remords
et le désespoir

face
au regard qui condamne
à la parole qui blesse
au geste qui ne vient pas

c'est
agir en être humain
faire
dire ce qu'il faut
écnre

pour trouver
ensemble
le mot qui reconforte
la parole qui apaise
et l'acte qui libère

Sydney,
23 juillet 1997

fear

Fear of the *duéé*¹
fear of sorcery
fear of God
fear of the devil
fear of the father
fear of the husband
fear of the master
fear of the boss
fear of women
fear of custom

Fear of laughing
fear of suffering
fear of saying
fear of writing
fear of daring
fear of loving
fear of asking
fear of giving
fear of crying
fear of smiling

Fear of these people
fear of those people

fear of aging
fear of time

fear of this one
fear of that one
fear of self

fear of dying
fear of living
together

fear of being together

fear skin deep
fear deep under the skin
fear of skin

fear that will not say its name

fear in the belly
fear in the heart
fear in the body

fear at one's heels
fear at one's throat
ties the hands
and strangles
like a rosary told in the void
for a litany of mea culpa
or a requiem for the still-born

when what it's really about
is a country being born
where we may continue the every day struggle
one day at a time
time passing
so we ourselves
may
be born
create
so we may be
together

Adelaide,
24 July 1997

¹ duée: sprite, goddess

la peur

La peur des duéé
la peur du boucan
la peur de Dieu
la peur du diable
la peur du père
la peur du mari
la peur du maître
la peur du patron
la peur des femmes
la peur de la coutume

La peur de rire
la peur de souffrir
la peur de dire
la peur d'écrire
la peur d'oser
la peur d'aimer
la peur de demander
la peur de donner
la peur de pleurer
la peur de sourire

La peur des uns
la peur des autres

la peur de vieillir
la peur du temps

la peur de l'un
la peur de l'autre
la peur de soi

la peur de mourir
la peur de vivre
ensemble

la peur d'être ensemble

la peur à fleur de peau
la peur dans la peau
la peur de la peau

la peur qui ne veut pas dire son nom

la peur au ventre
la peur au cœur
la peur au corps

la peur aux trousses
ligote
et étrangle
tel un chapelet égrainé dans le vide
pour une litanie de mea culpa
ou un requiem pour mort-né

quand il s'agit bien
d'un pays qui vient au monde
où lutter au quotidien
jour après jour
au fil du temps
pour
naître
faire
être
ensemble

Adélaïde,
24 juillet 1997

being with the other

In the footsteps
of my mother
toward the land
on the path
of the ancestors
toward the land
the voice of my father
says
that we must go
to the fields
to school
elsewhere
toward others
to live
and to be
oneself with
others
wherever you are
alone with the u^1
alone in the crowd
alone with oneself

in a cave
or at the stake
flowing with
the blood
of struggle
for the land
to live as and to be oneself
with the other
who has not
who has nothing
who says nothing
who does not speak
who is dying
who is dying
to live and be oneself
with the other
who is knocking at your door
who is asking
who is expecting a child
the other
who is waiting
on your doorstep
the other
who is
on the threshold of your hut

Adelaide,
25 July 1997

¹ u: sprite, goddess

être avec l'autre

Sur les pas
de ma mère
vers la terre
sur la voie
de l'ancêtre
vers la terre
la voie
de mon père
dit
qu'il faut partir
au champ
à l'école
ailleurs
vers les autres
pour vivre
et être
soi avec
les autres
où que tu sois
seul avec les *u*
seul dans la foule
seul avec soi

dans une grotte
ou au poteau
où coule le sang
des luttes
de la terre
pour vivre et être soi
avec l'autre
qui n'a pas
qui n'a rien
qui ne dit rien
qui ne parle pas
qui agonise
qui se meurt
pour vivre et être soi
avec l'autre
qui frappe à ta porte
qui demande
qui attend un enfant
l'autre
qui attend
au pas de ta porte
l'autre
qui est
au seuil de ta case

Adélaïde,
25 juillet 1997

creation

Sorting words
in the water's flow
on a rock's crag
with the curve of a stone
at the rim of an eyelid
by the ford of a river
to the throb of a sob

Seizing the sense
in the sound of a consonant
in the voices of a vowel
in the quaver of a comma
in the no of a hiatus
in the closure of a bracket
in the finality of a full stop

Carving out the idea
to the flow of time
with the flow of years
in the ocean wind
under the sky of childhood
at the gates of memory
on the threshold of nothingness

Sorting words
between the lines
against the grain
from breaking point
to point of no return

Seizing sense
stealthily
or figuratively
from the cesura
to the fracture

Carving out the idea
at break of day
or in the black of night
from wound
to rupture
to live this writing
in rags and tatters
or as one dispossessed
to live writing
back against the wall
and in foreign territory
outside of myself
or as an underdog outsider
in this language
that is not mine

Sorting words
till I drop
Seizing the sense
to writing the self
Carving out the idea
till I
die

in the name of what is
and what is not
or of mine who are no more
in the name of those
at the frontline
of a country yet to be born
to the laughter of the children
to come

Adelaide,
26 July 1997

création

Trier les mots

au fil de l'eau
au dos d'un galet
au rond d'une pierre
au bord d'une paupière
au gué d'une rivière
au grelot d'un sanglot

Saisir le sens

au son d'une consonne
aux voix d'une voyelle
au pas d'une virgule
au non d'un hiatus
au clos d'une parenthèse
au final d'un point

Tailler l'idée

au fil du temps
au gré des ans
au vent de l'océan
au ciel d'enfance
aux portes de la mémoire
au seuil du néant

Trier les mots
à demi-mot
ou en porte-à-faux
de la brisure
à la démesure

Saisir le sens
à mots couverts
ou au figuré
de la césure
à la cassure

Tailler l'idée
à la pointe du jour
ou au plus noir de la nuit
de la blessure
à la rupture
vivre l'écriture
en guenilles
ou en va-nus-pieds
vivre l'écriture
au pied du mur
et en terre étrangère
hors de moi
ou en outsider
dans cette langue
qui n'est pas mienne

Tirer les mots
à n'en plus finir

Saisir le sens
à s'écrire

Tailler l'idée
à en mourir

au nom de ce qui est
et de ce qui n'est pas
ou des miens qui ne sont plus
au nom de ceux qui sont
au bord d'un pays à naître
au rire des enfants
à venir

Adélaïde,
26 juillet 1997

listen

Listen

to
a note
a word
a sound
a silence
a tone
a voice
a speaking
an utterance

Listen

to
a murmur
a noise
a cry
a laugh
a trill
a rhyme
a rhythm

Listen
in the emptiness
of a lodging
in the cold of a street
in the black
of a night
in the nothingness
of a dream

Listen
in CDs
in stereos
in sirens
in instruments
in engines

to being
to silence
to the world

Melbourne,
27 July 1997

écouter

Écouter

une note
un mot
un son
un silence
un ton
une voix
une parole

Écouter

un murmure
un bruit
un cri
un rire
une trille
une rime
un rythme

Écouter
dans le vide
d'un logement
dans le froid
d'une rue
dans le noir
d'une nuit
dans le néant
d'un rêve

Écouter
dans les CD
dans les stéréos
dans les sirènes
dans les instruments
dans les moteurs

l'être
le silence
le monde

Melbourne,
27 juillet 1997

hope

Am
alone
in a vehicle
travelling very fast
over asphalt
under concrete
like the Aborigine
sitting here in the cold
on a bench
in front of a church
facing a hurried world
or the one who plays
the didgeridoo
over there on the quay
facing the tourist crowd
or then again the old man
barefoot
on the icy morning
pavement

facing the night club
I see a gull
that flies away like
hope slipping away
to free
itself
from
the battered being
stumbling from here
to there
amidst the city chaos
amidst human indifference
to hold on forever
and ever
to a word
made from the woes of the world
hope

Melbourne,
28 July 1997

espoir

Seule
dans un véhicule
roulant très vite
sur le goudron
sous le béton
comme l'Aborigène
assis ici dans le froid
sur un banc
devant une église
face au monde pressé
ou celui qui joue
le didgeridoo
là-bas sur le quai
face à la foule touriste
ou encore le vieil homme
aux pieds nus
sur le trottoir glacial
du matin

face à la boîte de nuit
je vois une mouette
qui s'envole comme
l'espoir qui se dérobe
de l'être en lambeaux
qui cahote deci delà
dans le chaos de la ville
dans l'indifférence humaine
pour retenir encore
et toujours
de mots en maux du monde
l'espoir

Melbourne,
28 juillet 1997

speaking truth

speaking truth
to the armoured gaze
to the blank stare of closed lids
to the fatality of the evil-eye
to the blinkered masque
in order to
violently unpick
the stitches
of the tight-lips
that refuse to speak
to break the voices of the
we're speaking for you, mates
to stop the inflation of the
hail fellows and how do you dos
to disrupt the chorus of the
on behalf ofs
to counter the command of the
silence-we're-on-air brigade
to settle the score with the
be quiets
to put an end to the
endless
we knows

of those that know everything in the name of nothing
of those that think everything in the name of everyone

to
casually
reduce us
to nothing

Canberra,
29 July 1997

dire le vrai

Dire le vrai
au béton d'un regard
au clos des yeux fermés
au sort du mauvais œil
au masque des ceillères
pour
en découdre avec
les points de suture
des bouches cousues
casser la voix des
on parle pour toi
arrêter l'inflation des
je vous salue
brouiller le refrain des
au nom de
défaire l'ordre des
silence on tourne
régler la somme des
tais-toi
en finir avec les
nous savons
à n'en plus finir

de ceux qui savent tout au nom de rien
de ceux qui pensent tout au nom de tous

pour
mine de rien
nous
réduire à rien

Canberra,
29 juillet 1997

elsewhere

Elsewhere is here
when elsewhere
are people who listen
and share
with us
a few bits of memory
a few scraps of words
a few pages of reading
and writing
a small parcel of time
time for meeting
over a meal
or time for a walk
a few steps taken together
on a campus at start of term
as time passes
elsewhere as it does here
if elsewhere is here
for people who listen and share

Canberra,
30 July 1997

ailleurs

Ailleurs est ici
quand ailleurs
sont ceux qui écoutent
et partagent
avec nous
un bout de mémoire
quelques bribes de paroles
un peu de lecture
et d'écriture
une parcelle de temps
le temps d'une rencontre
autour d'un repas
ou de quelques pas
sur un campus en rentrée
au fil du temps qui passe
ailleurs comme ici
si ailleurs est ici
pour ceux qui écoutent et partagent

Canberra,
30 juillet 1997

toward tomorrow

*for Denis Freney*¹

a voice that fades and dies
on an answer-machine
a dream of strange drowning
a letter from prison
footsteps on asphalt
a day out on the harbour
to discover
the city
an Algerian poster
a heavy suitcase
an interview
one first of May
under the East Timor flag
before the departure
of this comrade
who left yesterday
as he had all his life
toward tomorrow

Sydney,
31 July 1997

¹ left-wing Sydney activist

vers demain

pour Denis Freney

une voix qui se meurt
sur un répondeur
un rêve de noyade étrange
une lettre de prison
des pas sur le bitume
une balade en mer
à la découverte
de la ville
un poster algérien
une lourde valise
une interview
un premier mai
sous le drapeau d'East Timor
avant le départ
du camarade
qui s'en est allé
hier
comme toute sa vie
vers demain

Sydney,
31 juillet 1997

for Bernadette

In the calm hollow of a wave
a quiet
Friday afternoon
walk
along the wide bay
in the hollow of my memory
a promise made
out on the harbour
in homage to the courage
of a woman
a promise of a poem
in gratitude
to a great lady of this country
who I'll be thinking of
tomorrow
on the road home

Sydney,
1st August 1997

à Bernadette

Au creux d'une vague
une promenade sereine
de vendredi après-midi
dans la grande baie
au creux de ma mémoire
une promesse en mer
en hommage au courage
d'une femme
de poème en gratitude
à une grande dame du pays
à qui je penserai
demain
sur la route du retour

Sydney,
1er août 1997

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

word memory

The word spoken
comes from the belly
like the child

The word
is the fruit
of silence

words are **innocents**
with their hands full

We also **get high**
on words
to **forget**
the world

We don't have **short** memories
but sometimes
we like to
forget

Silence won't speak
won't signify

So they cut out
your tongue?
So you lost your
(native) tongue?
So then, speak!

the word-mills
are stilled into silence
by
true concern

Memory
is a red-hot iron
in the wound

parole mémoire

La parole
sort du **ventre**
comme **l'enfant**

Le silence
ne veut rien dire

On te coupe
la langue
tu as perdu
ta langue ?
alors, parle !

La parole
est le fruit
du silence

Les **mots** sont des **innocents**
aux mains pleines

Les moulins
à paroles **ne tournent plus**
devant
le concerné

On se **drogue** aussi
de mots
pour **oublier**
le monde

Avant et après
la réunion
les conciliabules **vont bon train**
au bénéfice
des beaux parleurs

On n'a pas la mémoire courte
mais des fois
on aime bien
oublier

La mémoire est
comme le fer
dans la plaie

It's a Sign of the Times

It's a Sign of the *Times*
the black briefcase
absent
from the times of struggle
now well and truly
present
and in a front row seat
if you please
looking out for *number one*
first in line
in the *post* office queue
for a *top job* to fill
number one in line
for a *position* in *power*

par les temps qui courent

Par les temps qui courent
le cadre **absent**
du temps des luttes
est bel et bien **présent** et
aux premières loges
s'il vous plaît
en bon number one
aux abonnés
des postes à pourvoir
en bon number one
aux abonnés
des postes de **pouvoir**

the land

For some
 the land
 For
 others
 nothing
more than a green
 rock

The French State
keeps an ever watchful eye
over its **strategic** rock
 in the Pacific

In my language
 the land
is

“*Nâ-puu*”
“There where we sleep”

Alone
Having Nothing
one morning or one evening
one day one night
I shall go away
back to my mother
the Land

As I came
to my mother
the Land
one morning or one evening
one day one night
alone
Having Nothing

Under the cement
the land
under the concrete
the land
under the bitumen
the land
under the tarmac
the land
under the macadam
the land
under the asphalt
the land

la terre

Pour les uns
la terre
Pour
les autres
rien
qu'un
caillou vert

L'Etat français
veille encore au grain
de son caillou **stratégique**
du Pacifique

Dans ma langue la terre
se dit

« *Nâ-puu* »

« Là où l'on dort »

Seule
sans rien
un matin ou un soir
un jour ou une nuit
je m'en irai
à ma mère
la Terre

Comme je suis venue
à ma mère
la Terre
un jour ou une nuit
un matin ou un soir
seule
sans rien

sous le ciment
la terre
sous le béton
la terre
sous le bitume
la terre
sous le goudron
la terre
sous le coaltar
la terre
sous l'asphalte
la terre

Custom

The laziness
of some
feeds off the Custom
of others

There are those
who live beyond their means
and make others pay
by their
opportune use
of Custom

There are those who go
in for Custom
as they would go to a
fair

The soul
is gone from this word
emptied
thrown out
trashed

“Custom”

la Coutume

La paresse
des uns
se nourrit de la coutume
des autres

Il y en a
qui vivent au-dessus de leurs moyens
et font payer les autres
en passant
éventuellement
par la coutume

Il y en a qui
vont à la coutume
comme à la
kermesse

Elle n'est
plus dans ces deux mots
où on l'a vidée
d'où on l'a vidée

« **la coutume** »

Boucan¹

Boucan

when you hold us in your spell
we are hooked
on your magic
responsibility flies
out the window
and we lose it
big time

Boucan

when you hold us in your spell
the brother hits his sister
the nephew kills his uncle
the daughter spits in her mother's face

Boucan

when you hold us in your spell
its just
a dog's life

¹ Boucan: sorcerer

Boucan

when you hold us in your spell
it's almost too good to be true
for the local witch-doctor quack
healing under contract
making a pretty bundle
but alas
alas
woe is we
it's too bad but so true
too bad for our health
for our life
too bad
for us

le Boucan

Boucan
quand tu nous tiens
on ne se passe plus
de ton paquet magique
on déresponsabilise
à cent à l'heure
on disjoncte
à pleins tubes

Boucan
quand tu nous tiens
le frère frappe sa sœur
le neveu tue son oncle
la fille vomit sa mère

Boucan
quand tu nous tiens
c'est carrément
une vie de chien

Boucan
quand tu nous tiens
c'est tant mieux
pour le charlatan du coin
qui soigne sous contrat
pour un joli magot
mais hélas
trois fois hélas
c'est
tant pis
pour notre santé
pour notre vie
c'est tant pis
pour nous

love and other catastrophes

From desire to pleasure
the desiring body blooms
and desire
reduces **Love** to **pleasure**

Rape
of
womanhood
to prove
one's
manhood

glOry
is an inflatable dOll

Jealousy is a stone
in the heart
and a noose around the neck
of fearing otherness

We wait for
time
that waits for no man

We p a s s w i t h
time
that remains

We are only p a s s i n g t h r o u g h
like youth
or life
in this world

l'amour et d'autres désastres

Du désir au plaisir
le corps désire éclore
et le désir
réduit l'amour au plaisir

On viole
la femme
pour prouver
qu'on est
des hommes

La gloire
est une poupée gonflable

La jalousie est une **pierre**
au cœur
et un nœud au cou
de qui craint l'autre

On attend
le temps
qui n'attend pas

On p a s s e avec
le temps
qui reste

On ne fait que p a s s e r
comme la jeunesse
ou la vie
en ce monde

truth

Naked Truth

that none possesses

la vérité

Nue est la vérité

que nul ne détient

death

*We are born
onto this earth
an instant to live
in time to die*

Fear not
for she is here
at birth
and again
at every living moment

Yes

from the other side

She is here
just over there
staring us in the face
death
by our side
biding her time
since birth



la mort

*On naît au monde
on est sur terre*

l'instant de vivre
ou le temps de mourir

Point de crainte
car elle est là
à la naissance
et encore là
à toute heure
de la vie

oui

de l'autre côté

elle est là
en face
toujours là
à nos côtés
attendant son heure
depuis la naissance



THE BEST OF ALL WORLDS

Waste Land

Empty now the waste land
of my games of old
down-under back-street slum child
of iron shanty huts and
mimosa squats
with my back-street mates
our heads in the clouds
and the nickel factory smoke
tagging on the run
every wall round the place
dodging cops' sirens
with our child dreams
and security guards on the rounds
with our young hopes
of sons of the land
leaving on the wind
fading with time
rage in the heart
as every move
hits the wall
of silence of the haves
dismembered by the system
of no fair share
I am cut off
from my brothers of yesterday
shattered in a thousand pieces
of irrefutable paper that
won't stick
to the walls

of this endless
mental prison
before the TV screen
that bashes my head in with
its loin-like
truncheon thrust
that blows my brain
with its global and virtual
in total denial of my reality
my everyday reality
as I live it
and my version of things
as they happen
and my point of view
senseless
from so much soul searching soul
emptying
blues
before the empty wasteland
of our down-under back-street slum
child games of old
back-streets empty now of all
my mates from back then
lost
somewhere
in the system

Terrain vague

Vide est le terrain vague
de mes jeux d'antan
d'enfant de seconde zone
celle des cabanes
dans les mimosas
avec les copains du squat
la tête dans les nuages
et la fumée du nickel
à taguer à la va vite
sur tous les murs du coin
entre deux sirènes de flics
nos rêves d'enfants
entre deux tours de vigiles
nos espoirs de jeunes
et de fils du pays
qui s'en vont avec le vent
qui s'étiolent avec le temps
de la rage au cœur
quand tout se heurte
au silence des nantis
au système sans partage
qui me départage
de mes frères d'hier

et m'éclate en mille morceaux
de papier incollable
sur les murs de ma prison
mentale à n'en plus finir
devant l'écran de télé
qui me matraque la tête
à coups de boutoir
et m'explose le ciboulot
de global et de virtuel
contre ma réalité quotidienne
telle que je la vis
et ma version des faits
tels qu'ils se déroulent
de mon point de vue
devenu vide de sens
à force de vague à l'âme
devant le terrain vague
de nos jeux d'antan
d'enfants de seconde zone
vide de tous mes copains
de ce temps-là
disparus dans le système

Tropical Town

It's a tropical town
with all the iron and the concrete it takes
and a few coconut palms
to ensure that it is so
despite all those
who would wish it otherwise
than all the red white and blues
of all those fine facades
all those proud cenotaphs
that they must suffer still
like it or not
we're in France here
twenty thousand ks. away
from the beloved mother country
of all these and other antipodean
isles tranquil-ised
by the red white and blues of
all the old clichés
that some carry still
as the glorious scars
of long ago and times gone by
back in the good old colonial days
when things were fine and dandy
in the best of all worlds
of the tropical town

Ville tropicale

C'est une ville tropicale
avec tout ce qu'il faut
de fer et de béton
et quelques cocotiers
pour qu'il en soit ainsi
n'en déplaie à tous ceux
qui la veulent autrement
que tous les bleus blancs rouges
de tous ces beaux frontons
et monuments aux morts
qu'ils doivent encore subir
qu'ils le veuillent ou non
car ici c'est la France
à vingt mille kilomètres
de cette chère mère patrie
de toutes ces antipodes
et autres îles alanguies
aux couleurs bleu blanc rouge
de tous les vieux clichés
que d'aucuns portent encore
en belles cicatrices
d'antan et de jadis
du temps des colonies
quand tout allait très bien
dans le meilleur des mondes
de la ville tropicale

With Back Bowed

Day breaks
on the roof of a thatched hut
where lies sleeping between her parents
the child I once was

and the morning dew
drops on the bowed back
of my old woman's shame
at break of day

lighting my mind's eye
with parentless children
who beg in the street
without the slightest memory
of their bit of land
back home

where the ruling masters
are liars
and impostors
fraudsters
and forgers
of our customs

who hurry around
up and down the streets of the town
pounding the pavements
with the self-important strides
of the man on a mission

from a mistress to satisfy
to a jealous wife
from a spoiled daughter
to an estranged son

children to feed
going to school
through the mangrove
while the hurrying father
slides a groping hand
towards the daughter's thigh

on the floor of the shanty
knocked out with booze and dope
to forget her
prostitute state of
paternal rape

Day breaks
on the roof of a hut
where lies sleeping between her parents
the child I once was

Le dos courbé

Le jour se lève
sur le toit d'une case
où dort entre ses parents
L'enfant que je fus

et la rosée du matin
arrose le dos courbé
de ma honte
de vieille femme
au lever du jour

éclairant ma mémoire
des enfants sans parents
qui mendient dans la rue
sans aucun souvenir
de leur coin de terre

où règnent en maîtres
menteurs
usurpateurs
falsificateurs
de la coutume

qui courent dans tous les sens
les rues de la ville
battant le pavé
de leur pas pressé
d'homme à tout faire

de la maîtresse à satisfaire
de la femme jalouse
de la fille gâtée
du fils en rupture
des enfants à nourrir

allant à l'école
par la mangrove
pendant que le père pressé
glisse sa main avide
vers la cuisse de la fille

k.o. dans la cabane
d'alcool et de came
pour oublier son état de
prostituée
violée par son père

Le jour se lève
sur le toit d'une case
où dort entre ses parents
l'enfant que je fus

Mangrove Swamp

The swamp is crawling with beings
coming and going every which way
in the mangrove mud
in the crab traps
full to burst
ready to claw
if need be to remind you
of the cost
of living
as dog eats dog
and the price to pay
for the bloom of youth
to stay fresh flower
a collector's rose
daisy on a chain
round some charmer's neck
notch in the belt
of some champion pimp
when night falls
over the mangrove swamp
where fireflies glitter
like the lights of the harlot town
all the better to see you with
my child

Mangrove

La mangrove grouille d'êtres
allant et venant dans tous les sens
dans la boue des palétuviers
et des paniers de crabes
pleins à craquer
et prêts à pincer
s'il le faut pour rappeler
le coût de la vie
le prix à payer
pour rester belle plante
de collection de roses
de marguerites à effeuiller
et autres femmes à inscrire
aux CV et palmarès
des médaillés de la drague
des proxénètes et autres maquereaux
quand tombe la nuit
au bord de la mangrove
où scintillent les lucioles
et brillent les lumières
de la ville lupanar
pour mieux te soumettre
mon enfant

Drag Net

Be on your way
Get out of mine
Out of my life
story
of beds and dregs
of the society where
sex equals cash
or promotion
from the boss lagging
behind
the internet times
suddenly face to face
with his screen
gaping open-mouthed as
the virtual and the digital
clear the way
clean sweep
drag net
to open the infinite doors
of the global world
with its evils of the earth
like Pandora's Box

Net

Passes ton chemin
et va voir ailleurs
si j'y suis
dans mon histoire
de lit et de lie
de la société où
coucher égale dollars
ou promotion
du patron en retard
sur l'époque du net
qui tombe nez-à-nez
avec son écran
et bouche bée devant
le virtuel et le numérique
faisant place nette
pour ouvrir à l'infini
les portes du monde global
avec ses maux de la terre
comme la boîte de Pandore

Netted

little boy will grow up
into big boy
will surf the net
from adventure to adventure
will travel the world
seek his fortune
in search of civilisations lost
in remembrance of past time
on the computer screen
of the cyber-café or the cyber-hut
will sail the oceans of the world
like a multi-hull helmsman
will brave the ocean winds
will tangle with sharks, eaters of men
Jaws
that let none be the one who got away
spill nothing but haemoglobin
over the giant wide screen when
little fish grows up
into big fish
will be caught and fried
leaping
tangled
netted

Dans les mailles du filet

Petit garçon deviendra grand
et surfera sur le net
et d'aventure en aventure
s'en ira de par le monde
à la recherche du temps perdu
et des civilisations disparues
sur l'écran de l'ordinateur
du cyber-café ou de la cyber-case
et sur tous les océans du globe
tel un barreur de multicoque
aura maille à partir
avec le vent du large
et les requins mangeurs d'hommes
les dents de la mer du film
qui ne laissent filer personne
et couler que de l'hémoglobine
sur grand écran géant quand
petit poisson deviendra grand
se fera frire et sautera
dans les mailles du filet

Decline

The wine is flowing
in the hut next-door
from the bottle
from the carton
drinking themselves full
passing the occasional sip to old Pops
and his stick
waiting for the physio
amidst the laughing and the shouting
and the drunken delirium
under a lead hot sun
whose blazing will
raze
any vague desire
to think
or do
whatever
in this world
that never stops
turning
against us
reducing us
to ruined wrecks
on a downward spiral
of decline
in the land of booze
where Johnnie Walker is King
in the isle of dope
where Weed
rules

Deperdition

Le vin coule à flots
dans la case d'à côté
et on le boit au goulot
ou en berlingot
jusqu'à plus soif
avec de temps à autre
une gorgée pour le pépé
et sa béquille
qui attendent le kiné
sous les rires et les cris
et tout le délire
sous un soleil de plomb
brûlant à volonté
toute velléité
de penser
à réaliser
quoi que ce soit
dans ce monde
qui n'en finit pas
de se retourner
contre nous
et de nous réduire
à l'état d'épave
en perdition
et déperdition
en pays d'alcool
où règne Johnnie Walker
et en île de came
où la marie-jeanne
fait la loi

In the Land of King Nick

The land of King Nick
is an island in the sun
where the sun always shines
for all the golden boys
of the local and
international jet-sets
and their dolly birds
printed on blue sea
gliding on wind surf
or flying surf
or helicopter
conquerors of the sky
roaring in out of nowhere
on their jet-skis
or as silver surfers
racing over the seven seas
and they swim and they sail
and they come and they go
and they run and they climb
and they leap and they fly
nature sport gods
super rally riders
always initiators

of the latest thrill
of the latest leisure taste sensation
to while away the time
like kings in conquered territory
and such is life
on this island in the sun
its shores gently lapped
by a post-card perfect ocean
that don't say it all
coz whatever you do
no waves
King Nick says
coz it feels good to doze
under the coconut palms
by forest waters and shining sands
and so forget
how the other half lives
all those they live off
King Nick and his Wall St. nickel-dollar court
in the Land of King Nick

Au Pays du Roi Nick

Le pays du roi Nick
est une île au soleil
où il fait toujours beau
pour tous les golden boys
de la jet-set locale
et internationale
et leurs petites poupées
imprimés sur mer bleu
à planer en flying-surf
ou en hélicoptère
en conquérants du ciel
à surgir en jet-ski
ou en surfers rapides
de toutes les mers du globe
et ils nagent et ils voguent
et ils vont et ils viennent
et ils courent et ils montent
et ils sautent et ils volent
en dieux du sport nature
et en super raiders
toujours initiateurs

de quelque nouveauté
à se mettre sous la dent
et faire passer le temps
comme en pays conquis
et ainsi va la vie
sur cette île au soleil
bercée par l'océan
des belles cartes postales
qui ne disent pas tout
car surtout pas de vague
comme a dit le roi Nick
car il fait bon dormir
sous les cocotiers
et oublier ainsi
les conditions de vie
de tous ceux qui font vivre
le roi Nick et sa cour
le nickel et son cours
au pays du roi Nick

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The Sullivan's Creek Series is a developing initiative of Pandanus Books. Extending the boundaries of the Pandanus Books' list, the Sullivan's Creek Series seeks to explore Australia through the work of new writers, with particular encouragement to authors from Canberra and the region. Publishing history, biography, memoir, scholarly texts, fiction and poetry, the imprint complements the Asia and Pacific focus of Pandanus Books and aims to make a lively contribution to scholarship and cultural knowledge.