Antipodean French Crime Fiction is All but Pacific

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Abstract
In exploring how crime fiction's geo-political context addresses social critique, the corpus of French crime novels set in the South Pacific offers a precious case-study since it contemporaneously evokes communities both colonial – French Polynesia, New Caledonia, the New Hebrides, and Wallis and Futuna – and post-colonial: New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu. I am not claiming a regional (crime) literature for the South Pacific. Instead, I peer through the lens of French-language crime fiction set in the South Pacific to explore what it reveals about cultural assumptions and social critique. Distant reading of this corpus reveals a cultural gap between reality and how these locations and their inhabitants are imagined, particularly through the choice of the protagonists' cultural background. Close reading of the corpus helps trace the gap's contours, in particular authors' fixation on plots with global rather than local ramifications. In this essay, I investigate the roots of this gap in French imperial and colonial projects, and show that the gap narrows over time, offering evidence based on changes in author background, publisher, and genre.

Key words: post-colonial, imperial, South Pacific, crime fiction.

1. Introduction

In 1998 Daniel Margueron published an overview of French crime and spy novels set in French Polynesia. Having identified twenty-four such works, he found that they split on thematic and chronological dimensions into two groups: a pre-1960 focus on social and political themes versus a later evocation of France's atomic research (Margueron 1998: 2). In updating and extending Margueron's work across the South Pacific[1] I will show that his analysis fits into a

[1] I exclude Australia partly because DNA evidence shows that Aborigines and

broader issue of how South Pacific French crime fiction (SPFCF) authors use place and culture and how their depictions reveal more about metropolitan French preoccupations than South Pacific geopolitical realities. I begin by identifying the significant gap between South Pacific cultural and geopolitical reality and its imagined crime fictional depictions. I then examine why this gap exists and why it has narrowed in the fifteen years since Margueron's review before tracing a possible future for social critique in SPFCF based on works of the extreme contemporary.

While reality is always distorted by fiction (for example, the ever higher body counts racked up in contemporary crime) what differentiates SPFCF's reality gap is that it involves the novels' setting and characterisation more than their plot. Early social critique in SPFCF is unidirectional denunciation by metropolitan outsiders of the Pacific way of life. While we will see that some recent South Pacific insider voices have reversed this to denounce the Western lifestyle being imposed on them, this switch is by no means complete, perhaps because much of the region remains colonized. The corpus of eighty-four SPFCF novels[2] published between 1922 and 2013 splits into two groups based on the political situation of the country in which they are set: independent versus non-self-governing. Only ten novels (12%) are set in independent nations: one in Fiji, five in New Zealand and four in Papua New Guinea. The remaining seventy-four (88%) take place on five island groups governed from elsewhere. Forty-four (52%) novels are set in French Polynesia, an overseas country (*pays d'outre-mer*) of the Republic, that includes the atolls of Hao, Mururoa and Fangataufa, the location from 1966 to 1996 of France's nuclear testing at the *Centre d'expérimentation du Pacifique* (CEP, Pacific Experimental Centre). Twenty-five novels (30%) take place on New Caledonia, which is on a path to independence from France with a referendum expected before 2018. Three novels are set on now-independent

other Pacific peoples separated very early in human history (Rasmussen *et al.* 2011: 97) but mostly because Australia occupies a different imaginary space in the French psyche; a dusty-red first-world continent rather than turquoise lagoon-laced but economically and socially backward island paradises.

[2] I take a broad view of this genre, including spy novels and thrillers but excluding novels only using the South Pacific as a brief stopover.

Vanuatu[3], which as the New Hebrides group was administered from 1906 to 1980 by an Anglo-French Condominium. And both Wallis and Futuna, an overseas collectivity (*collectivité d'outre-mer*) of the French Republic, and Easter Island, a special territory of Chile, feature in one novel each. Thus this corpus is valuable since it contemporaneously evokes locations both under and free of the colonial noose.

2. Evidence for gap between reality and SPFCF

I first trace the edges of a cultural gap between geo-political reality and SPFCF imagination using evidence gathered from both distant and close reading of the corpus. Distant reading the eighty-four novels as a single corpus reveals that fictional South Pacific demographics do not approximate reality. SPFCF novels fall into five groups according to the cultural origin of their main protagonist: fifty are metropolitan French visitors, seven are metropolitan French temporarily resident in the region as government functionaries, eleven are other resident metropolitan French, five are locally born whites, and eleven are indigenous persons. These proportions have changed over time with metropolitan French visitors of the early decades being joined, but not replaced, by characters settled in the region, however even today they do not approach demographic reality. In New Caledonia, Kanak are 40.3% of the population, the largest grouping ahead of Europeans (29.2%) and those from Wallis and Futuna (8.7%) (Rivoilan and Broustet 2011: 3). Racial and ethnic breakdowns are not collected for French Polynesia but 30% of the archipelago's residents report speaking at home a Polynesian language rather than French (Bodet and Monchois 2009: 3). Tellingly, only sixteen (19%) SPFCF novels are written from the cultural-insider perspective of characters anchored in South Pacific life, either indigenous peoples or locally born whites. Moreover, this is a recent phenomenon with the first such novel published by Lucien Maillard in 1995. Thus the vast majority of SPFCF novels depict

[3] One of the country's three SPFCF novels was set and published after Vanuatu's independence but it does not engage with post-independence themes, other than a French spy complaining that his job is more difficult now the French have no authority (Nemours 1982: 38).

South Pacific societies through the eyes of those without a personal stake in these countries. Most are either visitors, for a short holiday or assignment, or sojourners on a longer-term, but still temporary, posting. Even those protagonists who have moved permanently to the region, often to retire, keep one foot in metropolitan France through regular trips back to replenish supplies as well as to nourish social and family ties.

Shifting the gaze to the level of individual novels reveals a striking feature of SPFCF: the proportion of novels in which the intrigue is global rather than local. To a metropolitan French visitor, France's Pacific outposts seem deep in enemy territory: "nearby residents are the Americans, the Russians, the Chinese and exported British, everyone except the French" (Nord 1966: 106, my translation). Notable by their absence are France's other Pacific neighbours – Polynesians, Melanesians and Micronesians – and this is true of much SPFCF. When indigenous Pacific peoples are involved, it is for crises that made global headlines, such as the pandemonium at the end of the New Hebridean Condominium (Nemours 1979: 11), the New Caledonian événements (A.D.G. 1988b: 14), or a Fijian coup (Deutsch 2002: 9). However, Pacific peoples are usually mere bystanders to hot and cold wars fought by Pacific Rim powers, such as China, Japan and former Anglo-Saxon colonies.

SPFCF's depiction of China and the Chinese is frequent – occurring in thirty-one (37%) novels – and changes over time. In early works China is a geopolitical enemy fomenting independence in French colonies in order to extend its Maoist influence across the Pacific (Cayeux 1960: 40; Genève 1962: 54). In 1958 French President Charles de Gaulle promulgated the constitution of the Fifth French Republic, under which "distant lands are no longer seen as mere French possessions in the old colonial tradition but as intrinsic parts of France itself" (Chesneaux 1991: 256). De Gaulle was vying with China[4] to position France between the US and the USSR (Sun 2011: 58) as a middle-sized world power (Chesneaux 1991: 268), a design in which France's presence in the Pacific played an important

[4] France was the first major Western power to recognise the People's Republic of China on 27 January 1964 (Vaïsse 1998: 520), although this was some fifteen years after Mao came to power, a delay partly explained by Peking's support for the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic in 1958 (p. 62).

role (Gomane 1983: 35). It is worth noting that representing the communist threat by China rather than the USSR (which appears in only eight SPFCF novels) differs from metropolitan French cold war concerns of the time. A decade later, mainland Chinese are being framed by local Chinese to disguise the latters' land grab (Rank 1972: 192f). From then on both mainland and local Chinese inspire distrust, but for different reasons. Local Chinese took over commerce but, despite – or because of – their importance to the economy, French and native Tahitians did not treat them well, voting in an anti-Chinese law (p. 192). Thus local Chinese who have lived in French Polynesia for generations resent their second-class status (Cayeux 1960: 38f). Notwithstanding their demographic and economic importance in French Polynesia, only one novel is written from a local Chinese perspective – *On rit jaune à Tahiti* (Prudhomme 2010) – condemning the heavy-handed approach to assigning French names to naturalised Indochinese citizens. Three recent novels – Patrice Guirao's trilogy (2009; 2011; 2012) featuring private detective Al Dorsey – are rare (and well-written) examples of SPFCF featuring a recurring and sympathetically written Tahitian-Chinese secondary character, Toti. This change in attitude is probably less due to a widespread rethinking of racial prejudices than to Guirao's insider knowledge: born in 1954 in Mascara, Algeria, Guirao's family moved to Tahiti in 1968 and, but for studying for a degree in France, he has lived there ever since. In addition, a Chinese character plays an important secondary role in the only SPFCF written by someone born there (Rey 2005).

Although some SPFCF mentions American efforts to combat Japan in the Pacific theatre during WWII (Daeninckx 2003: 10; Rank 1978: 160; Zié-Mé 2007: 97), most Japanese antagonists have industrial or economic rather than geo-political motivations. In *Le Sabbat des Papous* (Evans 1974: 192), Japanese spies convince a Papua New Guinean tribe to worship a mini-submarine as the reincarnation of their gods, hoping to have the tribe's chief sign over mineral rights to a uranium vein. In *Le Général contre le samouraï* (Nemours 1974b: 145), Japanese industrial spies kidnap the daughter of an English nuclear scientist while she is water-skiing off Papeete in order to pressure her father into revealing nuclear reactor technology. In *Lola von Bismarck* (Rank 1978: 212), a Japanese diplomat supports a New Caledonian insurrection with hired mercenaries, hoping to assume

nickel mining concessions after independence. In *Je fais main basse sur les diams' des Papous* (Whale 1987: 166) a French adventurer finds a diamond mine in Papua New Guinea and sells the exploration rights to a Japanese company hoping to break de Beers's monopoly. These works coincide with Japan's enviable export-led growth from the 1970s – just as the *trente glorieuses* years were ending in France – when President François Mitterrand negotiated "'voluntary' restraint agreements with the Japanese over cars" (Wright 1984: 293) and promoted a home-grown electronics industry (Holton 1986: 75).

If the Chinese are motivated by power and the Japanese by money, SPFCF has Anglo-Saxon zealots – "The English leave behind in their former colonies not Anglophiles but Anglo-maniacs" (Nemours 1974b: 184, my translation) – wanting to rid the Pacific of the French in general and Catholicism in particular (A.D.G. 1987a: 169; de Scitivaux 1998: 53; Nemours 1974b: 82, 126f; 1979: 19; Serres 1997: 23; 2005: 11). Thus Australians, New Zealanders and/or Americans plot to destabilise New Caledonia (Nemours 1975: 28f; Rank 1978: 12), Polynesia (Nord 1966: 91; Rank 1972: 217), and particularly the Anglo-French Condominium:

> France is the colonial power clinging to the New Hebrides, for many reasons starting with the fact that if it leaves the archipelago then New Caledonia would be isolated in a totally Anglophone east [sic] Pacific in the grip of Australian leadership ambitions. (Nemours 1974a: 138, my translation)

As well as these international concerns, the nuclear arms race and France's CEP loom over novels set in French Polynesia, as Margueron identified. Earlier works argue the centre's role in maintaining global geopolitical stability (Nord 1966) but if metropolitan France believes in the global good brought by its nuclear deterrent, the local risk / benefit analysis is less clear cut with works mentioning health and safety risks to locals (Pécherot 1996), the potential for terrorism (Nord 1966; Site 1967), or how French Polynesia has been changed by the CEP (Gouiran 2004) and speculate about the paradise it might have remained but for the CEP (Bertaud 2010: 35; Nemours 1974b: 19, 130). For all the nuclear ambivalence only two groups regularly surface in SPFCF as actively antinuclear – Tahitian independence fighters (Meckert 1971: 143; Pécherot 1996: 15) and Anglo-Saxons

(Nemours 1974b: 62; Nord 1966: 187f) – which brings me to a black moment in French / New Zealand relations: the 'Rainbow Warrior' affair. Three novels reference it (A.V.M. 2009: 107; Maillard 1995: 155; Prudhomme 2010: 40) while another two claim characters who were implicated (A.D.G. 2007: 37; Stéphan 2011: 51).

Returning to my observation about the impact of political situation, it could have been that my analysis above favoured evidence from the 88% of novels set in non-self-governing locations. To calm this concern, I now take a closer look at the ten SPFCF novels based in independent nations. The one book based in Fiji (Deutsch 2002) opens with a location-credible military coup (of which Fiji had three in 1987, 2000, and 2006) but its intrigue involves warring Chinese factions, Islamic fighters from the Philippines and an Ulster Defence Association supergrass. All four novels set in Papua New Guinea (Evans 1974;[5] Pelot 1995; Rank 1982; Whale 1987) are narrated by cultural outsiders and employ clichéd images of mud-daubed natives. Of the five novels set in New Zealand, two look at the country from the perspective of cultural outsiders (Chavance 2006; Roehmer 1980) while the other three are narrated by insiders. That Marc Stéphan (2011) lives in New Zealand is attested to by his novel's local knowledge but his "New Zealand" detective speaks fluent French (p. 22), has a French father (p. 291), and spends a fifth of the novel in Tahiti thus Stéphan seems to be trying to address a metropolitan French audience hard to reach from a Tahitian imprint. Finally, while Caryl Férey (1998; 2004) claims to take the side of the culturally downtrodden (Busnel 2012), his two New Zealand novels are post-colonially problematic for their conflation of authenticity and credibility (Carter and Walker-Morrison 2012: 13ff). Thus, I cannot claim that SPFCF set in independent nations better reflect geopolitical reality than those based in non-self-governing states.

In summary, the reality gap inherent in much of SPFCF betrays a lack of interest in acquiring and transmitting local knowledge. As one metropolitan spy flown from Paris to Tahiti explains: "If I had to learn the history of a country before each of my missions […] I'd never sally forth. Places and people are the same everywhere –

[5] Published just before PNG gained its independence from Australia in 1975.

except for how they eat and pray" (Cayeux 1960: 116, my translation). By privileging lack of local insight, SPFCF enshrines rather than destabilises prior "understanding" of these far-flung places held by French readers inculcated in centralist, republican, universal and rational Enlightenment ideals. In the next section I identify possible reasons for this lack of local insight.

3. Causes of gap

Having shown that a cultural gap exists, I now offer two suggestions for why it came into being, both anchored in history. First is nostalgia for lost empire and geopolitical dominance. Eighteenth century accounts by South Seas explorers such as James Cook[6] and Louis Antoine de Bougainville[7] that describe Tahiti as a utopia have had an enduring influence on French perceptions:

> Through the discovery of Tahiti, the celebrated ideal of life on an idyllic antipodean island could be attached to an exemplary real place. Associated as it was with ideals beyond its immediate reality, the case of Tahiti illustrates the extent to which discoveries were capable of producing new and equally enduring myths in place of, but in tune with, the ones they superseded. One island group set a new standard by which to measure other parts of the antipodes – and the world – as seen from Europe. In contrast to the mainland of the Australian continent (a massive, uncontained and still largely unknown space) and New Zealand (with its aggressive Maori population), Tahiti came to represent the paradise that Europeans had searched so long to find in the antipodes. (Arthur 2010: 83)

However, Admiral Bruny d'Entrecasteaux's 1808 report of his Pacific voyage and search for missing navigator Jean-François La Pérouse marked the point after which the Rousseauian noble savage found in these earlier accounts turned into a Hobbesian "savage" savage, an image used in nineteenth century justifications of the colonial

[6] Cook is mentioned in eleven SPFCF novels (A.D.G. 1987a: 119; Cayeux 1960: 137; Hyvernat 2004: 93; Jacques 2010: 199; Massiéra 1962: 65; Meckert 1971: 30; Nemours 1974a: 52; 1974b: 91; 1975: 58; 1976: 24; Rank 1972: 109).

[7] Bougainville is mentioned in seven SPFCF novels (Evans 1974: 45; Massiéra 1962: 65; Meckert 1971: 30; Nemours 1974b: 91; 1975: 58; Rank 1972: 109; Vignes 1962: 25).

project. Bronwen Douglas argues that Bruny d'Entrecasteaux's account

> is a synecdoche for the era's dawning disenchantment with primitivist idealisation of the noble savage (*le bon sauvage*) and its supplanting by negative ultimately racialised attitudes better aligned with a new age of intensifying European imperialism. (2009: 177)

Bernard Smith also tracks a change in French attitudes to Pacific peoples through accounts of the voyage of, and subsequent search for, La Pérouse. Having read the account of Captain Cook's third voyage, French king Louis XVI instigated La Pérouse's scientific expedition, particularly tasked with observing the natives. However, La Pérouse seems to have distrusted Pacific peoples, especially after one of his ships' captains was killed in Samoa: "The island paradises of the Pacific […] from being the abode of innocent joy that they were to Bougainville, Wallis and Banks, had become for La Pérouse […] the abode of treachery and crime" (Smith 1985: 141). Whether twenty-first century French readers of SPFCF hold notions of noble or savage savages matters less than the likelihood that Tahiti in particular and the South Pacific in general will conjure up preconceived exoticism in the minds of French readers.

That this exotic remains particularly distant for readers stems from two differences between the British and French imperial projects. First, the British favoured settler colonies resulting in a substantial white population that "eradicated and/or marginalised the indigenous population" (Veracini 2010: 5), while French rule favoured mixed colonies with a small number of functionaries on short term contracts who governed "a resilient and sizeable indigenous population and asserted their ascendancy while relying on an indigenous workforce" (p. 5). Second, although British colonies remained economically tied to the colonial centre they enjoyed considerable political autonomy, whereas France exercised greater controls over its colonies, leading to four groups jockeying for position:

> an imperial metropole where sovereignty formally resides; a local administration charged with maintaining order and authority; an indigenous population significant enough in size and tenacity to make its presence felt; and an often demanding and well-connected settler community. (Elkins and Pedersen 2005: 4)

Thus the few French representatives, who spend relatively short periods in post, have little incentive to champion their colonies and translate local knowledge back to the centre, a point made in an early SPFCF novel (Navarre 1946: 29, 53). These historical choices conflate to form a cultural gap between a reality and the crime fictional imaginary that embodies social critique from "above" by cultural outsider French writers incapable of imagining South Pacific insiders as equals.

4. Gap narrowing over time

Having shown that a gap exists, and offered explanations for why it came into being, I now show that this gap has narrowed over time. In doing so, I use a post-colonial lens, adopting Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's definition of "post-colonial" as everything after the moment of colonisation (2002: 2)[8] in order to include the eighty-eight per cent of SPFCF set in non-self-governing territories. Nonetheless a post-colonial reading strategy is productive because it illuminates changes across both time and space in how authors and works engage with the coloniser / (formerly) colonised relationship. If independent post-colonial literatures "asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre" (p. 2), these scholars identify two preliminary stages before this independent state can be reached. During the imperial period writing is initially:

> produced by a literary elite whose primary identification is with the colonizing power […] Such texts can never form the basis for an indigenous culture nor can they be integrated in any way with the culture which already exists in the countries invaded. Despite their detailed reportage of landscape, custom, and language, they inevitably privilege the centre, emphasizing the 'home' over the 'native', the 'metropolitan' over the 'provincial' or 'colonial', and so forth. (p. 5)

All thirty-three pre-1987 SPFCF novels are at this preliminary stage. Written by authors who have either never set foot in the region or

[8] Although they acknowledge that this usage is contentious (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2002: 194).

only visited it, these books have only foreign-born white protagonists and almost universally laud coconut palms while thirteen mention sexually available local women. Archetypal SPFCF novels of this period (for example, Berg 1964; Genève 1962) have a male Parisian spy fly down to solve a South Pacific problem caused by the Chinese (seventeen novels), Americans (ten), Russians (six) or Japanese (five); but taking the time to bed a local *vahiné*.

What has changed since 1987? I have identified three factors, of which the first is an increasing concordance between an author's cultural and geographic background and the subject about which they are writing. Of the fifty-four authors responsible for the eighty-four SPFCF novels only one was born in the South Pacific: Jean-Henri Ariimoehau Rey. Twenty-three authors are metropolitan French citizens for whom I have found no evidence of their having visited the South Pacific. Another ten authors are metropolitan French writers who have visited the South Pacific while twenty are metropolitan French citizens who have lived in the South Pacific. However, these overall corpus figures disguise the fact that author background has changed over time, with those writing from France and visitors being overtaken by metropolitan French resident in the South Pacific. However, as with my prior analysis of the cultural origins of protagonists, these authorial demographics are still far from reflecting current reality; 87% of French Polynesian residents were born in the archipelago compared to 11% born in France or another DOM-TOM (Bodet and Monchois 2009: 3), while 75.6% of New Caledonian residents were born there compared to 15% born in France or another DOM-TOM (Rivoilan and Broustet 2011: 2). Thus, the majority of SPFCF authors have little or no personal investment in these societies and act more as anthropologists engaged in constructing a collective ethnography of the Francophone South Pacific.[9]

Only with the publication of the first novel by a writer resident in the region (A.D.G. 1987a) then the first novel narrated from a cultural insider's perspective (Maillard 1995) did SPFCF begin to

[9] And oblivious to academic turmoil. Early academic anthropologists legitimised their pursuit by repelling amateur interlopers – missionaries, colonial officers and travel writers (Hulme and McDougall 2007: 4) – and it is only since the field's "literary turn" in the 1980s that such accounts have been accepted (Pels 2007: 222).

progress towards portraying insider perspective: "The second stage of production within the evolving discourse of the post-colonial is the literature produced 'under imperial licence' by 'natives' or 'outcasts'" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2002: 5). A.D.G. (Alain Fournier) – who lived in New Caledonia from 1981 to 1991 (Chaumeil 2007: 106) where he set three anti-independence crime novels (1987a; 1988a; 1988b) and a historical adventure (1987b) – fits the "outcast" label for his extreme right wing politics, at odds with the néo-polar wave exemplified by fellow *Série noire* author Jean-Patrick Manchette. Lucien Maillard is also an outcast because, after moving to Polynesia in 1983 and becoming editor-in-chief of a local newspaper, he got on the wrong side of local politicians and had to return to France in 1988 (1995: 7). SPFCF then had to wait until 2005 for a "native" author – Jean-Henri Ariimoehau Rey – to write a crime novel drawing on his own life experiences as journalist and sailor. In *Le Testament du «Hutu-Painu»* (Rey 2005) a bar manager, Lola, is murdered in the street, her night's takings stolen, and rookie reporter Julio is on the case. Born in Tahiti to a local mother and French functionary father, Julio has just arrived back in Tahiti after spending three years in LA building a yacht with his American wife, Dayana. Julio follows the case to a *roulotte* (food truck) run by a Tahitian-Chinese family. He falls in love with the daughter, Angélina, but it is the brother, Jean, who is arrested for the murder of Lola although Angélina had been seen that night at Lola's bar and may have abetted Jean to help him escape from gambling debts. Although a murderous thread runs through Rey's novel, it is less polar than noir autobiography. There appear to be multiple parallels between the main character, Julio and the author: both journalists with *La Dépêche de Tahiti*, both spent three years in the USA building a boat then sailing it to Tahiti. The detective story doesn't get off the ground; whodunit is no mystery and there is an intriguing subplot about the local Chinese mafia that should have been developed. Thus, the novel's strength lies in its evocation of Tahitian life as being more ordinary than the usual SPFCF exoticism.

The second reason for the narrowing gap between SPFCF and geopolitical reality comes from means of production. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2002: 6) argue that the power of the imperial patronage system has to give way in order for independent literature

to thrive. Of the eighty-four SPFCF novels, forty-eight (57%) were first published by major French houses, nine (11%) by small French imprints, fourteen (14%) by Tahitian publishers and thirteen (15%) were self-published. Again these figures do not tell the whole story, since the type of SPFCF publisher has also changed over time. Only in 1997 did Serres first self-publish SPFCF, followed a year later by both the first from a Tahitian publishing house (de Montenars 1998) and from a small publisher (Férey 1998). These three sources have now replaced major French houses, which have not published SPFCF since 2007. At first glance this desertion by major publishers seems strange, given the recent boom in sales figures for detective fiction set in far-flung locations (Berteau 2013: 98). Perhaps the South Pacific was over-mined as a fictional destination in the sixties, seventies and eighties such that the sanguinary sun-sand-sex trope is now *passé* in the metropolitan French market, remaining attractive only to local publishers and authors with personal experience. If so, there is a notable exception: Caryl Férey, whose two New Zealand novels, *Haka* (1998) and *Utu* (2004), published by major French house Gallimard, have garnered prizes and sold over 160,000 copies. However, it would be wrong to simply equate the output of non-metropolitan publishers with an independent post-colonial literature; in the fourteen novels from Tahitian publishers only eight are narrated from a cultural insider's perspective, of which six are indigenous persons. Even more telling are the thirteen self-published SPFCF, which might have adopted this channel to avoid metropolitan diktat and to promulgate local perspective, but for the fact that only one (Mijo 2006) is written from the perspective of a cultural insider.

The third reason for the narrowing gap relates to sub-genre changes within SPFCF. Fifty per cent of SPFCF is detective or noir fiction, but this is a relatively recent phenomenon: Meckert published the first noir SPFCF in 1971 and Nemours the first detective fiction in 1974, decades after the post-WW2 French boom in crime fiction sparked by Gallimard's *Série Noire* imprint. By contrast, the second most popular genre – the twenty-two spy novels – has fallen away over time with the last SPFCF spy novel published by Bruce in 1984. It is perhaps surprising that detective fiction took so long to arrive in the South Pacific given that islands lend themselves to a "locked room" plot typified by Gaston Leroux's *Le Mystère de la chambre*

jaune (1907). Pierre Nemours uses this device in two novels (1974a; 1976), although he then sails a yacht through the locked room rules in the former. Whatever the reason for the slow arrival, both the noir and detective sub-genres are less escapist forms of fiction than spy novels, so this change has moved SPFCF towards more realist writing and towards sub-genres known for their social critique.

5. Future

A new generation of authors is producing crime fiction that returns the reality gap to its genre-standard role within plot rather than characterisation or setting. French Polynesian standard-bearer for this mature perspective is Patrice Guirao, whose trilogy featuring private detective Al Dorsey captures the archipelago's languorous nature in long, funny, and exasperating conversations. Packed with credible details on weather, clothing, informal insider networks, and how and about what locals interact, Guirao's characterisation valorises the normality of South Pacific ethnic diversity. However, his novels still rely on external plot points and outsider characters: American GIs turned cocaine smugglers and a French anarchist counterfeiter turned priest in *Crois-le!* (2009); a Parisian diamond thief turned Tahitian shaman determined to prevent Polynesian statues from going to Paris's *quai* Branly ethnographic museum in *Lyao-Ly* (2011); and Chilean drug smuggling via Easter Island in *Si tu nous regardes* (2012). If Guirao writes a fourth volume it will be interesting to see whether he devises an insider plot worthy of his insider knowledge.

If so, he would follow the trajectory of French-born, long-term New Caledonian resident Claudine Jacques. In *L'Homme-lézard* (2002) New Caledonia is shown from "below", depicting struggling Kanak abandoned by whites and ethnic tension caused by immigration from Tahiti, Vanuatu, and Wallis and Futuna. Jacques includes descriptions of local flora, fauna and cultural practices and footnotes to explain terms in different Pacific languages. While *Nouméa mangrove* (2010) also portrays ethnic and economic tensions between local and white populations, it has less background description and no footnotes, signalling she is now writing for an insider audience. Guirao and Jacques may encourage their peers and the local publishing industry to rally to these glimpses of a

distinctive future for SPFCF, eventually reaching a critical mass capable of reversing the cultural flow in order to reground the debate about the South Pacific multicultural "other" and offer a fresh insider perspective to outsider metropolitan French readers.

In Guirao's engaging evocations of Tahiti and Jacques's dark depictions of Nouméa we glimpse a distinctive future for SPFCF that their peers are as yet unwilling, or unable, to follow. However, their success may encourage peers and the local publishing industry to rally to these glimpses of a distinctive future for SPFCF, eventually reaching a critical mass capable of reversing the cultural flow in order to reground the debate about the South Pacific multicultural "other" and offer a fresh perspective to metropolitan French readers, one free of implicit social critique by outsiders of South Pacific insiders and their way of life.

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